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From the Editors



Welcome to *Islamic Intellectual Traditions*, a new Diamond Open Access journal published by Brill and supported by the Tokat Institute for Advanced Islamic Studies. The journal aims to make available a platform wherein the diverse articulations of the Islamic intellectual tradition, spanning continents, languages, and time periods, can be explored with scholarly precision and epistemic elasticity.

We welcome contributions in the form of analytical studies, critical editions, translations of texts, and book reviews that cover fields such as philosophy, theology, mysticism, scriptural exegesis, legal theory, literature, anthropology, and sociology. It is still common in Islamic studies scholarship to view these disciplines as sufficient unto themselves and consequently ensconced in their own thought worlds. While specialized attention of this kind has produced invaluable insights, it has also obscured an otherwise pellucid reality: all intellectual enterprises in the Islamic tradition, regardless of their particular approaches to reason, language, meaning, and truth, interlock with one another in profoundly subtle and subtly profound ways.

It is therefore our hope that *Islamic Intellectual Traditions* will prove to be a scholarly forum where readers can appreciate not only the distinctive features of the many disciplines within Islamic studies, but also the multilingual contexts wherein they interpenetrate and refashion one another, often pushing each other into uncharted conceptual spaces.



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Sin, Repentance, and Atonement in the Judeo-Islamic Nexus: Bahya ibn Paquda's Muslim Sources

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Abstract

With special attention to the medieval Jewish thinker Bahya ibn Paquda's (fl. 5th/11th century) meditations on the nature of sin, repentance, and atonement, as they appear in his *Duties of the Heart* (*Farā'id al-qulūb*)—a text that left an indelible mark on Jewish tradition—the article identifies some of his principal Islamic sources. A close comparative analysis with early Muslim ascetico-mystical and Sufi literature reveals an almost certain reliance on *Establishing Repentance* (*Ihkām al-tawba*, still in manuscript form) by al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857) and *Nourishment of the Heart* (*Qūt al-qulūb*) by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), as well as a plausible reliance on the *Treatise* (*Risāla*) by Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072). In the process, the article demonstrates how his extensive use of early Muslim writing led to the percolation of hadiths and the nomenclature of the Quran into the *Farā'id*. The reason Bahya was able to make use of Islamic literature in his treatment of repentance and atonement with relative ease was due to the theological, conceptual, and doctrinal affinities shared by medieval articulations of Judaism and Islam, particularly around questions related to the moral and religious frailties of the human being (unconditioned by original sin), as well the

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to Nariman Aavani, Sarah Aziz, Reuven Firestone, Ehud Krinis, Diana Lobel, the anonymous peer-reviewers, and the editors of the journal for their help, in various capacities, at different stages of the research and writing of this essay.

mechanisms offered by the two traditions for eliciting divine forgiveness in the wake of sin and wrongdoing.

Keywords

Bahya ibn Paquda – Jewish-Muslim – Judeo-Islamic ethics – Muḥāsibī – repentance – atonement

1 Introduction

Little is known about the life of Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, author of the *Duties of the Heart* (*Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*), one of the most influential works of spirituality produced in Jewish history. Of the few details available to us, we gather that he was a *dayan* or judge of the rabbinical court in Andalusia in the eleventh century during its golden age. His near contemporaries included such luminaries of medieval Jewish culture as Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. ca. 450/1058) and Judah Halevi (d. 535/1141). We also know that Bahya lived in the prosperous northern city of Saragossa, an artistic and intellectual hub of Islamic Spain. Following the collapse of the caliphate of Cordoba in 1013 and its eventual dissolution, several Jewish families moved north to regions that were still under Muslim rule. Toledo and Saragossa were among them, and it is possible Bahya's family may have migrated to the latter, a kingdom-city or "tāʾifa-kingdom" about three hundred kilometers west of Barcelona.² While the precise details about his birth and travels (if any) remain a matter of speculation for the modern historian,³ we may locate the period of his scholarly activity

2 Sara Sviri, "Spiritual Trends in Pre-Kabbalistic Judeo-Spanish Literature: The Cases of Bahya Ibn Paquda and Judah Halevi," *Donaire* 6 (1996): 79–80.

3 For cursory details about his life and thought, see the preface and introduction to Diana Lobel's superb study, *A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), and more recently, Lobel, "Bahya Ibn Paquda," in *Jewish Virtue-Ethics*, ed. Geoffrey D. Claussen, Alexander Green, and Alan L. Mittleman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2023), 65–79. See also Sviri, "Spiritual Trends;" and Elisha Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90–92. Georges Vajda's short monograph, *La théologie ascétique de Bahya Ibn Paquda* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1947), though dated, is still useful. The most recent addition to the burgeoning field of Bahya scholarship is Omer Michaelis, *Interiority and Law: Bahya ibn Paquda and the Concept of the Inner Commandments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press:

to the years between 1050 and 1090.⁴ No other work of Bahya⁵ has come down to us.⁶

Originally authored in Judeo-Arabic, the *Kitāb al-Hidāya ilā farā'id al-qulūb* or *Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, seamlessly weaves together strands of theology, philosophy, scriptural exegesis, law, psychology and virtue ethics into a singular work with the principal aim of guiding the human soul into the proximity of God. Translated in 1161 by the physician-scholar Judah ibn Tibbon (d. 585/1190) as *Hōvōt ha-Levāvōt*, it was among the first of many Judeo-Arabic writings rendered into Hebrew for a generation no longer as proficient in Arabic as its predecessors as well as those living outside of Islamic lands.⁷ Diana Lobel's remark that "few Hebrew books have gone through as many printings" testifies to its widespread popularity.⁸ The book would go on to have a significant impact on Spanish and Palestinian Kabbalists, various circles of Jewish pietists in Egypt and the broader Middle-East, as well as Central European Hasidism, not to mention Jewish Peripatetics such as Moses Maimonides (d. 601/1204) who drew on its negative theology in their own disquisitions on the nature of the Godhead.⁹ Translated into many of the vernac-

2024). We may also note Ehud Krinis's forthcoming study of Bahya and the Muslim *zuhd* tradition.

- 4 Diana Lobel, "Bahya Ibn Paqoda," 66. On some of the debates surrounding the dating of his life and work, see Michaelis, *Interiority and Law*, 139n1. See also the still useful essay by Paul Kokowzoff, "The Date of Life of Bahya ibn Paqoda," in *Livre d'hommage à la mémoire du Dr Samuel Poznański* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1927), 13–21 ("We are thus carried to the end or perhaps even to the middle of the XIth century respecting Bahya's life," 20).
- 5 Lobel notes that the name Bahya was known in Saragossa, though there is some disagreement whether the correct pronunciation was "Bahya" or "Bahaye," *Sufi-Jewish*, 1. The full Arabic transliteration of the name is Bahyā b. Yūsuf b. Bāqūdā.
- 6 Some have ascribed the short treatise *Kitāb ma'āni al-nafs* ("On the Meanings of the Soul") to him. Leon D. Stitskin, "Naturalism and Personalism: Bahya ibn Pakuda's Response to the Mechanistic Naturalists," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 12.2 (1971): 104–110. Most scholarship, however, rejects the attribution. Michaelis describes the *Farā'id* as his "major, and to the best of our knowledge, only book." *Interiority and Law*, 1.
- 7 Menahem Mansoor, "Arabic Sources on Ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 3 (1973): 81–90, at 81; Sviri, "Spiritual Trends," 79. On some of the uncertainties surrounding the Hebrew title, see Michaelis, *Interiority of Law*, 139–140, n. 3.
- 8 Lobel, *Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, xi. See also Sviri, "Spiritual Trends," 79–80.
- 9 Lobel, *Sufi-Jewish Dialogue*, xiii. Cf. Paul Fenton, "Judeo-Arabic Mystical Writings in the XIII–XIV Centuries," in *Judeo-Arabic Studies: Proceedings of the Founding Conference of the Society for Judeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers), 87–103, at 89; Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Frank and Oliver Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201–217; Fenton, "Judaism and Sufism," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Oliver Leaman and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Routledge, 1996), 1:755–768, at 1:757.

ular languages of the world's Jewish communities, from Spanish, Portuguese and Yiddish to German, French and English, its continuing popularity almost a millennium after it first appeared, gleaned through a simple internet search, highlights the timelessness of the text.¹⁰

One of the reasons for the widespread appeal of the *Farā'id*—felt almost immediately after its original composition—was because it filled in the author's own day a “didactic vacuum in Jewish, inner devotional life,” particularly with respect to areas neglected within the rabbinic tradition.¹¹ In this regard Baḥya felt he was being innovative in so far as he was introducing a previously ignored “science of hearts” (*ilm al-qulūb*) into the spiritual life of his community.¹² By drawing attention to “duties of the heart” which should accompany and complement the “duties of the limbs,” he sought to infuse Jewish religiosity with an essential life-giving sap that would make the formal, external devotions more acceptable to God. Indeed, the novelty of such an approach, one which went beyond simply the common place division of “intentions” and “acts,” lay in the fact that the very title of the work had no precedent in Jewish writing.¹³ The unique vocabulary and accompanying ideas of the *Farā'id* did, however, have their precursors in the Islamic tradition, particularly in early ascetico-mystic and Sufi literature with which Baḥya was deeply familiar. The contrast between the *farā'id al-jawāriḥ* (duties of the limbs) and *farā'id al-qulūb* (duties of the heart), for example, which permeates the text was drawn, without question, from the books of one of the earliest moral psychologists of Islam, al-Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), who makes use of this distinction in his extensive corpus. Indeed, it is present in the very title of one of his works, the *Questions Concerning Actions by way of the Limbs and the Heart (Masā'il fī a'māl al-jawāriḥ wa-l-qulūb)*.¹⁴ In his *Book of Counsels*, he also speaks of “the recognition of con-

10 Mansoor, “Arabic Sources,” 81; Michaelis, *Interiority*, 1.

11 Sviri, “Spiritual Trends,” 80.

12 Paul Fenton, “Introduction,” *The Treatise of the Pool: al-Maqāla al-Ḥawḍiyya* by 'Obaydāh Maimonides, trans. P. Fenton (London: Octagon Press, 1981), 3.

13 See Sviri, “Spiritual Trends,” 80, as well as the work of Amos Goldreich (see note below). The thesis of the recent study by Omer Michaelis is that Baḥya's work was far more revolutionary than previously acknowledged. *Interiority and Law*, 2.

14 Muḥāsibī, *al-Masā'il fī a'māl al-qulūb wa al-jawāriḥ*, ed. Khalil 'Imrān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 2000). See Lobel's discussion of the influence of Muḥāsibī, where she summarizes the conclusions of Amos Goldreich on this question, *Sufi-Jewish*, xi. In an earlier work she writes that Goldreich “has argued cogently for this possible influence.” *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language and Religious Experiences in Judah Ha Levi's Kuzari* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 182–183. Goldreich presents his findings in “Possible Arabic Sources for the Distinction between ‘Duties of the Heart’ and ‘Duties of the Limbs,’” *Te'udah* 6 (1988): 179–208 (Hebrew). See also Michaelis

firmed duties for the heart and the limbs (*maʿrifat al-farāʿiḍ al-muʿakkada ʿalā l-qulūb wa-l-jawāriḥ*).¹⁵ The distinction is also present in the *Nourishment of the Heart* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), a work from which (as we shall see below) Baḥya almost certainly culled some of his source materials.

There is no real debate among Baḥya scholars regarding the extent and scope of the *Farāʿiḍ*'s debt to Sufi and early Muslim literature. The question centers rather around who precisely Baḥya was drawing from. The difficulties in pin-pointing his Islamic sources are understandable when it comes to the Hebrew edition of the text, particularly in light of Paul Fenton's remark that the "Islamic character of the book was greatly obliterated when it was later translated and mostly read in the Hebrew version."¹⁶ The lexicon of the Islamic religious sciences which Baḥya freely employed in the original, including his occasional use of Quranic phrases (generally overlooked in Baḥya scholarship¹⁷), were all more or less lost in translation. The fate of the Hebrew version of the *Farāʿiḍ*, however, was not as extreme as the Hebrew translation of Averroes's *Decisive Treatise* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*), since the Islamic references of the latter were either replaced with biblical equivalents or simply removed.¹⁸ With that said, the original Arabic of the *Farāʿiḍ* presents its own unique set of challenges when it comes to retracing sources. This is because Baḥya intentionally avoided citing Muslim personalities by name, even though he frequently cited their words, guided no doubt by an entirely reasonable desire to thwart any criticisms that might be leveled against him by his co-religionists for his use of extra-Judaic Islamic material. In the words of the late biblical scholar Menahem Mansoor,

lis, *Interiority*, 30–38, 48–52, and other relevant sections of the text, where he examines the Muḥāsibīan substratum of the *Duties*.

- 15 Muḥāsibī, *al-Waṣāyā*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭāʾ (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2003), 75.
- 16 Paul Fenton, "introduction," *The Treatise of the Pool*, 3.
- 17 Lobel appears to be more sensitive to this issue than other scholars. See, for example, her analysis of a Sufi tale which influenced Baḥya's thinking, and the Quranic origin of an expression in the tale where God is described "on the lookout" (*huwa bi-l mirṣād*), which she correctly identifies. *Sufi-Jewish*, 41–44. Nevertheless, there are certain idiomatic expressions in Baḥya which are thoroughly Quranic which have yet to be brought out in Baḥya scholarship. These most likely trickled into his text through an internalization of the language of the Islamic sources with which he was so well-acquainted. More on this below.
- 18 As Norman Golb points out, "Qurʾān" is replaced with "Torah" or "sefer," and the few references to the Prophet of Islam from the original are omitted. "The Hebrew Translation of Averroes' *Faṣl al-Maqāl*," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 25 (1956): 91–113, at 94–95.

Bahya specifically identifies his sources only when they are Jewish or when they stem from Greek philosophy. Yet he quotes Islamic sources anonymously. It will not do simply to accuse Bahya of plagiarism, for in his time there was no moral objection to borrowing ideas. The only feasible explanation seems to be that sometimes Bahya refuses to reveal his sources in order to make his work seem more Jewish than it really is. In this way, he was able to avoid offending those Jews to whom the use of non-Jewish sources was anathema.¹⁹

While the question of what precisely renders one text more “Jewish” than another (or for that matter, more “Islamic”)²⁰ remains open to debate, and aside from the fact that Mansoor’s observation seems to ignore the deep theological, legal, and mystical affinities between Judaism and Islam which allowed Bahya to so easily make use of Islamic material in a work intended for a Jewish audience without betraying his own tradition—affinities which served as the structural basis for the creation of a medieval Judeo-Islamic tradition²¹—his insight into the underlying motivations behind Bahya’s selective strategy of revealing some sources and concealing others is accurate. But despite his desire to hide some of his sources, the Sufi tenor of large portions of the work is, as already noted, undeniable. Even though “Bahya never openly admits to his free and expansive borrowing from Sufi lore,” writes Sara Sviri, “for any student of early Sufi literature Bahya’s use of Sufi material is totally transparent, whether in his use of themes and anecdotes, terminology and imagery, or in the very structure of the book.”²² Bahya himself sought to pre-empt any criticism that might have been levelled against him for his use of Islamic material through his citation of the Talmudic proverb, “whoso pronounces a word of wisdom is to called a wise man.” There would have been no inconsistency, in Bahya’s own mind, in

19 Mansoor, “Arabic Sources,” 82.

20 See Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), in which he interrogates the very idea of what it means for something to be “Islamic.” Many of his insights could no doubt also apply to other religious traditions. For a critical appraisal of this work, see Arjun Nair, “On Wine-Drinking in Sufi-Philosophical Islam: A Response to Shahab Ahmed,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 13.1 (2023): 49–76.

21 On the Judeo-Islamic tradition, see the still very useful treatment in Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 67–106. See also Atif Khalil, “Jewish-Muslim Dialogue, Globalization, and the Judeo-Islamic Legacy,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 17 (2015): 1–21. <https://cdr.creighton.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/d6a220b9-d9b0-455e-aa63-add0936bccod/content> (last accessed August 25, 2025).

22 Sviri, “Spiritual Trends,” 80.

his reliance on the wisdom of Muslims, going back, as we shall see below, even to the figure of the Prophet Muhammad.²³

As far as this structure of the book is concerned, the *Duties* is divided into ten chapters or “gates” (*abwāb*) representing ascending stages of the seeker’s journey to God. In a general sense, they correspond to the well-known states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) common to Sufi texts, each of which corresponds to a virtue or quality which the soul must internalize to enter the divine presence.²⁴ There would be no real use in trying to find a strict correspondence between Baḥya’s order and that of any other text, since within Sufi literature there is no set schema with respect to which qualities must be internalized first, due in large part to the interrelated nature of the virtues. This would explain the vast range of schematizations reflected in the sequence of chapters found in the classical literature of Islamic mysticism. As far as the order of chapters is concerned, for Baḥya the journey begins with *ikh-lāṣ al-tawḥīd*, which is to say a pure, sincere and undefiled acknowledgement of divine unity, with all that it entails. The title of Baḥya’s opening chapter cannot but help call to mind *sūrat al-ikh-lāṣ* or the 112th chapter of the Quran entitled *ikh-lāṣ*,²⁵ which offers a succinct description of the transcendent unity of God, equivalent to a concise, tightly bound scriptural creed. Progressing through such gates²⁶ as trust in God (*tawakkul*),²⁷ self-accounting or introspective examination (*muḥāsa-*

23 For some remarks on this subject, including his inclusion of hadiths, see Fenton, “Judaism and Sufism,” 205; Khalil, “Jewish-Muslim Dialogue, Globalization, and the Judeo-Islamic Legacy,” 10. Baḥya’s use of anonymity when citing Muslim personalities nevertheless suggests caution.

24 On the states and stations in Sufism, see Atif Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God: Tawba in Early Sufism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), 68–83. See also the chapter on the subject in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

25 Interestingly, this chapter is also referred to as *sūrat al-tawḥīd*.

26 We follow Lobel and others in retaining “gate” for *bāb*, even though the Arabic is typically used to designate nothing more than the chapter or subheading of a text. In Baḥya, the metaphor of the “gate” or “opening” has wider implications, alluded to in his introductory remarks. In addition, one cannot ignore the term’s use in Jewish Aramaic, exemplified by its employment, for example, in the titles of three tractates of the Talmud: *Bāba Qāma*, *Bāba Meṣī’a*, and *Bāba Batra*, i.e., the first, middle, and last gate. The idea of *bāb* as a gate, to quote Reuven Firestone, thus “resonates fully in a Rabbinic Jewish cultural milieu” (personal correspondence).

27 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’īḍ al-qulūb*, ed. A. S. Yahuda (Leiden: Brill, 1912), 175–227. On *tawakkul* in early Sufi ethics, see Atif Khalil, “Ibn al-‘Arabī & the Sufis on Trust in God (*Tawakkul*),” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 71 (2022): 87–105, at 87–93; cf. Atif Khalil, “Ibn al-‘Arabī on the Circle of Trusteeship and the Divine Name *al-Wakīl*,” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 12.1 (2023): 65–82.

ba),²⁸ sincerity in one's actions (*ikhlas*)²⁹ and humility (*tawadu'*),³⁰ the journey ends with love of God (*maḥabba*)³¹ to which Bahya devotes a concluding chapter. By ending, like Makkī's does in his inquiry into the stations in the *Nourishment*, with a section on *maḥabba*, Bahya underscores the supreme nature of the experience of intimacy with the divine reality. As in the case of many other Sufi texts devoted to *mu'āmala* or praxis, Bahya neither stresses self-effacement in God nor does he blur the ontological distinction between the human being and her Creator.³² Unlike many of these Sufi texts, however, he does not confine himself to the examination of moral and ethical themes; often he probes into more strictly theological and philosophical matters (particularly in the earlier sections of the book), and even legal issues that are of relevance. The wedding of ethics and mystical metaphysics, of *'ilm al-mu'āmala* ("the knowledge of practice") and *'ilm al-mukāshafa* ("the knowledge of unveiling")—a feature particularly of later Sufi tradition—is more or less absent in Bahya, whose ethical ideas are woven into the fabric of a distinct Bahyan theology.³³

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- 28 Bahya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 306–353. On the spiritual practice in the thought of Muḥāsibī, see Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: The Life and Words of Muḥāsibī* (London: Routledge, 2011), 199–204.
- 29 Bahya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 228–258. On sincerity in Sufi ethics, see Atif Khalil, "Ethics in Islam," in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, eds by Brendan N. Wolfe et al.: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Ethics> (last accessed: August 25, 2025).
- 30 Bahya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 259–281. On humility in Sufi ethics, see Atif Khalil, "Humility in Islamic Contemplative Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 4.1–2 (2020): 223–252.
- 31 Bahya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 378–397. The language of "passionate love" or *'ishq* appears to be lacking in his treatment, reflective of the introspective, sober Sufism one tends to encounter in the works of Muḥāsibī and Makkī. On love in early Sufism, see Joseph Lumbard, "From 'Ḥubb' to 'Ishq': The Development of Love in Early Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18.3 (2007): 345–385. For a survey of love in the Quran, hadiths, and early Sufi piety, see Hany Ibrahim, *Love in the Teachings of Ibn 'Arabī* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2023), 30–54.
- 32 In this, he was not far from the mainstream of Jewish spiritual currents, which maintained a distinct separation between the creature and the Creator even at the limits of spiritual attainment. Gershom Scholem writes, "*Devekut* [Hebrew: 'cleaving, or clinging, to God'] results in a sense of beatitude and intimate union, yet it does not entirely eliminate the distance between the creature and its Creator, a distinction that most kabbalists, like most Hasidim, were careful not to obscure by claiming that there could be a complete unification of the soul and God." *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 176.
- 33 To quote Lobel, "Bahya's work integrates several streams of medieval Jewish and Islamic thought: rabbinic Judaism, Mu'tazilite rationalist theology (*kalām*), Neoplatonic philosophy, Islamic asceticism (*zuhd*), and mysticism (Sufism)." "Bahya Ibn Paquda," 66.

2 Baḥya on Sin, Repentance, and the Return to God

For the remainder of the article we shall now turn to briefly examine the seventh chapter of the *Farā'id* which addresses the subject of sin, atonement, and repentance (Arabic = *tawba*; Hebrew = *teshuvah*) with the purpose of identifying some of the Sufi material he may have consulted, either directly or indirectly, and whose traces are found both in the pithy aphorisms he cites—often prefaced by an anonymous *qīla* (literally “it has been said”)—as well as the thematic contents of his work.³⁴ Since we do not have precise knowledge of the range of Sufi texts that were available in Andalusia while he was writing,³⁵ a certain element of speculation will guide our reconstruction. What follows is not meant to serve as an exhaustive study of his chapter, which, subdivided into ten sections, offers a rich and complex exploration into the nature of sin, religious obligation, the duties of the heart, the justice and mercy of God, and of course repentance and atonement. Rather, our aim is to offer a cursory overview of some of the salient points of intersection between the *Farā'id* and earlier articulations of Islamic ascetico-mystical³⁶ and Sufi piety.

34 Some of this had already been done, albeit in rudimentary form, by Georges Vajda in his brief chapter on repentance in *La théologie ascétique de Bahya ibn Paquda*, 99–113. See also note on Stern below.

35 Lobel, *Sufi-Jewish*, xi. To be clear, we are not in the dark regarding works that were available in al-Andalus. The *Historia de los Autores y Transmisores Andalusíes* (HATA), a bio-bibliographical database produced under the directorship of Maribel Fierro, contains (according to its website), “biographies of more than 5000 Andalusí scholars and on the works they wrote and transmitted.” It was of limited use, however, for our purposes, since no such database can be exhaustive. <https://www.eea.csic.es/red/hata/> (last accessed August 25th, 2025).

36 We consciously use this term instead of simply “ascetic”/“ascetical” or “renunciant” to describe the pre-/proto-Sufi phase, in keeping with a recent trend in Sufi studies which has moved away from the asceticism-to-mysticism historical model of earlier scholarship. The category (“ascetico-mystical”) captures the interconnected relation between theory and praxis to which Alexander Knysh has drawn attention when he writes, “[w]hereas discoursing about mystical experience usually falls within the rubric of ‘mysticism’ or ‘mystical theology’ with asceticism being commonly conceived as practice par excellence, separating them may distract us from their organic coexistence and interdependence” (*Sufism: A New History* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017], 12). The category is useful regardless of the time-period one wishes to assign for the precise emergence of a self-conscious mode of piety known as *taṣawwuf* or Sufism—a time-period over which one cannot, in our view, be stringent. It makes little sense to recognize Junayd (d. 298/910) as a Sufi while objecting to the classification of Muḥāsibī as one. In any case, our aim in the essay is not to enter the debate around when to situate the exact origins of Sufism, let alone around who may (or may not) be legitimately viewed as an adherent of a sub-tradition which would percolate into all aspects of pre-modern Islamicate culture and civi-

Near the opening of his discussion, the rabbi sets out to define the *māhīyya* of *tawba*.³⁷ The use of the word in a such a context appears somewhat peculiar, since the technical term is used largely in a philosophical and not typically Sufi context to describe the “what-ness” or “what-it-is-ness” of a thing. Derived from the question *mā hiya?* (“what is it?”), it is conventionally translated into English as “quiddity” or “essence.”³⁸ Baḥya’s use of the term may reflect here his own synthetic approach, which integrates and unifies various sub-traditions into a single work, ranging from philosophy and theology to ethics and psychology. It may also underscore his attempt to define, as precisely as possible, with a kind of technical precision common to much of Arabic philosophy, what exactly we have in mind when we speak about *tawba*.³⁹ With that said, Baḥya’s terminology here is not entirely without precedent in the literature of Islamic moral psychology either, and it seems quite likely he was also drawing from and developing the language of Muḥāsibī, in whose writings we often find inquiries into a subject prefaced by a question posed by an interlocutor, such as “inform me about the intellect, what is it (*mā huwa*)?” or “inform me about truthfulness (*ṣidq*), what is it (*mā huwa*)?”⁴⁰

Baḥya then turns to outline the *māhīyya* of repentance by opening his definition with the stipulation that *tawba* involves “setting the self aright (*al-inṣilāḥ*) for the obedience to God, after having abandoned it.”⁴¹ The word that is used here, *inṣilāḥ*, which might also be translated in this context as “putting the self in order,” is the verbal noun of the seventh form of the trilateral Arabic root ṣ-l-ḥ (= “to be good,” “right” or “in order”),⁴² and calls to mind the frequent Quranic use of words drawn from the same ṣ-l-ḥ root in the context of repentance. In fact, alongside *istighfār* or “seeking forgiveness” there is no concept

zation. It seems more fruitful to remain flexible around such questions in the absence of consensus among the global community of Sufism specialists.

37 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 284.

38 For a discussion of the significance of the term *māhīyya* in medieval Islamic philosophy, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 63–69.

39 It is worth noting here that the medieval Jewish neologism, *māhūt*, is borrowed directly from Arabic philosophical language.

40 Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-qaṣd wa-l ruḡūʾ ilā Allāh*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā’ (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003), 162–163. See also 188–189, where the questioner asks, “expound for me the nature of the self’s chatter, wherein lies its origin? And explain to me the meaning of the words of the Prophet, ‘my community is forgiven the chatter which arises from the self.’ What is it (*mā huwa*), and what may it be likened to?”

41 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 284.

42 Muhammad Abdul Haleem and Elsaid Badawi, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Quranic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 531.

that is as frequently coupled in Muslim scripture with *tawba* as *islāh*, namely “setting things aright.”⁴³ This is because the Quran repeatedly emphasizes (like much of the rabbinic tradition) rectifying past wrongs as a defining feature of the restorative process brought about through repentance. And so we encounter such passages in Muslim scripture as “except such of them as repent, set things right (*aṣlahū*), and make manifest the truth” (Q 2:160); or “except those who repent, set things aright (*aṣlahū*) and hold fast to God” (Q 4:146); or “and if they repent and set things aright (*aṣlahā*) then let them be” (Q 4:16); or “whoso of you does wrong in ignorance, then repents and sets things aright (*aṣlahā*), (know that for such a person) Lo! He is Oft-forgiving, Oft-Merciful” (Q 6:54). In Baḥya’s definition we encounter what can be described as the percolation of the Quranic language of repentance into his own writing, mediated through his Muslim sources—the kind of language the uniquely Islamic features of which are lost in translation. But the reason he is able to so easily make use of this nomenclature to begin with is because of the overlapping conceptualizations of repentance found in Judaism and Islam rooted at least partially in the semantics of the idea itself: both the words *tawba* and *teshuvah* mean, in their most elemental sense, to “turn” or “return.”⁴⁴ The spatial metaphor employed in these religious concepts places the accent not on the emotional element of remorse, but on an act of reorientation, and in the case of the Islamic and Judaic traditions, involves concrete steps the penitent person must take to ameliorate and undo past wrongs as part of rectifying past wrongs.⁴⁵ One is reminded

43 In the Quran *islāh* (in its verbal form, as *aṣlahā*) is more frequently coupled with human *tawba* (also in its verbal form) than any other word. It appears alongside *tawba* in almost a sixth of the latter’s occurrences (seven out of forty). On *islāh* in the Quran, see Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 27–31. It should be noted that the idea of *islāh* would gain further salience in the modern period, with the use of the term in reformist and revivalist movements, including those spearheaded by Sufism. For a discussion of how two twentieth century Sufis utilized this concept, see Fuad S. Naeem, “Sufism and Revivalism in South Asia: Mawlana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi of Deoband and Mawlana Ahmad Raza Khan of Bareilly and Their Paradigms of Islamic Revivalism,” *Muslim World* 99.3 (2009): 435–451.

44 Of the Arabic root t-w-b, from which we get *tawba*, the medieval Arabic lexicographer Ibn Fāris writes, “*tā*, *wāw* and *bā*’ form a single word that refers to ‘return.’” *Muʿjam maqāyīs al-lughā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1969), 1:357. On the semantics of *teshuvah* in Hebrew, see C. G. Montefiore, “Rabbinic Conceptions of Repentance,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 16 (1904): 209–257, particularly 212–214. The article, though dated, remains a comprehensive and lucid treatment of the subject. See also Richard Bell, “*Teshubah*: The Idea of Repentance in Ancient Judaism,” *Journal of Progressive Judaism* 5 (1995): 22–52.

45 Consider the words of Jacob Petuchowski in the context of describing his reluctance to translate *teshuvah* by its commonly accepted equivalent: “I have as much as possible,

of the saying of the early Sufi who captured the spatial metaphor inherent in the semantics of not only *tawba* but also *teshuvah* when he poetically declared, “repentance is that you be unto God a face without a back, just as you were previously unto him a back without a face.”⁴⁶ This is not to say that regret does not play a role in repentance (indeed, it is central as we shall now see below), but the emphasis is nevertheless placed on actual measures required of the penitent person to reveal the sincerity of his desire to return to God, and this requires more than mere sentiment.

A few pages later, Baḥya proceeds to outline four essential elements of repentance, which he lists as “contrition (*nadam*) over what has transpired of one’s sins,” “abandoning and uprooting (*al-tark wa-l-iqlāʿ*) them,” “confessing and seeking forgiveness for them,” and finally “safeguarding the self so as not to return to them, neither through one’s heart nor limbs,” the last of which amounts to what he refers to earlier as an *ʿazm* or resolution never to return to what one has left behind.⁴⁷ While his four-fold list does not appear to find a neat, one-to-one equivalent in early Islamic source material, it is close enough to the range of lists provided in the texts to allow us to see that while working within another tradition, he is nevertheless drawing from the reservoir of the Sufis. In Sulamī (d. 412/1021), to take but one example, we find a saying attributed to Junayd (d. 298/910) where he declares that

the penitent does not realize the reality of repentance until four qualities come together in him: first, undoing the heart’s inclination to persist in the sin through regret; second, intense struggle (*muḥāhada*) against sin for the remainder of one’s life; third, a sound resolution (*ʿazm*) never to return to the sin; and fourth, amending wrongs to others so as to be free from responsibility towards them.⁴⁸

tried to avoid translating *teshuvah* as ‘repentance.’ Our English ‘repentance’ comes to us from the Latin. Its basic meaning is ‘to make sorry.’ To feel sad and sorry about our sins is indeed an essential part of the process of regeneration. But, as Bible and Talmud see it, it is only a part.” “The Concept of ‘Teshuvah’ in the Bible and Talmud,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal* 17 (1978): 180. For a comparative analysis of *tawba* and *teshuvah*, see Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 18–21.

46 Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī, *al-Taʿarruf li madhhab ahl al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Yuḥannā al-Jayb (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2001), 65; Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, ed. Sayyid ʿImrān (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2001), 1:183.

47 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾid al-qulūb*, 287.

48 Sulamī, *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, 1:271 (commentary on Q 9:3, “If you repent, it is better for you”).

Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) in his *Risāla (Treatise)* provides a more succinct three-fold list in the opening to his chapter on repentance which draws its authority from “those versed in the fundamentals of religion from the people of the Sunna (*arbāb al-uṣūl min ahl al-sunna*),” the conditions of which include “remorse (*nadam*) for the violations that have been committed, an immediate abandonment (*tark*) of the slip, and a firm resolution (*‘azm*) never to return to similar acts of disobedience.”⁴⁹ Interestingly, all three of them—*nadam*, *tark* and *‘azm*—appear in Baḥya, and Junayd’s requirement of struggling against the sin and amending wrongs perpetrated against others is also presented later in the rabbi’s chapter as a critical component to the completion and perfection of the repentance demanded by God.

Considering that all three of Qushayrī’s conditions are included by Baḥya, it is worth noting that while Qushayrī was based in the Eastern lands of Islam, his treatise did eventually find its way to Andalusia since we know that Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), who was born and raised in Muslim Spain, studied the book assiduously in his youth at the hands one of his teachers, becoming so proficient in its contents and lexicon that he was given the surname “al-Qushayrī.”⁵⁰ Precisely how early the *Risāla (Treatise)*—the “most authoritative handbook of Sufism in the 15th/11th century in Nishapur, and beyond,”⁵¹ and completed in 1045/6⁵² (before Baḥya composed his book)—reached Andalusia, of this we cannot be certain. But there is no reason to preclude the possibility that the author of the *Farā’id* had access to it.⁵³ With that said, none of the sayings in Qushayrī’s chapter on repentance appear in Baḥya, nor are there any distinctive thematic intersections other than we might expect in a general treatment of repentance.⁵⁴ The same, however, cannot be said when we compare the section on *tawba* in Baḥya’s *Farā’id al-qulūb* with that of Makkī’s *Qūt al-qulūb*,⁵⁵ a work that was authored in the later part of the tenth century and

49 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Maḥmūd b. Sharīf (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2002), 207.

50 Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, trans. Peter Kingsley (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 102–103.

51 Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali, *The Comfort of the Mystics: A Manual and Anthology of Early Sufism* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 8.

52 Ibid.

53 See Lobel, *Sufi-Jewish*, 46–47.

54 In offering some examples of Baḥya’s employment of the “language of Sufi masters,” she does draw attention to some overlaps with Qushayrī, none of which however can lead us to deduce a definitive mark of influence. See Lobel, *Sufi-Jewish*, 10–11.

55 On the work and its influence on later Sufi tradition, see Atif Khalil, “Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996) and the *Qūt al-Qulūb (Nourishment of Hearts)* in the Context of Early Sufism,”

which we also know was read and studied in Andalusia.⁵⁶ While the precise period when it became available, remains, like the *Risāla*, uncertain, we do know that Ibn Barraġān (d. 536/1141) and others were familiar with it in the early part of 12th century.⁵⁷ Some examples to illustrate its apparent influence on the *dayan* are in order. As part of his discussion on the impediments to repentance which forms the eighth subsection of his chapter, Baḥya delves into the danger of trivializing one's sins and failing to recognize their corrosive effect on the soul, not to mention (as he explains in another section) the punishment that is their due as part of God's "Promise and Threat" (*al-wa'd wa-l wa'id*)⁵⁸—an expression common to Islamic theology. Here he quotes an anonymous saying to emphasize what he has in mind: "It has been said, 'Look not at the insignificance of what you have done, but look rather at the magnificence of the One against whose command you have sinned.'"⁵⁹ Makkī, in an analogous inquiry in the *Nourishment* cites two close variants, the first of whose source he identifies. He writes,

It has been said, 'trivializing a sin is itself a major sin.' [...] And Bilāl b. Sa'd said, 'Look not at the insignificance of the offense, but look instead against whom you have sinned.'⁶⁰ And it has come to us through a report that God revealed to one His friends ..., 'Look not at the insignificance of the offence but look at the greatness of the One you face on its account.'⁶¹

While neither of the sayings are repeated verbatim in Baḥya, they are close enough to suggest that he may simply have been rephrasing them with some poetic license of his own, for literary purposes, or simply recalling them incor-

Muslim World 122.2 (2012): 335–356. See also Saeko Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī: The Role of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 2013).

- 56 Another work of similar title is the *Maqāmāt al-qulūb* (*The Stations of the Heart*) by the early mystic Nūrī, but there is nothing in the content of the short treatise that might suggest its use by Baḥya. See *Risālat maqāmāt al-qulūb*, in *Textes Mystiques Inédits d'Abū-l Ḥasan al-Nūrī* (d. 295/907), ed. Paul Nwyia (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1968), 130–152.
- 57 See Yousef Casewit, *The Mystics of al-Andalus: Ibn Barraġān and Islamic Thought in the Twelfth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 71–72. Ibn al-'Arabī also refers both to Makkī and the *Nourishment* on a few occasions in the *Meccan Revelations*. See Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī*, 105–107.
- 58 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 287.
- 59 *lā tanẓur ilā ṣaghīr mā 'amīlta wa-innamā unẓur ilā 'aẓīm man 'aṣayta amrahu* (Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 294).
- 60 *lā tanẓur ilā ṣighr al-khaṭī'a wa-lākin unẓur ilā man 'aṣayta*.
- 61 *lā tanẓur ilā ṣighr al-khaṭī'a wa-unẓur ilā kibriyā'i man wājahtahu bi-hā* (Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, ed. Sa'īd Nasīb Makārim [Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1995], 1:367).

rectly from memory. Indeed, it is not uncommon in Sufi texts to come across variations of a single aphorism, or the same aphorism attributed to different figures. Sufi authors were, after all, generally more concerned with inspiring and elevating their readers than with historical precision, a fact which would explain the use of weak hadiths in ethically oriented as opposed to legal and theological works, as well as the hagiographical embellishment of the lives of the saints. The fact that the audience of the *Duties* would have likely comprised readers who were not deeply familiar with the Sufi tradition itself, might also have given him a greater measure of liberty to edit Sufi aphorisms. To this we should also note that Baḥya “may have modified terms and sentences” from his Arabic sources to suit the literary conventions of Judeo-Arabic in which he was writing.⁶²

Closer to the end of his chapter, Baḥya touches on a question explored in some detail in Sufi literature centring around the relation between the sinner who immediately repents and the one who remains free from wrongdoing altogether. Which of the two is superior in God’s eyes? Baḥya’s answer avoids the simplistic dichotomization that might ensue from inclining towards one or the other. Instead, his argument is nuanced: it depends on the nature of the sin as well as the scope and extent of the transformation brought about by the ensuing repentance. In some scenarios, the undefiled person is superior to the penitent; in others, the penitent is superior to the sinless; and in yet others, they are equal. As for those who are guilty of minor breaches of positive commandments or *mitzvōt*, and then sincerely repent by fulfilling all its conditions, they stand on an equal footing with those who refrained from the sin to begin with. He concludes his brief remarks about those who fall into this category with the following words, “and regarding such a person it has been said, ‘he who repents from sin is like one who never sinned.’”⁶³ The saying—a canonical hadith⁶⁴—appears word-for-word in Makkī not once but twice in separate contexts in his chapter on *tawba*.⁶⁵ Considering the tradition is not found in the sections on repentance in other early Sufi manuals, such as those of Kharrāz (d. 286/899),⁶⁶ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988),⁶⁷ Abū Bakr al-Kalābādī (d. ca. 380–385/990–

62 Yazaki, *Islamic Mysticism and Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī*, 171–172.

63 *al-tā’ib min al-dhanb ka man lā dhanb lahu* (Baḥya ibn Paqūda, *Farā’iḍ al-qulūb*, 296).

64 Ibn Mājah (*zuḥd*, 30); see Wensinck, 1283.

65 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1362, 381.

66 *The Book of Truthfulness*, ed. and trans. A. J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 9–11 (Arabic text).

67 *Kitāb al-luma’ fi-l taṣawwuf*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 43–44.

995),⁶⁸ Qushayrī, Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d. ca. 470/1077),⁶⁹ nor for that matter even in Muḥāsibī's short treatise on repentance,⁷⁰ the temptation to ascribe the source to Makkī is, at least in this particular instance, difficult to resist. While the hadith does appear in the chapters on repentance in the *Tahdhīb al-asrār* of Khargūshī (d. 406/1015 or 407/1016),⁷¹ and the *Kitāb al-bayād wa-l-sawād* of Sīrjānī (d. ca. 470/1077),⁷² there is no evidence to suggest Baḥya might have consulted them, nor do we have any knowledge of either of these works being read in Andalusia in the 11th century.⁷³

As far as some of thematic affinities go, near the very end of his chapter, in its ninth subsection, Baḥya delves into the nature of sins for which one must repent, dividing them into two general categories: sins against God and sins against His creatures. The former may involve a denial of God's existence (*al-kufr bi-llāh*), unsound beliefs (*al-i'tiqādāt al-sū'*), as well as violating duties of the heart and the limbs which do not involve others. Baḥya notes that despite the gravity of disobedience to one's Creator, sins against others, particularly injustice (*al-ẓulm ilā l-nās*), whether it be with respect to bodies, wealth (*amwāl*), or reputations (*a'rāḍ*), are more difficult to atone. This is because they may require concrete acts of restitution that are not easily obtainable or simply impossible, either because the victims live in faraway places or because they are no longer alive (*li-fawt al-maẓlūm*), not to mention any other number of reasons that would make the steps required for atonement difficult.⁷⁴ Remarkably, Makkī too addresses these very same issues at the end of his chapter on repentance. While he does not structure his analysis in the same format of Baḥya, he does distinguish, like him, between sins against God and others (*mā kāna bayna al-'abd wa-bayna mawlāhu*), the latter of which may include damaging reputations (*shatm al-a'rāḍ*), theft (*akhdh al-amwāl*), and other such injustices. Makkī also explains that while sins against God alone can be easily forgiven, sins against others cannot because they too may require tangible measures of restitution and the forgiveness of the injured party. Citing a tradition about the afterlife, he writes that the sin which is easily forgiven is

68 *al-Ta'arruf*, 64–65.

69 *The Comfort of the Mystics*, ed. Gerhard Böwering and Bilal Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 22–26.

70 *Iḥkām al-tawba* (more on this text below).

71 *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 77. For more on him, see Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 65.

72 *Sufism, Black and White*, ed. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 88.

73 Moreover, neither of them can be compared in the extent of their popularity and influence with the works of Makkī, Sarrāj, Kalābādhi, or Qushayrī.

74 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 297–298.

one which involves an offence against God alone; the sin which is never forgiven entails *shirk* or co-partnering another with God; and finally, the sin which is never left unaccounted for or let go of (*lā yutrak*) involves being called to account by God's servants (*mazālim al-'ibād*).⁷⁵ The thematic overlaps between Baḥya and Makkī, all the way down to their examples of sins, as well as where the inquiry is situated in relation to the broader analysis of repentance (at the end of chapter)—not to mention subtle similarities in language and style—furnish us with further evidence that Baḥya, while not repeating or quoting Makkī verbatim, nevertheless seems to have synthesized, developed and recast some of the features of his *bāb al-tawba* into his own chapter, but creatively so and as an independent thinker with his own unique aims and audience in mind.

The evidence for a Makkīan influence seems to be further confirmed when Baḥya brings up the necessity, as part of the process of repentance, of leaving behind not only what God has prohibited but also what he has allowed, particularly when it involves doubtful matters that might inadvertently lead to sin. Naturally, part of the goal here is to remain faithful to the rabbinic dictum of building a fence around the Torah. To emphasize the concern, Baḥya cites an unnamed authority who said about the righteous, “they used to avoid seventy categories of the permissible⁷⁶ out of fear of falling into a single category of the impermissible.”⁷⁷ The saying, with slight variation, appears in Makkī, with a shift from third to first person (“we use to leave behind seventy categories of the permissible out of fear of falling into a single category of the permissible”).⁷⁸ The quote appears not as we might expect in his treatment of repentance, but no less reasonably, near the very end of the *Nourishment*, in the 47th chapter on trade, merchantry, and earning a livelihood. It is also present in the *Treatise* of Qushayrī in the chapter where we would most expect to find it, in his *bāb al-wara'*, on scrupulousness, with the only difference (apart, once again, from an inconsequential rephrasing),⁷⁹ that the words are now retraced to Abū Bakr, the first caliph.⁸⁰ While Baḥya may well have culled it from both the *Qūt* and the *Risāla*, this should not detract from the fact that the imprint of the former is

75 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:386–387.

76 *sab'īn bāban min al-ḥalāl*.

77 *khawfan min bāb wāḥid min abwāb al-ḥarām* (Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 289).

78 *kunnā natruku sab'īna bāban min al-ḥalāl makhāfa bāb wāḥid min al-ḥarām* (Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 2:503).

79 *kunnā nad'u sab'īn bāban min al-ḥalāl makhāfa an naqa'a fī bāb min al-ḥarām*.

80 Qushayrī, *Risāla*, 236; cf. Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, trans. Barbara von Schlegel (Oneonta, New York: Mizan Press, 1990), 32.

still more pronounced (conceptually, stylistically, and structurally) in the *Duties*.

Baḥya's debt to Muḥāsibī is more transparent, and its traces are as evident in his chapter on repentance as they are in other parts of the book. Near the very end of his inquiry into *tawba*, the Jewish sage affectionately exhorts his reader with the words, "take account of yourself, my brother! (*fa ḥāsib yā akhī nafṣaka!*)."⁸¹ This he does in much the same way that Muḥāsibī often did. In his *Treatise for the Direction-Seekers* (*Risālat al-mustarshidīn*), for example, near the opening he gives the same counsel ("*ḥāsib nafṣaka!*") basing his advice on the famous words of the second caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb which he immediately quotes afterwards, "take yourselves to account before you are taken to account."⁸² As is well-known to students of early Islamic piety, this quality of *muḥāsaba* ("self-accounting" or "introspective self-examination") was such a defining feature Muḥāsibī's own practice, his appellation was said to have derived from his own cultivation of the habit.⁸³ And it was precisely this sustained process of the introspective examination of conscience that led Muḥāsibī to develop a complex mystical psychology which explored both the duties and the sins of the heart—a psychology which would leave an indelible mark on Baḥya's own thought.⁸⁴ Although Baḥya devotes an independent chapter to *muḥāsaba*, his desire to help the spiritual aspirant interiorize his conscience, in a sustained fashion, is discernible throughout the pages of the *Farā'id*.⁸⁵ Through an interrupted regimen of *muḥāsaba*, his hope, like Muḥāsibī, is for the seeker to become acutely conscious of the inner movements (*ḥarakāt*) of the heart, discern the motivations of outward behaviour, cut off the promptings of sin from their places of origin, and purify the self so that one is sufficiently prepared to meet God in the *ākhirā*, the world to the come.

81 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 302.

82 *Risālat al-mustarshidīn*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1964), 36–37.

83 This at least is the predominant view. According to a less prevailing opinion, it was because he had a small number of pebbles which he regularly counted in his states of remembering of God (*ḥāl al-dhikr*). Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam*, 47.

84 Omer Michaelis has recently argued that even though Baḥya's writing does not exhibit features conventionally associated with mysticism, we may still view it as such in view of his profound attention to "interiority," "the internal commandments," and the "inner dimension of Being, which grounds and conditions the visible dimensions of reality." *Interiority*, 9. With the same reasoning in mind, we should be able to say the same about the works of Muḥāsibī, which left an indelible mark on the later mystical tradition of Islam.

85 Michaelis has made a similar argument in the context of his own extensive comparative analysis of Baḥya and Muḥāsibī.

While Muḥāsibī composed numerous works in which he explored repentance, his most sustained analysis of the subject is to be found in the *Iḥkām al-tawba* (*Establishing Repentance*),⁸⁶ still in manuscript form,⁸⁷ the traces of which are discernible in Baḥya. In the seventh subsection of his chapter on repentance, Baḥya examines the obstacles which stand in its way. Here he delves into the danger of *iṣrār*, “persisting in sins,” arguing that it is among the greatest impediment to *tawba*. To quote his own words, “the most serious obstacle is to persist in the sin (*al-iṣrār ‘alā l-ma‘ṣiya*) and to postpone abandoning it (*al-ta‘akhhur ‘an al-iqlā‘ ‘anhā*). In such a case, repentance is not sound. It has been said, ‘there is no minor sin if one persists [in it] and there is no major sin if one seeks forgiveness (*lā ṣaghīra fi l-ma‘āṣi ma‘a l-iṣrār wa lā kabīra fihā ma‘a al-istighfār*).”⁸⁸ An abridged version of this saying appears in Muḥāsibī’s text, and is attributed, once again, to ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. It reads *lā ṣaghīra ma‘a l-iṣrār wa lā kabīra ma‘a l-istighfār*. The only difference is that in Baḥya version the words *fi-l ma‘āṣi* and *fihā* have been interjected as minor points of clarification.

Another theme in the *Farā’id* is of the necessity of following transgressions—outward or inward, against God or others—with corresponding acts of piety. In the first *faṣl* or section of the chapter, he is explicit that the *tā’ib* (i.e., the “returner” or “repenter”) must undo the harm of his sin, without delay, and in a manner that is *fi ḍiddihi*, “contrary to it” (the notion of *ḍidd*, pl. *aḍḍād*, being essential here).⁸⁹ Near the end of the chapter, in the ninth section, he re-

86 Muḥāsibī addresses *tawba* in many of his other works. His most sustained and focused treatment of the subject appears in the *Iḥkām al-tawba*. While there is some disagreement whether it should be *Iḥkām al-tawba* or *Aḥkām al-tawba* (*The Rulings of Repentance*), the content suggests the former, since the author’s aim is to help the sinner complete, perfect, and bring repentance to a close. Both, however, are possible. The full title of the treatise is *Iḥkām al-tawba wa-radd maẓālim al-‘ibād wa-khāliṣ minhā qabl al-ma‘ād*.

87 We have utilized MS Berlin 1435 for our analysis below, although the Cairo manuscript (Taṣ. Sh. 3) was also at our disposal, thanks to Sarah Aziz. For more on the history and status of *Iḥkām al-tawba*, see Gavin Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam*, 79 and 109, n. 106. Picken noted that at the time of writing, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-‘Aṭā’ was preparing the work for publication, yet we have no evidence he brought the project to completion. Cf. Yolande de Crussol, *Le rôle de la raison dans la réflexion éthique d’al-Muḥāsibī: ‘Aql et conversion chez al-Muḥāsibī (165–243/782–857)* (Paris: Consep, 2002), 452; Khalil, *Repentance and the Return to God*, 224, n. 32. See also the observations about the text in Josef van Ess, *Die Gedankenwelt des Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī* (Bonn: Selbstverlag des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Bonn, 1961) and Margaret Smith, *An Early Mystic of Baghdad: A Study of the Life and Teaching of Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī A.D 781–857* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 56–57, 293.

88 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’id al-qulūb*, 294.

89 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’id al-qulūb*, 283.

turns to the subject. “It is necessary that the *tawba* for the sin,” he declares, “be of the same kind which he committed—if possible.”⁹⁰ If wrongdoings involve breaches of the duties of the heart, such as malice, rancor, or envy towards another, then one must desire good for them, free the self of ill-will, and seek forgiveness. And if they entail breaches of the duties of the limbs, such as consuming what God has made unlawful, or negligence in what He has prohibited, then, in like manner, one is obliged to undertake virtuous acts that correspond in kind, through an oppositional relation to the sin for which atonement is sought. This feature of Baḥya’s thinking about sin was highlighted by Moshe Stern when he observed that for the Jewish sage “the act of penitence should match the offence,” adding,

[the] violation by omission of a positive precept should be repented by diligence in performing that same precept. On violation, however, of a negative precept by commission the act of contrition would be the persistent pursuit of like but opposite valued behavior.⁹¹

The very same idea appears prominently in Muḥāsibī’s *Iḥkām al-tawba*, where he is explicit that “sins are atoned by their opposites.”⁹² Thus, if one severed ties of kinship, he must strive to reunite them; if he took the life of another without just cause, he should free slaves; if he fell into fornication (*zinā*’), he should arrange for the marriages of the poor; if he consumed alcohol, he should charitably distribute pure and wholesome drink (*sharāb ṭayyib ṭāhir*); and if he spoke ill of a person behind their back, then he must now laude and praise them to restore their honor.⁹³ Through such corresponding *kaffārāt* (acts of restitution and atonement), the penitent must strive to reverse and undo the effects of his sins, as much as he can. At the heart of the concern lies the Quranic doctrine of *iṣlāḥ*, of setting matters aright, noted in passing above, which must accompany the regenerative and healing process of repentance. It was due to this principle of correspondence that, according to Muḥāsibī, the Prophet instructed his companion Mu‘ādh b. Jabal to turn to God through “a secret repentance for secret sins and an open repentance for open sins.”⁹⁴ In another work, Muḥāsibī develops the idea further when he argues that if

90 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 298.

91 M. S. Stern, “Al-Ghazzālī, Maimonides, and Ibn Paquda on Repentance: A Comparative Model,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47.4 (1979): 589–607, at 599.

92 Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fol. 8b.

93 Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fols. 8b–9a.

94 *tawbat al-sirr bi-l-sirr wa-l-'alāniya bi-l-'alāniya*. Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fol. 9a.

the penitent replaces foul friends with virtuous ones, a concern for this world with a concern for the next, and frivolous speech with contemplative silence and the incantation of the Quran, the “lights of obedience will subjugate his passions,” enabling him to overcome his propensity to disobey God.⁹⁵ This is because the causes of sin have been replaced by their *aḍḍād*, their “contraries.”⁹⁶ The desire to safeguard this principle of correspondence is also present in Makkī, where, in the context of a commentary on Q 4:146 (“except those who repent, set things aright, and hold fast to God”), he writes,

it is necessary that the repentance of every God-servant entail what is contrary to his sin (*ḍidd ma‘āṣīhi*)—few good deeds for a few evil ones, many good deeds for many evil ones. Thus, the penitent acts contrary (*ḍidd*) to his previous iniquities.⁹⁷

Only then will he fall into the ranks of the *muṣliḥīn*, the people of *iṣlāḥ*, lauded in Q 7:170.⁹⁸ This is why he states, “the God-servant is not a *tā’ib* unless he is a *muṣliḥ*, and he is not a *muṣliḥ* unless he engages in *ṣāliḥāt*,” that is to say, in works of *iṣlāḥ*.⁹⁹

Baḥya is adamant that *tawba* entails a comprehensive regimen which begins with a total reorientation of one’s life. It requires supererogatory fasts during the day (*al-tanaḥḥul bi-ṣiyām fi-l nahār*), night prayers (*al-ṣalāt fi-l layl*), and an internal severing of ties from the world.¹⁰⁰ This should be accompanied by contrition (*nadam*), brokenness of heart (*inkisār qalbihi*), fear (*khawf*), continues weeping (*bakā’*), and pleas for divine forgiveness (*istiḡḥfār*).¹⁰¹ Moreover, it is not enough to turn away from the sin which is the object of *tawba*, since the penitent must “abandon all that God has prohibited.”¹⁰² Baḥya returns to the subject later in the chapter, stating, “another factor that invalidates one’s

95 Muḥāsibī, *Bad’ man anāba*, 28.

96 Muḥāsibī, *Bad’ man anāba*, 28.

97 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:380. Although determining the precise nature of the correspondence requires, in some cases, a special type of discernment, and extends not only to the type of sin, but also to the times of their commission. As an example of what he has in mind, Makkī cites the words of earlier authority: “charity at night atones for the sins of the day and charity in secret atones for the sins of the night.” *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:383.

98 The verse reads, “We do not squander the wages of the *muṣliḥīn*.” Pickthall accurately captures the reformatory and corrective nature of *iṣlāḥ* through his rendition of *muṣliḥīn* in the verse as “reformers.”

99 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:380.

100 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’id al-qulūb*, 290.

101 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’id al-qulūb*, 287–289.

102 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā’id al-qulūb*, 289.

repentance is for the penitent to repent from some of his sins while he persists in others.¹⁰³ These same elements appear in Muḥāsibī's *Iḥkām al-tawba*. In the opening of the treatise, he states that from the among the signs of repentance are eating little, weeping over the self, extensive pleas for forgiveness (*ṭūl al-istighfār*), and copious prayer and fasting.¹⁰⁴ Shortly thereafter, he declares that the *tā'ib* cannot be characterized by *tawba* in its true sense so long as he repents from one or even a few sins: he must firmly resolve in his heart "never to return to those sins (for which he seeks divine pardon), as well as others (*gharyihā*)."¹⁰⁵ The condition is also present in Makkī, though he is less stringent regarding its requirement.¹⁰⁶ Behind the stipulation in Baḥya and Muḥāsibī, and less so in Makkī, lies a fear that without a complete turning of heart, an all-encompassing *metanoia* ("change of mind"), its diseases will grow, eventually leading to spiritual death, the full consequences of which will only be experienced in the world to come. This is why Ibn 'Abbās, according to Muḥāsibī, declared that many will appear on the final judgement, having deluded themselves that they had sufficiently atoned for their wrongs, only to realize, when it is too late, they failed to fulfill the most rudimentary obligations of *tawba*.¹⁰⁷

One of the concerns Baḥya raises closer to the end of his treatment, in the eighth subsection of the chapter, revolves around the spiritual benefits of wrongdoings in so far as they help prevent the sinner from succumbing to the dangers of pride and self-admiration. This is why he emphasizes the need to never lose sight of one's past mistakes, "for sin is the means through which humility is obtained, and one exerts himself to fulfill the rights of God." To that effect, he quotes the words of "one of the righteous (*ba'd al-ṣāliḥīn*)" to a disciple, who said, "If you were without sin, I would fear for you what is greater than sin." When asked what could be more detrimental, he replied, "self-admiration (*'ujb*) and ostentation (*riyā'*)."¹⁰⁸ The saying turns out to be a hadith of the Prophet, albeit with minor rewording,¹⁰⁹ cited by Makkī in his chapter on hope,¹¹⁰ and one of many on the subject that would have been utilized by Muḥāsibī to

103 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 295.

104 Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fol. 8a (he is quoting religious authorities here).

105 Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fol. 8b.

106 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:385.

107 Muḥāsibī, *Iḥkām al-tawba*, fol. 8a.

108 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 296–297.

109 One version of hadith runs, "Were you not to sin, I would fear for you what is greater than sin: self-admiration (*'ujb*)." Musnad al-Bazzār, no. 6936.

110 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, 1:444. The version cited by him runs, "If you were not to sin, I would fear for you what is worse than sin." When asked what that was, he replied, "self-admiration."

highlight the poisons of *‘ujb* and *riyā’* within his broader aim of developing an Islamic moral psychology—among the earliest in Muslim intellectual history.

While Muḥāsibī touches on *‘ujb*, *riyā’*, and *kibr* (pride) in passing in the *Iḥkām al-tawba*, particularly within the context of sins of the heart, a more detailed examination of these “mortal vices” (*muhlikāt*) appears in what may have been his most famous work, *al-Ri’āya li-ḥuqūq Allāh* (*Observing the Rights of God*). In the relatively lengthy section on *‘ujb*, he explains how important it is to be continuously mindful of one’s own moral and religious failings, since an awareness of how far one falls short of the religious and moral ideal serves as an armor against feelings of self-importance and self-admiration. Conversely, those afflicted with spiritual pride typically fail to recognize their faults, not because of freedom from sin but because they remain oblivious to the full extent to which their souls are plagued by vice. This leads Muḥāsibī to state that among the factors which contribute to a misplaced sense of pride is a blindness to the depth and scope of one’s wrongs, alongside a trivialization of those very faults of which one might be aware (recall the words of ‘Umar above). In fact, one of the qualities of those afflicted by such pride is the belief that their piety is a gift to God, that they do Him a favor through their obedience. But the truth, for Muḥāsibī, is that no one is without blemish, this being the meaning of the Quranic verse, “Do not ascribe purity to yourselves” (Q 53:32). In his commentary on the passage, he quotes an earlier authority who confessed, “I would much rather spend the night asleep and wake up remorseful (for having missed the night prayer), than to have spent it in prayer only to be full of conceit in the morning.”¹¹¹ In later Islamic history, the sentiment found in the hadith which Baḥya cites with approval would be famously captured in the terse aphorism of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309), “A sin that bequeaths you lowliness and spiritual poverty is far better for you than worship that bequeaths you self-importance and pride.”¹¹²

In the final and tenth subsection of his chapter, Baḥya reminds the reader of the brevity of life and the inevitability of final judgement, encouraging him to turn to God in repentance while there is still yet time. He insists that despite the seemingly unsurmountable obstacles which stand in the way of *tawba*, he should neither lose hope nor despair. So long as the *tā’ib* sincerely tries, exert-

111 Muḥāsibī, *Ri’āya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad ‘Aṭā’ (Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1970), 400.

112 It should not surprise us that Ibn ‘Abbād intersperses and closes his commentary on the aphorism with disproportionately extensive citations (relatively speaking) from the writings of Muḥāsibī. See Ibn ‘Abbād, *Sharḥ al-Ḥikam al-‘Aṭā’iyya*, ed. Muḥammad Riḍā (Damascus: Dār al-Farfūr, 2003), 242–244.

ing himself as much as he can within the scope of his power, “He will make a way out for him (*yajʿal lahu makhraj^{an}*).”¹¹³ The expression is drawn, word-for-word, from the Quran, where the God-fearing, the people of *taqwā*, are assured of divine help (Q 65:2). Baḥya’s uses it to encourage the penitent to have trust in God’s aid and to recognize it may come from unexpected corners. Thus, the *tāʾib* might receive money through an unanticipated channel, enabling him to return the unlawfully acquired wealth of another; or the heart of a person against whom an injustice was done will easily soften, so that feelings of anger, hurt and rage are replaced by clemency, affection, and love. It might also involve finding the victim of a past mistake so their forgiveness can be sought in person.¹¹⁴ In other words, the unseen forces that direct our lives, and which we experience on a regular basis, will come to the assistance of the genuinely penitent. This is what Baḥya intends to teach the reader through his use of the well-known Quranic expression: it is to assure the *tāʾib* his efforts are neither lost nor spent in vain, provided he takes the initiative to repent, return to God, and atone for his crimes and misdemeanors of the past.

Another example of the use of Quranic idiom can be found in Baḥya’s description of the telos of repentance. What the *tāʾib* is ideally striving for is not just God’s forgiveness but His *riḍā*, i.e., His “good-pleasure.” Our Jewish sage is explicit that the desire is for “arrival (*wuṣūl*) at the good-pleasure (*riḍāʾ*) of his Lord.”¹¹⁵ A few lines earlier, he makes use of the elative form of the verbal noun, writing, “have mercy on yourself so you may arrive at the supreme good-pleasure (*riḍwān*) of your Lord.”¹¹⁶ The *wuṣūl* or “arrival” is not to a state of extinction in God, or annihilation of self, but to an encounter with divine *riḍāʾ* and *riḍwān*. The significance of this is underscored by the importance of the terms (and other derivatives of the r-ḍ-y root) in the ethical, theological, and eschatological landscape of the Quran. After all, the revelation of Islam presents the reciprocal relation of *riḍāʾ* between God and the human being as the final and penultimate state of the tranquil soul (*al-naḥs al-muṭmaʾinna*) at the moment of death (Q 89:27-28).¹¹⁷ “Return to you lord,” we read in Q 89:27-28, “*rāḍiyat^{an} marḍīyya*,” which is to say, “well-pleased (with God) and well-pleasing (to God).” Similarly, in the *sūra* or chapter on repentance, after describing the sensorial delights of Paradise, the Quran asserts, but “the *riḍwān*

113 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 300.

114 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 300–301.

115 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 302.

116 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farāʾiḍ al-qulūb*, 302.

117 On classical Muslim interpretations of the verse, see Picken, *Spiritual Purification*, 137–138.

of God is greatest" (Q 9:72). This would lead the medieval exegete Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) to explain that its primacy is due to the simple reason that the physical pleasures of the afterlife involve the body, while *riḍwān* pertains to the rapturous bliss of the spirit or *rūḥ* (due to the composite nature of the human being after the bodily resurrection). And since there can be no commensurability between the enjoyments of the senses, on the one hand, and the soul's reception of God's final satisfaction and good-pleasure, on the other, it logically follows that the latter is infinitely greater than the former.¹¹⁸ In addition, we should note that in the same way the Quran places the *riḍwān* of God above the material comforts of Paradise, it ranks the *muqarrabīn*, "those brought close" or "those made proximate (to God)," above all others (Q 56:11, 88). This is why they are "the foremost" (*al-sābiqūn*) (Q 56:10), forming a spiritual elite with a rank above and beyond "the people of the right" (*aṣḥāb al-yamīn*), a broad, general category to designate the saved (Q 56:27, 38). In other words, in the eschatological scheme of the Quran, the soul's *qurba* or proximity to God is intimately bound to His *riḍwān*. This is relevant to our purposes since Baḥya also identifies the telos of the spiritual life as one proximity to God (*al-taqarrub ilā llāh*),¹¹⁹ and interchangeably so with His *riḍā*, assuring the reader that the doors of *tawba* will remain open as long as one truly yearns for such intimacy and takes the necessary steps to reach it.¹²⁰

An analysis of the percolation of the nomenclature of the Quran into the *Farā'id*, of which numerous other examples could be offered,¹²¹ lies outside

118 "Spiritual felicities are higher and more eminent than bodily felicities (*al-sa'ādāt al-rūḥāniyya a'lā wa-ashraf min sa'ādāt al-jismāniyya*)" (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* [Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1990], 16:106-107, commentary on Q: 9:72).

119 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 301.

120 Baḥya ibn Paquda, *Farā'id al-qulūb*, 301. The theme of proximity to God in Baḥya, obtained through the concerted practice of interiorization and introspective self-examination, is extensively explored by Michaelis. *Interiority*, 77–96. On proximity in early Sufism, see Mohammed Rustom, "Approaches to Proximity and Distance in Early Sufism," *Mystics Quarterly* 33 (2007): 1–25. On the closely related idea of *walāya* in Baḥya, see Ehud Krinis, "Judeo-Arabic *Walāya*: The Testimony in Baḥya Ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart," in *De la lettre à l'esprit: Travaux en hommage à Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi / From the Letter to the Spirit: Studies in Honour of Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi*, ed. Orkhan Mir-Kasimov and Mathieu Terrier, 2:77–93 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2025).

121 For example, Baḥya speaks in his chapter on repentance not just of *tawba* but *ināba* (*Farā'id al-qulūb*, 293, 303), a broader term used in the scripture of Islam to refer to repetitiously coming back to God. Iṣḥāhānī in his lexicon of Quranic Arabic states that the nominal root *nawb* conveys the idea of returning "time after time," or "one after another" (*Mufradāt alfāz al-qur'ān*, s.v. "n-w-b"). The verbal stem n-w-b is deployed in the Quran on 18 occasions but only in its fourth form, either as the active participial *munīb* ("returner" or "returning one") or as a verb (*anāba*). Muḥāsibī used this verb in the title of one of

the parameters of our present inquiry, even though it would form a rich study its own right. There is no reason to presume Bahya drew on this language directly (although it remains possible). The most likely scenario is that it entered through the writings of the early Sufis with whom he was so profoundly familiar, individuals of intense piety and devotion who had internalized the language of the Scripture of their faith through their own intimate relationship with it. This relation was so critical that Louis Massignon went so far as to argue that the “constant recitation, meditation, and practice” of the Quran was the “source of Islamic mysticism, at its beginning and throughout its growth.”¹²² The sentiment would be echoed years later by Annemarie Schimmel, when she observed that the “words of the Koran have formed the cornerstone of all mystical doctrines [in Islam],” before going on to provide some key examples.¹²³ It was only natural, therefore, that the imprint of this language would have made itself present in the Judeo-Arabic in which Bahya composed the *Duties*, a penetrating and profoundly insightful work of moral and mystical psychology through which his legacy would be permanently established in Jewish thinking, almost immediately after its composition. The imprint would be almost entirely lost, however, in the translations of the text into the numerous languages of the world’s Jewish communities through which its fame would be established.

3 Conclusion

The *Farā’iḍ* stands as a fitting illustration of the cultural symbiosis that allowed for the creation of a Judeo-Islamic tradition in the medieval Islamic world. The juridical and theological affinities the two faiths shared between conceptions of sin, repentance, and atonement, which set them apart from

his books, *Bad’ man anāba ilā llāh, The Beginning of the One who Returns to God*. To offer another example, in an earlier chapter Bahya emphasizes the importance of engaging in pious acts “for the face of God” (*Farā’iḍ al-qulūb*, 228). This is a Quranic expression employed, according to the prevailing opinion, to describe deeds performed with a sincere desire for God and His pleasure (*riḍā’*) alone (see Q 2:272; 76:9). Thus Rāzī notes in his commentary that one cannot say, “I did this ‘for his face’ and for someone else,” since to do something “for his face” precludes the possibility of it having been done for any other motive. However, one can for obvious reasons say, “I did this for him and for someone else.”

122 Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, trans. Benjamin Clark (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 73.

123 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 25–26.

Christianity, centered as the later was on a doctrine of redemption through the blood of a divinely incarnated Christ, allowed Baḥya to make extensive use of Muslim sources with relative ease in his analysis of *tawba*. In other words, the Judeo-Islamic nexus allowed for particularly useful exchanges around questions centering on the moral and religious frailties of a human being unmarked by original sin,¹²⁴ the reconciliation of the self with its Creator in the wake of wrongdoing, the mechanisms in place for attempting to secure God's forgiveness, and the complex relation between human and divine agency—exchanges that would not have been as easily possible in the Judeo-Christian or Islamo-Christian¹²⁵ nexus around similar questions, due to differing points of intersection. That the flow from Islam into Judaism in the medieval period was not simply unidirectional is illustrated by the extensive use of the *Isrā'īliyyāt* or “tales of the Israelites,” in not just uniquely Sufi but the broader pietistic and devotional literature of Islam, to offer but one example.

Diana Lobel observed of the *Farā'id* that it was “[w]ritten in the manner of a Sufi devotional manual.”¹²⁶ And Elisha Russ-Fishbane described it as “bearing the deep imprint of Sufi pietism.”¹²⁷ As we have seen, it was all this and more, inflected not only by the conceptual features of early Muslim ascetico-mysticism, but also hadiths and the nomenclature and vocabulary of the Quran. Early Baḥya scholarship speculated that one of the main influences on our Jewish sage was Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). Later, it became evident Baḥya and Ghazālī were drawing on shared Islamic material. One of these reservoirs, as demonstrated in subsequent studies, was the Muḥāsibīan corpus. While the precise scope and extent of this debt remain to be unearthed, the recent work of Omer Michaelis, marked by a sensitivity to the realm of human “interiority,”¹²⁸ has shed considerable light on this area. Our comparative analysis of Baḥya's chapter on *tawba* with the Berlin manuscript of Muḥāsibī's *Iḥkām al-tawba* has, we hope,

124 While the idea of original sin is less pronounced in Arabic Christianity, the predominant form of the tradition in medieval Islamic society, the geographical affinity of Muslims and Jews of al-Andalus to Latin Christianity may have rendered some of the Judeo-Islamic affinities around the theoretical and practical dimensions of *tawba/teshawah* more apparent.

125 While it is commonplace to speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition in the West, and less so of a Judeo-Islamic tradition, the least explored of the three seems to have been the Islamo-Christian tradition. Richard Bulliet's study remains a general exception (*The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2004]).

126 Lobel, “Bahya ibn Paquda,” 66.

127 Russ-Fishbane, *Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt*, 44.

128 This was at least in part, by the author's own confession, because the Covid-19 Pandemic afforded him an opportunity to go into isolation with the *Farā'id* as a companion. *Interiority*, ix.

further contributed to our understanding of this debt. Less explored has been Baḥya's use of Makkī. As we have also shown, the likelihood that he was both inspired by and drew from the *Qūt al-qulūb*, a seminal influence on Ghazālī (along with Muḥāsibī), is almost certain. His use of Qushayrī seems less definitive.

It is hoped that this modest contribution to Baḥya scholarship will advance our knowledge of the interreligious exchanges and symbiotic relationship between medieval Jews and Muslims that allowed for the formation and development of a Judeo-Islamic tradition that survived for centuries until the advent of modernity, colonialism, and the reconfiguration of geopolitical, cultural, and religious alliances in the wake of the second world war. The tradition was not one of syncretism but "creative symbiosis," and in the words of one scholar, was "parallel to and no less real—perhaps in fact even more real—than that of the Judeo-Christian tradition."¹²⁹

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129 Norman Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 9–10. See also Khalil, "Jewish-Muslim Dialogue, Globalization, and the Judeo-Islamic Legacy," 1–21. Modernity, colonialism, and the reconfiguration and reification of religious identities and religious differences contributed to the decline of such interreligious symbioses and the emergence of interreligious conflicts in a myriad of contexts. For a comparison in a different milieu (of Muslims and Hindus in South Asia) that sheds light on emergent dynamics between religions in modernity, see Fuad S. Naeem, "Monotheistic Hindus, Idolatrous Muslims: Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, and the Theological Roots of Hindu-Muslim Conflict in South Asia," *Religions* 16.2 (2025): 1–30. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/2/256> (last accessed: August 25, 2025)

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Avicenna's Metaphysical Efficient Cause Revisited

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Abstract

Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) advances the concept of a metaphysical efficient cause (MEC), which bestows existence on every effect. The MEC in some way or other complements the efficient cause of motion in physics and other natural causes. This article considers several interpretations of what a MEC is and discusses the problems those interpretations raise. It assesses the role of the Giver of Forms as the paradigmatic case of a MEC. The study proposes instead that the MEC be read as a more general principle of analysis in metaphysics, which can be applied more broadly to natural entities and processes.

Keywords

Avicenna – causation – existence – essence – form – metaphysics – Giver of Forms

1 Introduction

Avicenna is well-known to have developed Aristotle's philosophy of causality and Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology in novel ways. One such key point is

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Avicenna's development of Aristotle's efficient cause of physics in metaphysics as a principle and giver of existence. He states,

This is because the metaphysicians do not mean by efficient cause only the principle of motion, as the physicists [*al-ṭabī'īyyūn*] mean, but the principle and giver of existence [*mabda' al-wujūd wa-mufīdihi*], as in the case of the Creator [*al-bārī*] with respect to the world.²

Whereas the efficient cause of physics is limited to explaining kinds of motion in the categories, the efficient cause of metaphysics imparts existence itself. But what does this mean?

If we take Avicenna's example of the cosmos as a whole, we know what Avicenna does *not* mean. The cause or explanation of the existence of the cosmos should not concern its generation or origination in time, i.e., the alleged fact that it gained existence after non-existence. Avicenna states,

Someone may think that the agent and the cause are needed only for a thing to have existence after nonexistence and that once a thing exists, it exists through itself, without a cause...For such a person, the causes are thus only causes of origination.³

The point is connected to Avicenna's very definition of the metaphysical efficient cause (MEC). Avicenna requires that the MEC 1) absolutely "co-exists" with its effect and 2) asymmetrically necessitates its effect. These are rather strong requirements but ones that Avicenna consistently adheres to in metaphysics. We can see how strong they are by turning to Avicenna's application of (1). If we take the definitional requirement of "co-existence" in the strictest sense, so that a cause cannot exist prior, or posterior, to its effect in any way whatsoever, then we would have to exclude the usual examples of efficient causes that we or the natural philosophers would take at face value, i.e., the father as the cause of the child, the builder as the cause of the building (or even the builder's art as the cause of the building), or fire as the cause of warmth. This at least seems to follow, in theory, if we take Avicenna's definition of the MEC in this way. In practice, Avicenna confirms and bites the metaphysical bullet, stating explicitly that these are *not* examples of true causes. Moreover, he states that we can tell they are not true causes because the father, for ex-

2 Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), VI 1.2:195, translation modified; hereafter, "*Ilāhīyyāt*."

3 *Ilāhīyyāt* VI 1.11:198, translation modified.

ample, exists prior and posterior to the child without being the cause of the child's continued existence or "persistence." Avicenna states, "For the builder, the father, and the fire are not, in reality, causes for the continued existence of these effects...Thus, true causes coexist with the effect [i.e., absolutely]."⁴ In the following discussion, I consider how to understand the MEC with particular attention to the requirements of co-existence and necessity.

The object of the present study is to weigh several readings of the explanandum of the MEC. I sketch some of the main contenders, their philosophical strengths and possible textual supports in Avicenna, and ultimately what I take to be the strongest reasons against their adoption. I consider the following options for what a MEC is doing: 1) Causing essences to be what they are; 2) Causing (selecting) the essences that do exist as opposed to others (something like a possible-worlds approach); 3) Causing the continuous existence of sublunar species through an infinity of individuals; 4) Causing or "giving" a species form to sublunar matter in the process of generation. I use Avicenna's theory of the MEC as a limiting framework in deciding on these options, which I outline in the first section. The fundamental convictions of Avicenna's argument for the efficient cause of existence in metaphysics will provide suggestions for, and constraints on, the options we consider in the sections that follow. I conclude with my own proposal, explored elsewhere, that Avicenna's re-conception of efficient causation in metaphysics may be understood as an attempt at defining fundamental ontological dependency relations that is explanatorily and ontologically prior to the explanatory role of physical causes. I have proposed there that instead of understanding the efficient cause of metaphysics as a *causal* relation per se, we can better capture Avicenna's efficient cause of existence as a non-modal, essentialist account of *ontological dependence*.⁵

4 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.1–5; 201–202, translation modified.

5 Zarepour has already proposed viewing the "Avicennian notion of *efficient causation* in the same manner that contemporary analytic metaphysicians understand the notion of *ontological dependence*" in *Necessary Existence and Monotheism: An Avicennian Account of the Islamic Conception of Divine Unity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4. Zarepour sees Avicenna's distinction in terms of "entity-grounding" but does not pursue the point in detail given the scope of his work. I agree that Avicenna's approach is better understood in terms of ontological dependence and that it can also contribute to contemporary discussions of non-modal, essentialist readings of ontological dependence by centering the role of natural kinds. An alternative reading of ontological dependence is to view it as the genus under which the four Aristotelian causes fall as species. In this view, ontological dependence simply amounts to a general definition of causation.

2 The Argument of *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1–3

Avicenna lays out his theory of the efficient cause of existence in *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1–3, though the book draws on preceding discussion including I 6 and IV 1.⁶ The undertaking is a significant one. Avicenna seeks not only to establish that there is a facet of things that has yet to be explained under either the Aristotelian efficient cause of motion or the *kalām* cause of coming-to-be, but that it is actually the most pressing and essential explanandum of things. It is what makes a cause a cause in the most fundamental sense—*not* of the fact that something is undergoing change or that it came to be after not having been. He begins the discussion by defining the efficient cause in the following manner:

By efficient cause, [we mean] the cause which bestows an existence that is distinct from itself...This is because the metaphysicians do not mean by efficient cause only the principle of motion, as the physicists [*al-ṭabīʿiyyūn*] mean, but the principle and giver of existence [*mabdaʾ al-wujūd wa-mufīdihi*], as in the case of the Creator [*al-bārī*] with respect to the world. As for the natural efficient cause, it does not bestow any existence other than imparting motion in one of the forms of imparting motion. Thus, in the natural sciences, that which bestows existence [*mufīd al-wujūd*] is a principle of motion.⁷

In the following, I outline the relevant aspects of his argument for this cause of existence in metaphysics, as developed in *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1–3, which culminate in the distinction between the cause of the effect qua species versus cause of the effect qua individual. As Richardson states, three ingredients of his metaphysical conception of causation, or the relation of cause to effect, are: (explanato-

6 For studies that treat aspects of metaphysical efficient causality in Avicenna, see Kara Richardson, "Avicenna's Conception of the Efficient Cause," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21.2 (2013), 220–239; Michael Marmura, "The Metaphysics of Efficient Causality in Avicenna (Ibn Sina)," in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Michael Marmura (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), 172–187; Thérèse Druart, "Metaphysics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 327–348 (especially pp. 338–340); Robert Wisnovsky, "Final and Efficient Causality in Avicenna's Cosmology and Theology," *Quaestio* 2 (2002), 97–124; Wisnovsky, "Towards a History of Avicenna's Distinction Between Immanent and Transcendent Causes," in *Before and After Avicenna*, ed. David Reisman (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 49–68; Emann Allebban, "Conservation and Causation in Avicenna's Metaphysics," PhD Thesis, McGill University, 2018, 10–53.

7 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1.2:194–195, translation modified.

ry) sufficiency, necessity, and the absolute coexistence of cause and effect.⁸ As the following shows, these elements need to be parsed more finely to have the traction that Avicenna intends. This is particularly so for the notion of “necessity” at play. By necessity, or that a thing *necessitates* another, Avicenna intends an essential relation of dependency. The important aspect of this necessity is that it is asymmetrical and Avicenna will clarify that the asymmetry is to be understood in terms of essences, or asymmetric relations between natural kinds.

2.1 *The Efficient Cause as Cause of a Thing's Existence*

Avicenna begins with what seems to be a long-winded excursus on how the fact that a thing was preceded by nonexistence is not something that is causable or due to an agent.⁹ It is not at the face of it obvious why this would be a significant point to labor. Avicenna is here commencing his argument against the view that what makes something in need of a cause is that it came to be after having not existed, i.e. *ḥudūth*. Avicenna breaks this feature of a thing, its coming-to-be, into the following parts so as to inquire into their causes: 1) the fact that the thing was nonexistent; 2) the fact that the thing exists-after-having-not-existed; and 3) the fact that the thing exists. He says the first quality, that it was nonexistent, has no cause, other than the absence of its cause. He says the second quality also has no cause because it can't but be this way. That is, every effect is the type of thing that has existence after not existing. Even with eternal effects, nonexistence is prior essentially. He concludes that this feature, of existence-after-nonexistence, is not something that can be caused. Though he does not make his argument here in these terms, it is clear that he is thinking of this as being an essential quality of an effect, that it is the sort of thing that is preceded, in essence and for some effects in time, by nonexistence. Existence is external to its essence, and so it can't help but be the case that such things are preceded by nonexistence. For this reason, Avicenna says such a feature cannot be caused, for it has it in virtue of its essence.

However, the last feature, that a thing exists, *can* be caused. Avicenna concludes from this analysis that it is a thing's *existence* that is caused in any meaningful sense of cause, not the fact that it was nonexistent nor the fact that it

8 “According to Avicenna, *sufficiency, necessity* and *coexistence* are features of efficient causality in all domains” (Kara Richardson, “Avicenna on the PSR and Causal Necessity in the Natural World,” *Theoria*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/theo.70000> (last accessed: February 1, 2026) [italics mine]). I focus on Avicenna's discussions in *Ilāhiyyāt* with respect to the interrelation of these concepts in defining metaphysical efficient causation. I set aside any detailed analysis of how Avicenna's definition of metaphysical efficient causation is to be understood in relation to the four causes as discussed in his various works.

9 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1.7–10:197–198.

is a thing whose existence comes after nonexistence. Having established that it is existence that the efficient cause causes, he will later conclude that what makes something in need of a cause of existence is not that it came-to-be or what he considers any other accidental feature of it, but “that *species of existence* inasmuch as it belongs to that species of quiddities deserves to have a cause, even if it continues [to exist] and endures.”¹⁰

2.2 *The Principle of Coexistence*

Having established that it is a thing's *existence* that is in need of explanation, Avicenna next argues for the claim that it continues to need a cause of existence precisely as long as it exists. That is, the cause cannot exist prior to the effect nor after it. This is because the effect's existence after generation cannot be necessary in itself but is instead through an external condition. His argument may be summarized as follows. A thing's existence after generation is either necessary or not. If it's necessary, its necessity of existence is either through its own essence or an external condition (*shart*). If it is of its essence that it necessarily exists, then it could not have come to be, as an essence that is necessarily existent could not have not existed. Thus the thing's necessity of existence must be through an external condition. That condition is either: 1) generation; 2) an attribute of the thing; or 3) something else. Its generation cannot be the source of its necessity, since generation is not itself necessary, i.e., if it is necessary it would be unchanging or eternal. As well, its generation has ceased, so it cannot be a cause of its continued necessity. This brings him to the second option, which is some attribute of the thing that renders it necessarily existent. Perhaps it is *a thing having gone through origination* that renders the thing now necessarily existent. He says this, or any other attribute of the thing that one may speculate as rendering it necessary, is either its attribute qua its essence or qua existent. If the former, it would, again, render the thing necessarily existent in itself, which has been shown to be inconsistent with generation. So then it is an attribute that came into being with its existence. But just like origination cannot be the explanation of something's necessity, so too an originated attribute. So then the attribute requires a cause but this terminates

10 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 1.14:199. See the parallel discussion in *Najāṭ: Ilāhiyyāt* I 12: “On contingency being the cause of the need for the Necessary, not generation [*hudūth*] as the weak from among the *mutakallimīn* suppose.” I cite from Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Najāṭ*, edited by Muḥammad-Taqī Dānishpazhūh (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1985). For a discussion of contingency in the context of the essence/existence distinction, see Stephen Menn, “Metaphysics: God and Being,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*, edited by A. S. McGrade (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147–170 (especially pp. 154–157).

at an attribute necessitated by an external thing. (Because an infinite number of attributes that are all only possibly existent in themselves could never render something necessary.) Avicenna gives a similar argument in the *Najāt* for a coexisting cause of existence. There he argues that contingency is of its very nature, and it becomes necessary only through an external condition and not through itself. In the *Najāt* version of this argument, the cause of existence is also called a cause of persistence (*'illat al-thabāt*).¹¹ In *Ilāhiyyāt*, he states this in a similar manner:

Regarding that which is [erroneously] believed that the son continues to exist *after* the father, that the building continues to exist *after* the builder, and that the warmth continues to exist *after* the fire [is removed], the reason for this is the conflation [*takhlīf*] that results from lack of knowledge of [what] a cause is in reality [*al-'illa bi-l-ḥaqīqa*]. For the builder, the father, and the fire are not, in reality, causes of the *persistence* [*qiwām*] of these effects.¹²

Avicenna suggests here that the problem lies in the very definition of the cause that is overlooked and concludes that a thing needs a coexisting cause of existence for as long as it continues to exist. Importantly, he also notes that the cause cannot exist prior to the effect: “Thus, the true causes coexist with the effect. As for those that are [temporally] prior, these are causes, either accidentally or as helpers.”¹³ I will return to the question of causal “helpers”.

2.3 *The Cause of Existence as Cause of Natures*

Having established the need for an enduring cause of existence for as long as the thing exists, the subsequent discussion offers some details on what the cause of existence is doing, as distinct from other causes. Importantly, as he has shown above, this cause of a thing's existence is *not* causing a thing to come into existence, which is explicable by a thing's cause of generation. This would be the efficient cause of physics. Here in metaphysics he is establishing a new causal principle that is doing something far different and most essential for a thing.

He illustrates this by example through an analysis of the causes of three effects: the building, the son, and the fire. He first affirms what he has just shown regarding the need for a cause of persistence: one may think, in “ignorance”,

¹¹ *Najāt: Ilāhiyyāt* 11 14.

¹² *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.1:201, translation modified.

¹³ *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.5:202.

that these effects persist on their own after their causes, but “the builder, the father, and the fire are not, in reality, causes for the persistence [*qiwām*] of these effects.”¹⁴ He proceeds to outline the true causes of the persistence of these effects. It is not enough to simply cite the thing’s form as a cause of its persistence, as he considers the form to be utterly contingent and dependent. Persistence in existence seems to be a function of a thing’s essence being continuously actualized from outside through “the cause that endows forms.”¹⁵ As he writes with respect to the son: “as for it becoming formed as an animal and its continuity as an animal, this has another cause...the cause that endows forms”; the building: “the cause of the building’s shape is...the natures...the cause of these being the separable cause that enacts the natures”; the fire: “the cause of fire is the cause that bestows forms.”¹⁶ He concludes, again, that this cause coexists with its effects.

Again, Avicenna is treating an explanandum that is distinct from the causes of generation treated in physics. He is here concerned with “essential causes”. As he concludes, “The essential causes of things through which the existence of the essence of that thing comes about in actuality must exist with it.”¹⁷

It can be noted that although he introduces here the caused-ness of essences and tethers it to the cause of existence he has been speaking of, nowhere in his analysis does Avicenna directly invoke the Giver of Forms as intervening in causal processes to endow the form to individual properly prepared matter. And even if he is indicating the Giver of Forms, the explanandum remains, as it is unclear how the Giver of Forms, which presumably somehow possesses all forms in actuality, fulfills the requirement of both absolute coexistence and asymmetric necessity. While this is one reading of the role of the Giver of Forms as cause of existence, and is indeed what I will refer to as the received view, I will raise various problems with it. I return to this in section 3.4. I also find it less promising given the next step in Avicenna’s analysis of the MEC, which tethers it to causing at the level of species, not the level of the individual.

2.4 *The Cause of the Effect Qua Species*

Having established this new causal principle, the efficient cause of metaphysics, the cause of existence, Avicenna’s final step in his inquiry is to tether this causal principal to the ontological and explanatory domain of the effect qua species. To the prior results, in VI 3 Avicenna advances a distinction concern-

14 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.1:201, translation modified.

15 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.5:202.

16 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.3–5:201–202.

17 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 2.8:203.

ing cause and effect that “we must not ignore”: we may analyze an effect in terms of its *individual-ness* and identify the corresponding causes, or we may analyze an effect in terms of its *species-ness* and identify the corresponding causes. Avicenna states:

There is here, however, another explication by another kind of verifying inquiry [*taḥqīq*] which *we must not ignore*. This [explication] is that causes and effects, at first consideration according to thought, divide into two parts. [The first] part [is one] where the natures in the effect and its [own] specificity and essential quiddity necessitate that, in its existence, it is an effect of a nature or natures. The causes would thus necessarily be different from its specificity, since they are causes of it with respect to its species, not [to] its individual [instance]. If this is the case, then the two species are not one [and the same], since what is being sought after is the cause of that species. Rather, the effects would be necessitated by some other species, and the causes would necessitate a species other than their own. These [latter] would be essential causes of the thing absolutely caused with respect to the species of the effect. [The second] part [is one] where the effect is not the effect of the cause, nor is the cause the cause of the effect in [terms of the effect's] species, but in [terms of] its individual [existence]. Let us take this according to what thought outwardly dictates by way of division—what is found outwardly as existing examples of it—and by way of expansion [on this], until we show *the true state that must obtain for it through our examination of the cause that gives the form of every [existent] that has form from among bodies*. An example of the first [part] is the soul's being a cause of voluntary motion,¹⁸ an example of the second is this fire's being the cause of that fire.¹⁹ The difference between the two things is known. For this fire is not the cause of that fire in that it is the cause of the specificity of fire, but in that it is the cause of some fire. If considered in terms of specificity, it would be the cause of specificity accidentally. The case is similar with [the causal relation] of father to son,

18 Avicenna delineates three causes of voluntary motion in his discussions on final causation in *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 5: the most remote (and first cause) being the imaginative or cogitative faculty of the soul, followed by the less remote appetitive faculty, and finally the proximate being the motive power in organs.

19 Note Avicenna's remarks that these examples are just loose, preliminary ones, “what is found outwardly” to begin to draw out the distinction.

not inasmuch as this is a father and that a son, but with respect to the existence of humanity.²⁰

Here Avicenna begins by echoing the results of VI 2 that some things, due to their very essence, need a cause when existing. But here in VI 3 he associates that sort of causation with a new distinction concerning causes and effects: causes that cause a thing's specificity, versus causes that cause a thing in its "individual" instance. As he states,

[The first] part [is one] where the natures in the effect and its [own] specificity and essential quiddity necessitate that, in its existence, it is an effect of a nature or natures. The causes would thus necessarily be different from its specificity, since they are causes of it with respect to its species, not [to] its individual [instance].

Here we learn that the cause of existence that he has been arguing for is now subsumed under some broader analysis of cause and effect whereby it is responsible for causing the *species-ness* of an effect, hereto referred to as the cause of the effect qua species. And because the cause of existence is responsible for causing the species-ness of a thing, he says it must be of a different species than the effect. Accordingly, he goes on to emphasize, as he did in VI 1–2, that the entities we may think of to fulfill this causal role do not and cannot actually do so. Just as in VI 2 he argued that the father cannot cause the *existence* of the son and the fire cannot cause the *existence* of the other fire, here in VI 3 he again revisits the same examples, but instead of speaking of their persistence in existence as the explanandum, he speaks of their species or essence as the explanandum. When this fire causes that fire, or the father causes the son, they do not and cannot cause the existence of the species or essence of the effect which they both share. He says causes like the father and the fire are only responsible for causing individual fires and sons, or the effect qua individual. These individual effects instantiate essences that cannot possibly be caused by other individuals that instantiate the same essence. The son requires a cause of his humanity but one that is not human. As he states, "the two species are not one [and the same], since what is being sought after is the cause of that species." Here he clearly states that this cause of existence that he has been speaking of is a cause of species, i.e. of humanity, fire-ness, and so on. He states that these species would be caused and "necessitated" by "some

20 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 3.7–10:207–208, translation modified.

other species." That other species, he concludes, would be "essential causes of the thing absolutely caused with respect to the species of the effect." This essential cause of things is precisely the cause that he aimed to establish at the outset of *Ilāhiyyāt* VI.

Avicenna next turns to an extended discussion on the cause of the effect qua individual. The discussion is not immediately pertinent here, except to draw out the following point. The examples Avicenna uses to illustrate causes of the effect qua individual are telling: fire heating water to the point that it transforms into fire, salt changing honey into salt, and the light of the sun causing light here or on the moon.²¹ The examples represent a range of causes across the sublunar and superlunar realms that are often taken as true causes of a thing. Avicenna's contention is that in all of these cases that we take *prima facie* to be causing their effects—indeed that the Aristotelian physicist might take to be the paradigmatic cases of causing—the cause's efficacy is actually limited to explanation at the level of an effect qua individual and not the species-ness of the effect. The salt can turn honey into salt, but it cannot cause the *existence* of the very essence of saltness that it and the new salt share.

Importantly, Avicenna ends the discussion by referring the reader to *Physics* of the *Shifā'* as the appropriate place to further explore such causes of the effect qua individual.²² The crucial point made by Avicenna's elaboration of his "first blush" distinction between cause of the effect qua species and cause of the effect qua individual is that the latter category is addressed through the explanatory causes of motion and change in physics. However, such causes are restricted, in the sense that they explain the generation and corruption of individuals of a species but not the very existence of their contingent essence. Here, he is repeating the point made in the earlier chapters, that what physicists and others take to be the causes of a thing are only causes of kinds of motion. These causes, namely the efficient, formal, material, and final cause treated in physics, operate at only one level of the causal and explanatory structure of reality.

This is why Avicenna also holds here that the cause of species that he is seeking must be *outside* of the species itself, since "what is being sought after is the cause of that species." He also says the cause of the effect qua species is the cause that "gives the form of every [existent] that has form among bodies" and, as seen in VI 2, is a cause that continues to cause the form for as long as the thing exists. He says the cause of the effect qua species would be the thing's "essential cause". Connecting these points with the prior ones Avicenna has made

21 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 3.11–24:208–212.

22 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 3.25:213.

in VI 1–2, summarized above, Avicenna concludes his discussion of the MEC by aligning it with the plane of caused reality that is the species, while other causes function at the plane of caused reality that is the individual. Thus, I will hereto speak of the cause of the effect qua species, the MEC, and the cause of existence interchangeably, as I believe Avicenna does.

Although we have come a long way towards understanding the MEC, we may still ask what it means exactly to cause the effect qua species, just as we may still ask the question of what it means to cause existence. It seems even given these parameters, there are a number of ways to parse this causal principle. I turn to these now, with a constant eye backwards to the conception of the MEC that Avicenna has thus far developed. One key result that has emerged is that whatever it is doing, the MEC is not doing it through motion. Such causes, again, are appropriately studied in the science of physics, which Avicenna has subsumed under the broader category of the effect qua individual and is the proper subject matter of physics. Critically, there too, with respect to the cause of existence, Avicenna cautions that the causality of such a cause is “external to the science of physics” and “the natural philosopher has no business discussing it since it has nothing to do with the science of physics.”²³ Another key result is that it is causing the existence of species or essences, and not at the level of the effect qua individual, or whatever the father is providing or doing vis-a-vis the son. With these guiding posts in mind, I turn now to consider, for Avicenna, what does a cause of existence *do*?

3 What does a MEC do?

Here are what I take to be some main contenders for what a MEC is doing:

- 1) Causing essences to be what they are (causing the essence humanity as ‘rational animal’ and triangle as ‘three-sided figure’)
- 2) Causing (selecting) the essences that do exist as opposed to others
- 3) Causing the continuous existence of sublunar species through an infinity of individuals
- 4) Causing or “giving” a species form to a sublunar individual in the process of generation (*the received view*)

23 Avicenna, *The Physics of The Healing*, ed. and trans. Jon McGinnis, 2 vols. (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2009), I 2.10.17.

I do not think any of these are the explanandum that Avicenna is after here in proposing the cause of the effect qua species. In the following sections, I consider each of these options, first motivating their philosophical and/or textual plausibility in Avicenna, and then why I take them to be unsatisfactory in the end. I conclude with a gesture to an alternative that I develop in another study.

3.1 *Making an Essence*

Could there be a cause of the fact that humanity's essence is "rational animal" or a triangle's essence is "three-sided figure"? An example of this view is Descartes' radical voluntarism whereby God is the efficient cause of eternal truths like essences, or that all the radii of a circle are equal, by declaring them to be what they are. As Descartes writes in a letter to Mersenne, "You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause."²⁴ This raises all sorts of problems for Descartes that have occupied commentators, such as how Descartes can consider such truths necessary and yet also freely created by an omnipotent God. We need not step into these, but simply consider whether this might be the sort of explanandum that Avicenna is after in his MEC. That is, the proposal is that causing existence is to cause every essence to be what it is.

Whether essences can be caused to be what they are was a question in the Islamic context before and after Avicenna, tied to discussions around the ontological status of non-existent things.²⁵ Avicenna explicitly denies that something can be caused to be what it is, for it is what it is intrinsically—it is simply the genus and species of a thing that jointly cause the essence of the species. There cannot be an efficient cause of the essence over and above these, as he writes,

[Y]ou know for sure that nothing makes human to be animal, or four to be number. Otherwise, in the absence of that thing, human would not be animal and four would not be number, which is absurd. The meaning of our saying that one thing makes another thing to be 'such-and-such' is

24 "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:152, CSMK 25, qtd. in Cunning, David, "Descartes' Modal Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/descartes-modal/>.

25 For a summary of some of the positions and questions, as well as translated texts to follow, see Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich, *The Heirs of Avicenna: Philosophy in the Islamic East, 12-13th Centuries*, vol. 1, *Metaphysics and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 138–143.

that the latter thing is not ‘such-and-such’ in itself, but rather something outside it makes it ‘such-and-such.’ If something in itself cannot help being ‘such-and-such,’ then nothing makes it ‘such-and-such.’²⁶

He goes on to clarify further that the cause of a human does not also cause it to be animal, since human is animal essentially, just as, he says, black is color essentially and four is number essentially. In contrast, he continues, the whiteness of a human *can* be caused, as human is not white in itself, and so too, of course, is being for human. That is, existence is not intrinsic to human and needs an external cause. As ‘Umar al-Khayyām makes plain with respect to God’s causal role, “For the Creator, who is great, did not make human to be a body, for instance. Rather He made [human] to be existent. Furthermore, when the human exists, he cannot but be a body.”²⁷

Thus, we find here Avicenna unwavering in holding that the agency of the First is strictly with respect to causing existence. He makes this point earlier, as we saw, when arguing that the First’s causal contribution is not causing existence after nonexistence. And now he makes the point again here, arguing the First causes a thing’s existence, not causing an essence to be what it is. In both contexts, the shared intuition behind the arguments he gives is that God does not cause such matters, because there is no such cause to be had.

3.2 *Selecting Essences*

Another candidate for the causal role of the MEC is to be a kind of selector of the essences that actually populate our cosmos. One could certainly imagine a world whereby no humans ever existed, or no trees ever existed, or no mosquitos. Or one could imagine that different sorts of things populated the cosmos

26 Avicenna, *Dānish-nāma: Mantīq*, 15.1–16.5, in Adamson and Benevich, *Heirs of Avicenna*, 148–149. And in the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Dānish-nāma* 38.10–39.3, he again denies that essences can be caused to be what they are, repeating some of the same examples; see Adamson and Benevich, *Heirs of Avicenna*, 149.

27 Al-Khayyām, *Risāla fī l-wujūd*, 105.10–106.2, in Adamson and Benevich, *Heirs of Avicenna*, 150, and the same position is again articulated in his *Jawāb ‘an thalāth masā’il*, 167.8–9. Al-Sāwī also reaffirms Avicenna’s view and adds that if one thinks an essence *can* be caused to be what it is, then “it would be possible to suppose that the human is not an animal by supposing the absence of the cause” (*Baṣā’ir, Mantīq* 37.22–38.2, in Adamson and Benevich, *Heirs of Avicenna* 155). See also al-Rāzī’s recap of the *falsafa* view, “They also agreed that quiddities are not made (*ghayr maj’ūla*). They said: whatever is necessitated through another is eliminated along with that other thing. If blackness belonged to black through something else, then when that other thing was eliminated, black would stop being black. But saying that black is no longer black is absurd” (*Muḥaṣṣal*, 59.11, in Adamson and Benevich, *Heirs of Avicenna*, 161).

instead: a purple rational animal that flies. Is there a cause or explanation of there being the essences that there are in the cosmos (humanity; tree-ness; mosquito-ness) as opposed to a cosmos with different essences (unicorn-ness, etc.)? Put more broadly, why is the cosmos the way that it is? Perhaps contingency implies not just that something could have not been, but that what is could have been otherwise. Does God not only give existence but “choose”, or determine, which essences to give existence to? This would have the additional benefit of cohering with the intuition that choosing is essential to agency.²⁸

To scale the explanandum up a level, in many texts, Avicenna speaks of what we may call macro-level “essences”, or the larger ways that the cosmos operates. Avicenna discusses the management (*tadbīr*) or order (*nizām*) of the cosmos, which he says emanates from the first principles, and that through the mediation of the first of the heavenly bodies, the order of the cosmos is preserved.²⁹ He gives several examples of such cosmic orders in various texts. Some of these examples occur in the context of his discussion of “universal nature” (*al-ṭabīʿa al-kullīya*). One such example is the principle that any prepared matter gets its appropriate form rather than be “wasted”, even if receiving such a form results in aberrations from the species. Avicenna gives the example of the sixth digit,

The same is true of the additional finger, since it is something intended by the universal nature, which requires that any matter that is prepared for some form received it and that [that form] not be hindered; so when there is excessive matter deserving the form of finger-ness, it will not be denied and wasted.³⁰

He invokes “universal nature” in these examples in order to show that such aberrations are still within nature, even though they conflict with the “particular nature” (*al-ṭabīʿa al-juzʿiyya*), that is, “the specific power that governs one

28 However, some have argued for a compatibilist reading of Avicenna, in which although Avicenna does not ascribe choice to God in this way, God is nonetheless free. See Jari Kaukua, “Freedom and Responsibility in Avicenna,” in *Penser Avec Avicenne : De l'héritage grec à la réception latine, en hommage à Jules Janssens*, edited by Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebti (Louvain: Peeters 2022), 149–168, and Anthony Ruffus and Jon McGinnis, “Willful Understanding: Avicenna’s Philosophy of Action and Theory of the Will,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 97.2 (2015): 160–195.

29 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.3:52.

30 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.4:53.

individual.”³¹ In contrast, the universal nature is “the power emanating from the substances of the celestial entities as one thing, and it is the governor of the totality of what is in the world of generation (*kawn*),”³² It is not typical for a human to have a sixth digit or an oversized head,³³ but it is a sort of universal principle, in accordance with universal nature, that matter that is prepared for a form is not “wasted” and left without its suitable form. Another example he gives of a cosmic “way” or order that is in line with universal nature is the fact that sublunar individuals perish instead of live forever.³⁴ He explains that if individuals do not perish, there would be overcrowding and resource depletion, such that other individuals would not be able to exist. Another example he gives is how the souls of individual humans are freed from the body to attain their true aim instead of being perpetually trapped by the body.³⁵

Avicenna is building on a history of discourse on this concept of a universal nature.³⁶ Useful for our purposes is an analogy from Alexander of a ruler whose effect (rule) permeates the city. The analogy is apt, and relevant in two ways. First, it clarifies that, like the rule of a ruler, the universal nature is not some determinate substance or entity. Avicenna emphasizes that neither the particular nature nor the universal nature have existence as discrete substances, and that it is only the particular (*al-juzʿi*) that exists.³⁷ Like the ruler of a city, the universal nature is connected to maintaining the order (*niḏām*) of the cosmos. This order is ultimately caused by the first cause but through the mediation of superlunar causes. It is plausible that Avicenna is maintaining the view from Philoponus that the universal nature is an effect that descends from superlunar existents and which is responsible for the order and laws that govern the cosmos. Still, Avicenna takes God to be responsible for these contingent ways that the cosmos operates, and almost intimately so. For example, outside of the *Physics* passages discussed above, in his biological accounts of fetal devel-

31 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 5.23:226–227, translation modified. See Allebban “Conservation and Causation” 120–133 for more on the particular nature in Avicenna.

32 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 5.23:227, translation modified.

33 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.1:50 (*al-raʿsa al-musaffāṭa*, i.e. a reference to someone with megalcephaly).

34 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.4:53. Connected to this is Aristotle *Generation and Corruption* II 10. Perishing and making room for others is said to be one behavior of particulars that exhibits an eternal pattern, and hence mimics the eternal. See Sarah Broadie, “Heavenly Bodies and First Causes,” *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 230–241 (especially p. 240).

35 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.4:53.

36 On the background in Philoponus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and the Pseudo-Aristotle *De Mundo*, see Allebban *Conservation and Causation* 127–133.

37 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.2:51.

opment in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* IX 5 of the *Shifā'*, Avicenna invokes God's role in childbirth. He says the child's major joints are dislocated so as to pass through the birth canal and that God's "assistance and care" make it that the joints quickly return to their "natural continuity."³⁸ It is clear that Avicenna wants to maintain God's providential care over the cosmos, in this and many other ways.

The analogy of the rule of the ruler is important for another reason: different rulers, and their rules or way of governance, result in marked differences between cities or states. So too, we can certainly imagine a world in which the cosmos operates differently, according to a different order (*niẓām*) or management (*tadbīr*). Under this different rule, perhaps none of the above universal principles hold true. In sum, the proposal under consideration is that when Avicenna speaks of the cause of existence, he is not simply seeking an answer as to why there is something rather than nothing. He is also explaining why the cosmos is the way it is— at both the level of species as well as the macro-level of cosmic orders or "rule".

Exemplarism is a theory of creation that would be one way of accounting for this explanandum. Exemplarism holds that God chooses from all possible things which to create. The ideas of all possible created things are said to exist in God's mind as "exemplars" or models for God to choose from. As such, God could have chosen to create other individuals or other essences than those that are or have in fact been instantiated. And so the cosmos is the way it is because God chose it to be such.

However, exemplarism has problems,³⁹ some of which would be serious concerns for Avicenna as well. First, Avicenna explicitly rejects the notion of multiple forms or exemplars in the mind of God, on the basis of divine simplicity.⁴⁰ Second, the question depends on the ontological status of non-existents. Avicenna does not seem to think that possible, yet non-actual, essences exist.⁴¹ If there are not any, then they cannot exist in God's mind either. One issue is

38 Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Shifā'/Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, Kitāb al-Samā' al-Ṭabī'ī*, edited by Sa'īd Zāyid (Cairo: al-Haya' al-Miṣriyya al-Āmmiyya li-l-Tā'lif wa-l-Nashr, 1970), x 5:178.

39 See James Ross, "God, Creator of Kinds and Possibilities," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 315–334.

40 This argument comes in the context of rejecting the proposal that God is the substrate in which possibility inheres. See Jon McGinnis, "The Ultimate Why Question: Avicenna on Why God Is Absolutely Necessary," in *The Ultimate Why Question: Why Is There Anything at All Rather than Nothing Whatsoever?*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 65–83 (see pp. 78–79 in particular).

41 See Calvin Normore, "Metaphysics in the Orbit of Islam," in *Aristotle and the Arabic Tradition*, ed. Ahmed Alwishah and Josh Hayes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 184–185. For a discussion of the status of the nonexistent and related questions in various

that just because we can imagine the world differently, that does not mean these are genuine metaphysical possibilities. That is, according to some,⁴² for Avicenna conceivability does not entail metaphysical possibility. Avicenna would say it is perfectly fine to imagine the purple flying rational animal that I began the section with, and he has the machinery to explain such mental acts in his cognitive psychology and theory of concepts. However, as Kaukua argues, only conceptions of actual essences count as adequate concepts for Avicenna. There is no real essence of purple flying rational animal, which is a conjunction of various adequate conceptions, i.e. conceptions of actual essences: of rational animals, of flying things, and of purple things. Phenomenologically, when I conceive of a land-walking, tan-colored human, and when I conceive of a flying, purple human, my conceptions are in-distinct with respect to their metaphysical possibility. This is why Avicenna is skeptical of using conceivability as a measure of metaphysical possibility. Thus, on this reading of Avicenna, I may imagine away, all the different ways in which this cosmos might have operated differently or be populated by different essences than the actual ones, but this in itself does not mean that these are genuine metaphysical possibilities. And if I cannot establish on other grounds that there are other metaphysical possibilities, then the force for an explanation (of why *this* cosmos) is, in the meanwhile, dulled. A related question is whether Avicenna is committed to a necessitarianism whereby nothing could be otherwise or whether he allows for counterfactual states of affairs in his metaphysics. This is a matter of scholarly debate.⁴³ If we accept the standard view that Avicenna's ontology and cosmology entail such necessity, and that Avicenna's Necessary Being creates as a necessary emanation and not as a product of choice or selection,

13-15th century thinkers, followed by selected texts, see Adamson and Benevise, *Heirs of Avicenna* 138–188.

42 Jari Kaukua, "Conceivability and Metaphysical Possibility in Avicenna," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 12 (2026): in press. What I say next builds directly from Kaukua's article. See also his references on alternative readings of Avicenna.

43 Addressing this adequately would be a study of its own, but see the helpful summary of positions on this question in Ruffus and McGinnis, "Willful Understanding", 167–171. See also more recently Kaukua, "Modal Logic and Modal Metaphysics: An Avicennian Division of Labour," *Theoria*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/theo.70034> (last accessed: February 1, 2026), who argues that there are no counterfactual scenarios in his metaphysics; and Mohammad Saleh Zarepour, "FSR, Modal Collapse, and Open Future in Ibn Sīnā's Philosophy," *Theoria*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/theo.70017> (last accessed: February 1, 2026), who maintains indeterminacies, and see fn. 20 for scholars endorsing determinist readings. For a brief summary of the problem and references, see Kaukua, "Future Contingency and God's Knowledge of Particulars in Avicenna," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32.4 (2024): 745–765 (pp. 745–746 in particular).

then exemplarism, again, is a difficult fit. Thus, it seems there are a number of problems to overcome before adopting this explanandum as the most plausible reading of Avicenna's MEC. Of course, I have not done enough here to show that it is an impossible reading, as much depends on how the question of necessitarianism in Avicenna's thought is settled. But I think there is enough here to suggest that a model of creation where God is selecting amongst possibles is too far removed from Avicenna's thought to be a strong contender for the explanandum Avicenna is after. So let us turn to another option.

3.3 *The Continuity of Species*

There is a tradition of discussing the effects of the celestial world on the sublunar that may be another candidate for the explanandum of the MEC. Aristotle identifies the sun as efficient cause of generation and corruption in the sublunar world. The sun's annual motion along the ecliptic, i.e. its varying proximity to the Earth, causes the seasons, which cause cycles of generation and corruption in sublunar species. It is the sun's proximity to the Earth that brings on generation and its retreat brings on corruption, as detailed in *On Generation and Corruption* II 10.⁴⁴ Here Aristotle also explains how the sun's motion prevents the four sublunar elements from settling into their concentric natural places.⁴⁵ Hence Aristotle famously identifies both the sun and the father as efficient causes of an individual human: "Man is begotten by man and by the sun as well."⁴⁶

In the medieval context, the effects of the superlunary on the sublunary is often spoken of in terms of providence or governance (*tadbīr*) of the sublunary world. Ibn Rushd illustrates how "providence is preserved" through various celestial phenomena, including the motions of celestial bodies and their inclined spheres, their respective distances to the Earth, and even the very sizes of celestial bodies have a governing effect on the sublunar world. Interestingly, Ibn Rushd's discussion sounds a lot like what contemporary philosophers of religion have advanced as fine-tuning arguments for the existence of an intelligent designer. He names several of the data points that contemporary physicists draw on for these arguments, for instance, how if the moon or sun were ever so slightly closer or farther from Earth, life would not have been possible.⁴⁷ Each of these "Goldilocks" parameters is said to be fine-tuned for life to

44 Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, 336a32 ff.

45 Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, 337a9–15.

46 Aristotle, *Physics* II 2 194b14, and again less succinctly at *Metaphysics* XII 5 1071a13–17.

47 Averroes, *On Aristotle's "Metaphysics": An Annotated Translation of the so-Called "Epitome,"* ed. and trans. Rüdiger Arnzen. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 177.

exist on Earth. Averroes writes, “[I]f we were to imagine the disappearance of a single movement or planet among them, then either no coming-to-be whatsoever or that of some beings would not take place.”⁴⁸ Some of the mentioned effects these celestial phenomena have on the sublunar include: the four seasons, sublunar temperatures that are conducive for life, day and night on Earth which is a further regulation of temperatures necessary for life, rainfall, the ripening of fruits, and ultimately, “the existence and preservation of each and every thing coming to be in this [lower] world”. All of this is “due to [divine] providence for that which is in the present world.”⁴⁹

“The existence and preservation of each and every thing” in the sublunar world sounds a whole lot like the explanandum Avicenna is after. Like his predecessors, Avicenna speaks of the Sun’s influence on the sublunar, noting, “[T]he Sun’s proximity and remoteness and the occurrence of warmth and coolness owing to its proximity and remoteness respectively (as you will learn later) are an orderly cause of most of the things in nature that have particular ends.”⁵⁰ It is also clear that Avicenna thinks sublunar species must be eternal, that “the substance man, horse or palm exists and that it persist and be stable.”⁵¹ But since sublunar individuals do not live eternally, the only way for the species to persist eternally is through one corruptible individual after another, *ad infinitum*. There is otherwise “no need for generation and multiplication in progeny” if man could be eternal like the Sun and Moon. Thus to achieve this essential end, the existence of the species, it is necessary that cycles of generation and corruption continue regularly, which we know are caused by the Sun’s motions. Could, then, the MEC be Avicenna’s way of collecting all of these influences of celestial movers on the sublunar? Could the regularity and eternity of species be the explanandum in question, i.e. what Avicenna means by causing the existence or persistence of things?

In my reading of Avicenna, this explanandum must fall within the causal nexus of the effect *qua* individual, i.e. those causes pursued in the science of physics. Avicenna departs from the reading of Aristotle, for example that Averroes provides, where the existence of the contingent species forms are suffi-

48 Averroes, *Epitome*, cited in Gad Freudenthal, “The Astrologization of the Aristotelian Cosmos: Celestial Influences on the Sublunary World in Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Averroes,” in *New Perspectives on Aristotle’s De Caelo*, ed. Alan C. Bowen and Christian Wildberg (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 239–281 (at p. 243).

49 Averroes, *Epitome*, 178. Ancient authors make similar arguments, who Averroes is no doubt building on. For a discussion of Alexander and Galen see Freudenthal, “Astrologization,” 254–256.

50 *The Physics of The Healing I* 14.14:100.

51 *Ilāhiyyāt* VI 5.22:226, translation modified.

ciently explained by both the corporeal agent (i.e. the father) and the celestial motions. These causes may explain their continuity, but this explanandum cannot qualify as the explanandum of the cause of existence. This is because whatever the cause of existence is doing, for Avicenna, it cannot be doing it through causing motion, as discussed in section 2 above in his very definition of the efficient cause of metaphysics versus the efficient cause of physics. Avicenna clarifies this further in the *Physics*, in his discussion of the first efficient principle. He states the causality of such a cause is “external to the science of physics” and that “the natural philosopher has no business discussing it [such an efficient principle] since it has nothing to do with the science of physics.”⁵² He even specifies further that the *causality* of such a cause is “of a more general existence than [both] the causality of what specifically causes natural things and the things that are specifically related to natural things.”⁵³

Thus the heavenly motions in question may still, in Avicenna's view, have the kind of governing effect that Averroes describes, and for Avicenna they certainly “preserve” certain sublunar processes necessary for generation and corruption, but for Avicenna, the governance or preservation achieved through these motions does not amount to anything more than *physical* effects. They do not cross over into the metaphysical nexus of causing existence. Avicenna need not and does not deny that the motions of the Sun, other celestial bodies, their distances to the Earth, their sizes, etc., have effects on the sublunar. But insofar as these effects are caused by motion, they cannot qualify for the explanandum he is after in metaphysics.

3.4 *Generation and the Giver of Forms*

There are two approaches to this view: the received view and the revised view. On the received view, which reaches back to Averroes and Aquinas' reading of Avicenna, Avicenna's MEC provides the form of a generated compound of form and matter, where the matter is properly prepared by physical efficient causes. The thought is that the Giver of Forms produces *ex nihilo* and “bestows” form upon each individual made ready to receive the species form proper to it. Corporeal causes and physical processes in the natural world serve only to prepare matter, which then receives an individuated form from the Giver of Forms.⁵⁴ Richardson introduces helpful terminology here. She distinguishes

52 *The Physics of The Healing* I 2.10:17.

53 *The Physics of The Healing* I 2.10:17.

54 See Richardson, “Avicenna and Aquinas on Form and Generation,” In *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, ed. Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 251–274 (pp. 259–268 in particular).

between the “Infusion Model,” what I refer to here as the “received view” concerning Avicenna, and the “Eduction Model” of Averroes and Aquinas, following Aristotle. The Infusion Model of substantial generation holds that “when a new compound of form and matter is made, an incorporeal substance produces its form and bestows it upon matter made ready to receive it by corporeal causes.”⁵⁵ On this model, nature prepares the matter to receive the appropriate form, and the individual form is produced *ex nihilo* by the Giver of Forms. The Eduction Model holds the form is “produced *per accidens* in the process of eduction” i.e. the Aristotelian model where natural agents educe form from the potentiality of matter in the natural process of generation. Both Averroes and Aquinas attribute the Infusion Model to Avicenna. As Averroes states,

And this theory resembles that of Plato about forms separate from matter, and is the theory of Avicenna and others among the Muslim philosophers; their proof is that the body produces in the body only warmth or cold or moisture or dryness, and only these are acts of the heavenly bodies according to them. But that which produces the substantial forms, and especially those which are animated, is a separate substance which they call the giver of forms.⁵⁶

More recently, in discussing primary mixtures and complexes, Abraham Stone proposes a similar reading of Avicenna as taking a “limited form of occasionalism” of substantial forms.⁵⁷ Stone quotes passages from Avicenna, such as the following,

What must be said about all this is one thing, and that is that the compound body is adapted, by its complexion, to receive a disposition, or a form, or a proper faculty, and this emanates to it from the Giver of Forms and of faculties, and no other.⁵⁸

The received view understands this division of labor to be reflected, for example, in *Shifāʾ Physics* I.10.3:65, where Avicenna distinguishes between the cause

55 Richardson, “Avicenna and Aquinas on Form and Generation,” 251.

56 Averroes, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (London: Oxford Press, 1954) 407–408. See also Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 251.

57 Abraham D. Stone, “Avicenna’s Theory of Primary Mixture,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 18.1 (2008): 99–119 (specifically pp. 117, and 119).

58 Stone, “Avicenna’s Theory of Primary Mixture,” 117.

of motion that is a “preparer” (*muhayyi*) and the cause of motion that is a “completer” (*mutammim*), where the former is the natural agent that prepares matter to receive a form. The received view takes the referent of the latter, the *mutammim*, to be outside of the natural order and to be the Giver of Forms. But the text seems complicated. The text states in two places that the *mutammim* is “without doubt” a *principle of motion* and that it is “what in fact brings about the emergence from potency to act.” There is a third term he uses in the passage, that which gives (*yu'ti*) the forms of natural species. Importantly, he says “*It would seem*” that that which gives the form is outside of the natural order and not under the investigation of the natural philosopher, but then he concludes “Without doubt” both the preparer and the *mutammim* is a principle of motion, because the *mutammim*, which he also refers to earlier as the one that gives (*yu'ti*) the form, is “what in fact brings about the emergence from potency to act.” Here Avicenna both affirms that the *mutammim* is responsible for emerging the individual to actuality, indeed for giving the form, *and* that it is a principle of motion. This would exclude the MEC, the Giver of Forms, as a viable candidate for this role. To be clear, more careful textual study must be done to take this as supporting the revised view, and it is beyond the scope of this study to analyze this and all the passages in which Avicenna invokes the Giver of Forms. Rather, I raise these complications because texts such as these are taken to indicate that the Giver of Forms emanates individual forms when instances of matter are sufficiently prepared. Richardson provides additional reasons to question the received reading of *Shifā' Physics* I 10. She adds to it an analysis of other texts from *Shifā' Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Generation and Corruption* in which Avicenna invokes the Giver of Forms.⁵⁹ Her conclusion there, which I agree with, is that those texts are inconclusive to support the received view.

The received view has recently come under additional scrutiny. One concern that has been raised is its tension with Avicenna's view of the unity of hylomorphic substances. According to Richardson, the view that the Active Intellect endows individual forms “*ex nihilo*”, as suggested in Aquinas' reading of Avicenna, conflicts with Avicenna's view of the unity of the hylomorphic compound along with the fact that occasionalism conflicts with his overall approach.⁶⁰ Avicenna agrees with Aristotle that forms cannot exist separately from the matter in which they inhere.⁶¹ It is, of course, possible to the hold

59 Richardson, “Avicenna and Aquinas,” 259–268.

60 Richardson, “Avicenna and Aquinas,” 256–258.

61 See *Ilāhīyyāt* II 4 and II 1 and Richardson's treatment of them in “Avicenna and Aquinas,” 257.

the view that the Giver of Forms endows individuals forms without holding that those forms exist per se or separately from matter.⁶² However, this does raise questions about the role of the Active Intellect as analogous to, or duplicating, the natural efficient causes of forms. That is, Avicenna affirms the efficacy of natural causes in affecting the matter to receive the new form. The art of housebuilding in the soul of the carpenter is a source of the motion of the wood, up until it attains the form and becomes a house. What is unclear under the received view and needs argument is *why* the Giver of Forms must now intervene in this individual process, especially in light of what will be discussed shortly that suggests Avicenna affirms the Aristotelian account of natural agents educing form from the potentiality of matter in his biological works. Richardson states, “In my view, these texts [like that quoted above] suggest that he points to this incorporeal agent to explain the existence of composite substances, and their species, rather than to explain individual cases of substantial generation.”⁶³ The point brings us to the revised reading of the MEC, which takes its cue from Avicenna’s argument in VI 3 that the MEC operates at the level of the effect qua species and not the level of the effect qua individual. But let us first look at a few more reasons to rethink the received view.

Avicenna seems to caution against understanding nature and emanation in the way the received view views the role of the Giver of Forms,

Nature that is predicated in the manner of a universal is sometimes a universal relative to a species and sometimes a universal absolutely. Neither of these has an existence in concrete particulars as subsisting entities, except in conceptualization. In fact, however, only the particular has existence. The first of the two [i.e., relative to a species] is what our intellects recognize as a principle proper to the management necessary for the conservation of a species, whereas the second is what our intellects recognize as a principle proper to the management necessary for the conservation of the universe according to its order.⁶⁴

One can, of course, read the passage as focusing on a specific view of “universal nature”, which sees it as an independently subsistent entity. However, his argument provides constraints on how we understand both emanative causes and natures as forms. First, he states that neither of the two kinds of universal na-

62 See Andreas Lammer, *The Elements of Avicenna’s Physics: Greek Sources and Arabic Innovations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 194–196.

63 Richardson, “Avicenna and Aquinas,” 268.

64 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.2:51, with my interpolation in brackets.

tures exist separately and that only individuals exist. However, this view that it does not exist separately is compatible with the view that the universal nature, relative to species, is conceptually “a principle proper to the management necessary for the conservation of a species.” As I suggest below, this accords with two aspects of this theory of MEC: first, that it is a conceptual and definitional view of necessary dependency relations; and second, that it concerns the species and not individuals. Avicenna goes on to state, “In fact, nature [*ṭabīʿa*] in this sense has no existence, neither in the First Principle itself (for it is impossible that there be in it itself anything other than it itself, as you will learn) *nor in the manner of the procession to other things, as if it were an emanation but has not yet arrived.*”⁶⁵ We can apply this to the received reading of the role of the Giver of Forms viewed in the “limited occasionalist” terms suggested above. Avicenna proceeds to illustrate his point with the example of the Sun’s shining, asserting again that

nothing that subsists separately departs from the Sun, neither a body nor an accident...It is neither the case that that ray exists in anything other than the recipient nor that some part of the whole ray of the Sun’s substance has sunk down toward and then spread over bits of matter.⁶⁶

Applying this to our question, Avicenna can be read as cautioning against understanding emanation as a separate causing or sending down of a form. Whatever the Giver of Forms is doing when it is said to “give” the species form to sublunar individuals, it cannot be the production of individual forms. Averroes highlights this problem when he states, “The forms are not generated in themselves, because if they were, then the generations would be without the matter of the enmattered thing.”⁶⁷

The view that interprets Avicenna’s Giver of Forms as imparting or “creating” individual forms in each case of substantial generation faces an additional problem. It appears that Avicenna’s biological accounts in *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* of the *Shifāʾ* allow for sublunar agents to “educe” form from the potentiality of matter. I cannot show this here but only provide the following summary of my longer argument.⁶⁸ In *K. al-Ḥayawān* Avicenna follows an Aristotelian account

65 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.3:51–52, emphasis mine.

66 *The Physics of The Healing* I 7.3:51–52.

67 Averroes, *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, Book Zeta, comm.31, citd in Richardson “Avicenna and Aquinas,” 255.

68 See Allebban *Conservation and Causation*, 54–104. There I also treat his account of the generation of the human soul in *Kitāb al-Nafs* of the *Shifāʾ*. For a discussion of causation

of the generation of a new individual of a species, whereby the form of humanity in the father serves as a source of the motion of embryonic matter by means of the instrument of semen, just as the art of housebuilding in the soul of the carpenter is a source of the motion of the bricks by means of tools that carry the “motion of the art.” Critically, in his account in *K. al-Ḥayawān*, Avicenna invokes only natural efficient causes, i.e. causes of motion, to explain the coming-to-be of a new individual of a species, *including* becoming the species that they are. (This does not thereby mean that the Giver of Forms does not play a role vis-à-vis form, a point I return to below.) In this sense Avicenna follows Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, which discusses the relative contributions of the male and female in animal generation and the causes and nature of embryological development.⁶⁹ The corresponding work in Avicenna spans books xv to xix of *K. al-Ḥayawān*. In the same way that Aristotle’s biological works on animals have been shown to flesh out his account of the generation and analysis of animal essences,⁷⁰ so too, I think, should Avicenna’s biological works be consulted when considering the question of the role of the Giver of Forms. As noted below, the MEC may play a more general explanatory role than identifying the role of the Giver of Forms.

Avicenna treats embryological development and its causes in *K. al-Ḥayawān* xvi 1. In xvi 1, when discussing the status of the various faculties of the soul and the causes of embryological development at various stages, the Giver of Forms makes no appearance. Similarly, in *K. al-Ḥayawān* xv, in discussing the male and female contributions to sexual generation, their reproductive parts and roles in generation, the contentious issue of whether the female contributes sperma, and the developmental stages of animals in the womb in general, Avicenna again makes no mention of the Giver of Forms or an immaterial, sep-

and biological generation, see Wisnovsky, “Towards a History of Avicenna’s Distinction between Immanent and Transcendent Causes,” 49–68 (especially p. 51 ff); Wisnovsky, “Avicenna on Final Causality,” PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 1994, 110–134; McGinnis, “On the Moment of Substantial Change: A Vexed Question in the History of Ideas,” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam*, ed. Jon McGinnis (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 42–61; McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227–243.

69 See Devin Henry, “Generation of Animals,” in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 368–384; James Lennox, “Aristotle’s Biology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Spring 2025), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/aristotle-biology/>.

70 James Lennox, “Form, Essence, and Explanation in Aristotle’s Biology,” in *A Companion to Aristotle*, 348–367.

arate cause of form.⁷¹ Avicenna also discusses embryological development earlier in *K. al-Ḥayawān*, for instance his account in IX 5 of the changes embryonic matter undergoes, beginning with the frothing of the semen, all the way up to and including the birth of the baby. Here the only efficient cause that is invoked is the formative power, or nature, of the semen.⁷² And this is despite the fact that Avicenna considers embryological development to contain a number of substantial changes. *K. al-Ḥayawān* IX 5 goes on to discuss the development of the embryo in further detail, up until the birth of the baby, but again no invocation of the Giver of Forms is made, including at any of the points of substantial change. Avicenna begins his discussion of the causes of embryonic development and the acquiring of the various soul faculties in XVI 1, and again, throughout his account, makes no mention of a Giver of Forms. He emphasizes instead that it is the very nature of the semen that is the efficient cause of its motion, and not some external cause, but interestingly that the nature itself is in some sense subordinate to God.⁷³ After a brief excursion into the generation of the embryonic heart and lung, Avicenna goes on to detail the coming to be of the nutritive soul, and makes clear that it comes about from “the manner of the actions of naturally generated things.”⁷⁴ The father moves the semen, which prepares the matter supplied by the mother until the embryonic heart forms. The heart is then the efficient cause of the embryo’s continued development. And insofar as the embryo has a capacity for growth and development, then it is ensouled. As it continues to develop and acquires the sensitive organs, it is now said to have the sensitive soul.⁷⁵ This makes sense in the context of the

71 *K. al-Ḥayawān* XV 1–3:384–399.

72 To be clear, Avicenna does hold in XV that the embryonic heart is the efficient cause of the continued development of the offspring. On the embryonic heart taking over as efficient cause, see *K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:401.

73 *K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:401.

74 “The action of the seed [*zar*] of the father in the seed of the mother occurs only in the manner of the actions of naturally generated things, the bulk of which is in the manner of the meeting of the mover and moved...The semen moves something else, namely the semen of the mother, so it [the semen of the father] first moves towards generating the principle, then it bestows upon the first organ [*al-ʿuḍw*] a power that is the principle that moves towards generating the other [bodily] parts in order. And then the seminal clot comes to possess a soul...So if it becomes a possessor of soul, the soul in it moves towards the completion of the [bodily] parts. And this soul becomes at that point a nutritive soul since it has no other action, and even if it has within it the power to do something else” (*K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:401–402).

75 “And when the nutritive power in the seminal clot becomes ready to receive acts then it is prepared for the sensitive soul, so in it is the power to receive the soul insofar as it is sensitive” (*K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:402).

Aristotelian conception of soul, whereby the soul is not something separately existing from what it is a soul of. This is why Aristotle rules out the possibility that the soul is carried in by the semen or somehow exists separately and is put into the embryonic matter. Avicenna goes on to discuss the rational soul. It is the only place in his discussion of these many substantial changes, thus far and in what follows, wherein Avicenna invokes an external cause in the causal process:

And if the heart and brain come to be inside [the fetus] then the rational soul becomes connected [*ta'allaqa*] to it, and the sensitive [soul] emerges [*tafiḍu*] from it [i.e., the rational soul]. As for the rational [*nutqīyya*], it is distinct [*mubāyina*] and is not material, but it is not intellecting [*'āqila*] yet. Rather it is like how [the rational soul] exists in the inebriated or the epileptic [*maṣrū*]. And it [the rational soul] becomes perfected [*tastakmilu*] with respect to something external that bestows [*yufid*] the intellect [*al-'aql*]. As for the other faculties [*quwā*], they become perfected through the body and bodily functions. And if it were the case that a boy is sensitive and then he becomes human [*insānan*] through rationality [*nutq*], then, in being perfected, he would change from species to [another] species [*naw*].⁷⁶

It seems the rational soul is said to become connected to the fetus upon the development of the heart and brain. Only then does Avicenna finally involve “something external”. However Avicenna makes a point to clarify that this something external is not causing it to be human. Rather, it is a cause of the rational soul’s actuality, or the human’s actual *intellection*. This is the only point in his account of the coming-to-be of a new individual that Avicenna invokes an external cause, and it is not a cause of the individual becoming human.⁷⁷ The external cause is only invoked here for the second perfection, or actually intellecting. Avicenna’s illustrates this through the example of the boy. In transitioning from a state of the first perfection to the second, to actually intellecting, Avicenna argues against the view that the boy would thereby “become human”—it is not the case that “he would change in species to [another] species” upon actualizing his intellect. Rather, he was already human—he was already

76 *K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:403.

77 *Kitāb al-Shifā'/Kitāb al-Nafs*, ed. Sa'īd Zāyid (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1983), I 1:10. On the first and second perfection in Avicenna, and in relation to his theory of causality, see Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press), 2003, 113–141.

rationally ensouled, but to actually intellect, the Active Intellect is needed.⁷⁸ In so doing the boy is not changing species but actualizing a potentiality. It is notable that he invokes the Giver of Forms to explain intellection but not in any of the processes of natural change up to and including the birth of an individual.

To be clear, the point is not simply that the Giver of Forms is absent from the discussion. Rather, he carries us through the *entire* causal process of generating an individual and identifies *only* natural causes at every step, until and including becoming the new substance. In sum, if my reading of these passages from *K. al-Ḥayawān* IX 5, XV 1–3, and XVI 1 is correct, then it seems in his biological works Avicenna is very closely following Aristotle's account of the causes of embryological development, in particular of the species forms and souls (at least, up until and *including* the first perfection of the rational soul). That is, he invokes natural efficient causes to explain the coming-to-be of animals, including becoming the species that they are. The moving cause educes the species form from matter that contains the potential to be what the efficient cause is actually—be it a human or a chicken. Again, my point here is not that the Giver of Forms has no role with respect to form. I return to this shortly.

One last point to raise concerning the received view concerns its philosophical ambiguity. What would it mean for an immaterial agent to act directly on spatiotemporal processes at an individual-by-individual level? Philosophically it is also unclear what it would mean for an immaterial agent to act alongside natural agents to jointly produce an individual material effect. (Averroes raises a different but related problem— that two different agents cannot produce a single effect⁷⁹). If the answer is that it is instead acting a-temporally or “emanating forms” at all times, then this would bring us closer to the revised view. This is not to deny that Avicenna speaks of emanation. But he also speaks of it in many contexts, including attributing it to the acts of natural agents, and where it does not seem to be doing any real causal work. One such example occurs in the biological texts on substantial generation discussed above. He says the sensitive soul *tafiḍu* from the fetus,⁸⁰ insofar as the fetus becomes capable of sensitive acts. At the point that it is capable of such acts, the seminal clot is said to have the power to receive (*qubūl*) the sensitive soul. But we also learned there that there was no external immaterial agent evoked in the generation of the nutritive, sensitive, and rational souls, which were all explained in terms

78 *K. al-Nafs* v 5:208.

79 Cited in Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett), 2007, 330–335.

80 *K. al-Ḥayawān* XVI 1:403.

of their natural causes in embryological development. A study of Avicenna's use of emanation throughout his philosophy awaits and I draw no conclusion here except the modest suggestion that, although evocative of the causality of the Giver of Forms, the use of *tafiḍu* in the context of sublunary natural agents suggests that such language does not exclusively describe the causality of immaterial agents, nor does it necessarily refer to some mysterious or occasionalist "outpouring" as the term might evoke and which, I think, is philosophically unhelpful and puzzling.

In light of all these problems, and the textual evidence discussed above and in Richardson's dedicated study of this question, in my view this explanandum of how individuals attain their species form and come-to-be is part of the nexus of the effect qua individual and thereby the explanatory domain of the natural sciences and natural causes. I find it doubtful that this is the explanandum that Avicenna is after in metaphysics, for which he posits the cause of existence. The emphasis on the Giver of Forms and this explanandum of how individuals attain their form in generation has overshadowed a proper consideration of the MEC as a general theory and category, with much broader application than just the role of the Giver of Forms.

4 Conclusion

Although Richardson does not focus on an alternative theory given the scope of her study, I concur with her move towards one when she says the Giver of Forms is an incorporeal cause of the existence of species of natural things, rather than being a cause of their attainment of form in generation. My alternative, developed in another study, proposes reading the MEC through the lens of ontological dependence, rather than her suggestion of type and token causation. But I share her analysis that distances it from causing at the level of the individual as well as her statement that the Giver of Forms causing species is compatible with the view that natural agents educe the form from the potentiality of matter in processes of generation.

This brings me to what we may call the revised view of the causal role of the Giver of Forms as a MEC. Importantly, it takes as its point of departure Avicenna's theory of metaphysical efficient causation and his emphasis on the MEC as a cause of the effect qua species and *not* qua individual. Avicenna's fundamental explanatory distinction between the causes of the effect qua species, i.e. the MEC, and the causes of the effect qua individual, i.e. the causes pursued in the natural sciences, can free us to think more broadly about the role of the

Giver of Forms, and more importantly of all MEC s, as outside the explanatory domain of the effect qua individual.

All this said, it is important to clarify that under the revised view, while the Giver of Forms does not intervene in sublunar natural processes to impart an individual form to particulars made ready to receive them, it is not thereby true that the Giver of Forms is not a cause of species. The revised view still fully preserves the role of the Giver of Forms as a cause of forms, indeed as a *giver* of forms. It still holds that a sublunar individual, possessing a form, is still entirely, essentially and persistently dependent on the MEC, the cause of forms, for its form. This is important, because it identifies a space in which the received view and revised view overlap: they both affirm that the Giver of Forms causes species forms. The key difference is how to parse out what it means to say that the Giver of Forms is a source of forms. Given all of the above, and given the parameters of Avicenna's theory of metaphysical efficient causation, the revised view asks: is there a way to understand its role as a cause of existence, as a cause of species, that does not reduce it to providing individual forms in sublunar processes of generation and corruption?

In another study, I argue for reading Avicenna's theory of the MEC as outlining fundamental necessary relations between natural kinds. The Giver of Forms is but one example of such. While it is beyond the scope of the current study to develop this proposal, I conclude with the following nod.

I have argued that the above candidates in interpreting Avicenna's analysis of a "metaphysical" efficient cause fall short in important respects. One general shortcoming that applies to the four candidates can be highlighted. In addressing the question of metaphysical efficient causation, I noted that there are three related concepts: PSR, the absolute coexistence of cause and effect, and necessity. The two concepts of PSR and coexistent causes have been well studied. However, there are further questions the conditions raise, particularly that of absolute coexistence and necessity. For example, Zarepour has noted that the requirement of coexistence is a rather strong one in the context of our ordinary or contemporary ideas of causation. His reading of Avicenna's view of metaphysical causation is as follows:

It is worth emphasising that Avicenna's conception of causation, in the sense delineated here, is totally different form that of contemporary analytic metaphysicians. According to the latter, causation is a (typically counterfactual) explanatory relation between events...By contrast, Avicenna understands causation as a relation of existential and ontological dependence between all the existents, no matter what type they are. On this view, X causes Y if and only if Y's existence is bestowed by and de-

pendent on X's existence (or, equivalently, if and only if Y ontologically depends on X). An immediate corollary of this dissimilarity is that, for Avicenna, a cause cannot be temporally prior to its effect. They must exist together simultaneously. So although the effect ontologically depends on the cause, the latter does not precede the former in time. That is why fathers and housebuilders cannot be the true efficient causes of, respectively, children and houses, despite the indubitable fact that the former contribute to bringing the latter into existence.⁸¹

Zarepour proposes that Avicenna's view of causation in metaphysics is closer to a relation of ontological dependence than it is to our contemporary understanding of causation. It would seem that Avicenna's view of metaphysical causation challenges the received Aristotelian and Peripatetic views of causation just as much as it does our contemporary ideas. The idea that fathers and builders are *not* the metaphysical cause suggests an explanandum that natural causes fall short of, and that explanandum is a more fundamental theory of ontological dependence. The theory of ontological dependence that Zarepour identifies in Avicenna is, presumably, a general theory of metaphysical causation. As such, one shortcoming in recent approaches to Avicenna's discussion of metaphysical efficient causation is the focus on one instance or example of metaphysical causes, the Giver of Forms. The focus on the Giver of Forms overshadows the point that Avicenna intends this definition of ontological dependence to be an analysis of ontological relations in the science of metaphysics that applies broadly to natural phenomena. Even if we grant that the Giver of Forms, on its own, explains ontological dependence as it pertains to species or natural kinds, it does not explain the ontological dependency relations between, for example, natural and other kinds of motion, to use Avicenna's example in VI 3 discussed earlier. This suggests that we need to explore the definition and conception of metaphysical causation in a more general fashion.

In this regard, the concept of ontological dependence appears to be a particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry for several reasons. Contemporary discussions of ontological dependence have contrasted approaches that rely on logical (or modal) approaches with ontological (or essential) readings of ontological dependence. An important aspect of the discussion is that essential readings of ontological dependence offer a more fine-grained way to understand *asymmetrical* necessities that obtain. Recall that co-existence and necessity were

81 Zarepour, *Necessary Existence and Monotheism*, 16.

characteristics of the metaphysical cause according to Avicenna. But Avicenna is aware his account requires strict temporal coexistence, which in turn excludes the usual cases of causes. This makes it difficult to identify the source of asymmetry between cause and effect. For example, Avicenna addresses the objection to his stringent requirement of coexistence in *Ilāhiyyāt* IV 1:

Someone, however, may say: "If each of the two things [is such that], if one exists, the other exists, and if one is removed from existence, the other is removed, then one is not the cause, nor the other the effect, since neither has a better claim than the other to be the cause of existence."⁸²

The objector is, in effect, stating that the absolute coexistence of cause and effect makes it difficult to discern what has the better claim to be the cause. I cannot address Avicenna's full response to this question here. The purpose of this study has been to consider and raise issues with alternative ways of parsing out the explanandum of the MEC. But there is good reason to believe that such questions and Avicenna's responses provide the more fine-grained distinction that allows us to understand his general theory of the MEC. I leave that to another study.

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82 *Ilāhiyyāt* IV 1.12:167.

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The Unambiguous Truth (*al-ḥaqq al-ṣarīḥ*): Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on Philosophy and the “Truth” in His *Compendium (Mulakhkhaṣ)*

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Abstract

This article examines Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *Mulakhkhaṣ (Compendium)*² to challenge prevailing narratives that categorize it strictly as a philosophical work aligned with the Avicennan tradition. Through close textual analysis, I demonstrate that Rāzī privileges certain anti-Avicennan perspectives, particularly regarding divine agency and the creation of the universe. These preferences mark a departure from Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy and may reveal tensions between Rāzī’s philosophical and theological commitments. The study repositions the *Mulakhkhaṣ* within Postclassical intellectual history, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of its genre and philosophical identity. This contributes to debates on the classification and development of philosophy in the post-Avicennan era.

- 1 I presented versions of this paper at the 235th Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society in Boston (9 April 2025) and at the workshop “Avicenna, Avicennism(s), and the Later Philosophical Traditions” at LMU Munich (16 November 2024) and would like to thank the participants for their feedback. I would also like to express my sincerest appreciation to Frank Griffel for reading and responding to a draft of this essay. The research in support of this essay was made possible in part by an “Award for Faculty at Hispanic-Serving Institutions” from the United States National Endowment for the Humanities (HB-289056-23).
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Keywords

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī – Ibn Sīnā – *Mulakhkhaṣ/Compendium* – postclassical philosophy – divine agency

1 Introduction

For at least the past two decades, the driving force behind the study of philosophy in the pre-modern Muslim world has been the endeavor to replace the antiquated but still-influential notion that philosophy flourished during a classical, “Golden Age,” which culminated in the likes of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) and Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), only to decline irreversibly after attacks from “orthodox” theologians like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111). First theorized by scholars like Ernest Renan (d. 1892) and Tjitze de Boer (d. 1942) in the 19th century,³ this era of presumed philosophical decline—part and parcel of a broader narrative of civilizational decline that inversely mirrored the rise of Europe—would largely be ignored during the 20th century, in part because of unfounded assumptions about the intellectual quality (or lack thereof) of commentaries as vehicles of philosophical inquiry.⁴ Yet by the turn of the twenty-first century, the sheer volume of the scholars active in the period after Ibn Sīnā and the texts that they produced led Dimitri Gutas, for example, to suggest that that time may indeed have represented a “golden age” for Arabic philosophy.⁵ Indeed,

3 For a thorough telling of the decline narrative and de Boer’s and Renan’s roles in developing it, see Frank Griffel, *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–20. To his credit, De Boer actually denounced the argument that Ghazālī had “annihilated philosophy in the East” as “an assertion frequently repeated but wholly erroneous.” Nevertheless, he asserted that philosophy lacked the freedom necessary to flourish in the Postclassical Era, and that “minds were now too weak” to match or surpass the accomplishments of earlier times; Tjitze J. de Boer, *Geschichte der Philosophie im Islam* (Stuttgart: Fromman, 1901), 150–151; *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, trans. Edward R. Jones (London: Luzac, 1903), 169–170.

4 De Boer remarked that after Ibn Sīnā, no one developed independent views, but instead engaged in commentary; *Geschichte*, 151; *History*, 170. On the reevaluation of commentary, see Robert Wisnovsky, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47, Supplement 83: Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries: Volume 2 (2004): 149–191.

5 Dimitri Gutas, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, ca. 1000–ca. 1350,” in *Orientalisms of Avicenna’s Philosophy: Essays on His Life, Method, Heritage* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 81–97.

the consensus among specialists developed in the ensuing years is that philosophical inquiry continued to flourish in the centuries after Ibn Sīnā, Ghazālī, and Ibn Rushd, albeit not in precisely the same form as it once had.

The Postclassical, post-Avicennan era of philosophy in the Muslim world saw profound shifts in intellectual pursuits, particularly in how scholars engaged with the Aristotelian-Avicennan philosophical tradition. One of the most significant examples of these shifts is Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), whose works, including the *Mulakhkhaṣ* (*Compendium*) and *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* (*Eastern Investigations*), reveal a nuanced approach to Avicennan thought amid a changing philosophical landscape. The burgeoning field of Rāzī studies has made clear in recent years that Fakhr al-Dīn is one of the most significant figures of the Postclassical Era,⁶ whose influence we may one day see as rivaling Ibn Sīnā's. One of the longstanding challenges in scholarship on Rāzī, however, has been to make sense of what on the surface appears to be his evolving, contradictory beliefs over the course of his prolific career. Recently, Frank Griffel has made a strong case that we should not attempt to resolve Rāzī's contradictions from a perspective of evolution in his thought. Rāzī, Griffel argues, resists such an analysis because he did not strive for consistency in his works in the way that Ibn Sīnā did. Rather, the differing opinions that he expressed in his books are better explained by the genre in which he was writing; specifically, whether a work belonged to the genre of philosophy (*ḥikma*) or theology (*kalām*).⁷ With respect to Rāzī's philosophical works, especially his *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith*, Griffel argues that Rāzī sought to maintain and even refine Ibn Sīnā's philosophical system, including elements of that system that are "most repulsive" in the eyes of theologians.⁸ My analysis, however, suggests that this was not always the case and that there is a distinction between the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* in this regard. In the former, Rāzī often favors certain theological perspectives over philosophical ones in a way that he does not do in the latter. This is especially the case with respect to what we

6 Laura Hassan has called Rāzī "the pivotal figure of the reception of Avicennan philosophy within Muslim theology;" "In Pursuit of the World's Creator: Fakhr al-Din al-Razi on the Origins of the Universe in *al-Matalib al-'Alīya*," *Res Philosophica* 98.2 (2021): 233, <https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2042>.

7 Griffel, *Formation*, 307–317.

8 Griffel develops this argument in Part III of his *Formation*, 307–551; see 412 for "repulsive elements." He briefly reiterates this argument in his "Two Divergent Schools in Sixth-/Twelfth-Century Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides' Seventh Reason for Contradictions in Books," in *Religious and Intellectual Diversity in the Islamicate World and Beyond*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke and Omer Michaelis, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 1:349–352, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004682450_019.

might call certain theological imperatives,⁹ including the question of divine agency. Rāzī, I will show, repeatedly insists in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* that the theologians' understanding of God as a choosing agent (*fā'il mukhtār*) represents the truth (*al-ḥaqq*), while the philosophers' understanding of God as acting out of necessity (*mūjib*) inevitably leads to a number of absurdities. He does not do the same in the *Mabāḥith*, leading to a discrepancy that should not exist if we are to understand these texts as equivalent examples of Rāzī's philosophical books.¹⁰ By comparing his approaches in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith*, we gain insight into the broader categorization of philosophy in the Postclassical Era, shaping what some classify as "Islamic philosophy" and others "paraphilosophy." This study not only reexamines Rāzī's intellectual contributions but also contributes to the ongoing discourse on the nature of philosophy in the Postclassical context.

2 Rāzī on the "Truth" in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*

Though Prof. Griffel presents a compelling argument with respect to approaching Fakhr al-Dīn's oeuvre and understanding him as a philosopher, one element of his argument merits close examination: that Rāzī, in his philosophical books (*kutub ḥikmiyya*), maintains "the overall philosophical edifice of Avicennan thinking," particularly the position "of a highly impersonal God who executes no choice between alternatives and who creates the world from past eternity."¹¹ Griffel adds that, "in his books on *ḥikma*, al-Rāzī argues in favor of a God who is pure necessity, for instance, and who creates this world from past eternity."¹² Yet on various occasions in his *Mulakkhkhaṣ*—a book that Griffel classifies as one of Rāzī's philosophical works—Rāzī seems unambiguously to make the case that God is a choosing agent (*fā'il mukhtār* and *qādir mukhtār*) who selects between alternatives to create the universe at a specific moment in time. He likewise argues against the philosophers for maintaining that God is

9 I borrow this phrase from a paper that Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed presented at a symposium on Fakhr al-Dīn at Florida Atlantic University in April 2024.

10 From the perspective of the nature of God's agency, the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* appears more in line with Rāzī's theological works, like the *Muḥaṣṣal* and *Maṭālib*. Hassan has argued that, in those texts, Rāzī advocates for a God who is a "voluntary, wise and omnipotent agent, and that the effect of such an agent can only be a temporally created world;" *Ash'arism Encounters Avicennism: Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī on Creation* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020), 218.

11 Griffel, *Formation*, 338.

12 Griffel, *Formation*, 338.

an agent who acts out of essential necessity (*mūjib bi-l-dhāt*) from pre-eternity (*qidam, azal*), thereby making the universe pre-eternal (*qadīm*).

Before presenting the textual evidence, it is worth acknowledging that there are times in the *Mulakhkhaṣ* when Rāzī dispassionately presents the philosophers' and the religionists' perspectives on a topic. One such example comes from his discussion of providence (*ināya*). Here is the entirety of his brief comments on this topic:

On His providence: They claim that His knowledge of how the order of existence should be, so that it may come to be in the most perfect way, is a cause for that order's emanation from Him. That knowledge, then, is providence. Those who profess that He is a choosing [agent] claim that His creation of the universe in the most beneficial way for them is providence.¹³

The first perspective, attributed merely to "them," is clearly the Avicennan, *falsafī* take on providence.¹⁴ In Rāzī's understanding, this is the providence of a God who creates not by choice, but out of the necessity of His essence. The latter perspective, similarly lacking in specific attribution, belongs to religionists who hold that God acts out of His own choice (*mukhtār*). Rāzī's presentation of both positions with neither comment nor endorsement seemingly supports Griffel's argument; minimally, it does not hurt it.¹⁵ Elsewhere, however, Rāzī is not so reticent to state what he sees as the correct position: that God is a

13 *al-Mulakhkhaṣ*: MS Oxford Bodleian Huntington 329, fol. 354b.20–346a.1; *al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī l-manṭiq wa-l-ḥikma*, ed. İsmail Hanoğlu, 2 vols. (Amman: al-Aṣḥayn li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Naṣr, 2021), 2:1078.10–13. Throughout this study, I rely on the witness to the *Mulakhkhaṣ* held at Oxford University's Bodleian Library (now available online; link provided in bibliography). I also provide reference to Hanoğlu's *Mulakhkhaṣ* edition. I urge caution, however, in using Hanoğlu's edition alone given its unreliability, which I intend to demonstrate in a future publication.

14 Ibn Sīnā expresses this in *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*, ed. Muḥtabā Zārī (Qum: Bustān-i Kitāb, 2002), VII.22, 333.7–12; *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), IX.6, 339.8–12; and *Kitāb al-Najāt fī l-ḥikma al-manṭiqiyya wa-l-ṭabīʿiyya wa-l-ilāhiyya*, ed. Majid Fakhry (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1985), 320.11–15.

15 In the *Eastern Investigations*, Rāzī presents only the Avicennan perspective on *ināya*, and he does so without critique. He ends that section by noting that what he presented is "the interpretation of providence according to those who deny [God's] knowledge of particulars and [His] purpose in creating" (*huwa tafsiṛu l-ʿināyati ʿinda man yunkiru l-ʿilma bi-l-juzʿiyyāti wa-l-qaṣda ilā l-ʿijādi wa-l-takwīni*); *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya fī ʿilm al-ilāhiyyāt wa-l-ṭabīʿiyyāt*, ed. Muḥammad al-Muʿtaṣim Billāh Baghdādī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1990), 2:492.18–19.

choosing agent who created the universe in time. This is not only the case in his *kalām* works, but also in at least one of his philosophical books.

We get a hint of this in the final book in Rāzī's *Mulakkhkhaṣ*, which is dedicated to theology, or what he calls divine science (*al-ʿilm al-ilāhī*). The first topic of investigation (*mabḥath*) attempts to prove that the universe has a governor (*mudabbir*). Here, in concluding a section on the contingency of attributes (*imkān al-ṣifāt*), he remarks that "bodies' need for a choosing agent for their attributes is therefore established."¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, in a section arguing for the universe's governor by means of the "origination of attributes" (*ḥudūth al-ṣifāt*), he likewise observes that "the need of bodies in this world for a choosing governor is established."¹⁷ In neither case does he balance the discussion with an announcement of an alternative argument that would "establish" the truth of the philosophers' necessary agent.

Later in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*'s third book, Rāzī discusses "how acts proceed from Him" (*fī kayfiyyat ṣudūr al-fiʿl ʿanhu*), that is, from God. He begins by presenting the philosophers' account of creation via emanation. After a few paragraphs in which he faithfully summarizes what the philosophers say, he then declares: "Know that all of this is disordered thought."¹⁸ After presenting nine ways in which the philosophers' account of emanation is disordered, Rāzī offers the correct position: "The truth, according to us, is to profess [causation] by a choosing [agent]."¹⁹ Those who profess causation by necessity (*al-mūjib*), adds Rāzī, do so only because they hold onto the mistaken notion that "from the one only one proceeds," which he attacks as weak and false.²⁰

16 *fa-thabata ftiqāru l-ajsāmi fī ṣifātihā ilā l-fāʿili l-mukhtār*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 339a.22–23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1059.10.

17 *fa-ḥinaʿidhin thabata ftiqāru ajsāmi hādihā l-ʿalami ilā mudabbirin mukhtār*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 339b.23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1061.1.

18 *wa-ʿlam anna kulla dhālika khabṭ*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 347a.22; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1084.7.

19 *wa-l-ḥaqqu ʿindanā huwa l-qawlu bi-l-mukhtār*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 348b.9; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1087.7–8.

20 "You already know the weakness of their arguments for this and the strength of these points that indicate its falsity" (*wa-qad ʿarafta ḍuʿfa adillatihim ʿalayhi wa-quwwata hādihī l-wujūhi l-dāllati ʿalā buṭlānihī*); MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 348b.11–12; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1087.10–11. Hassan observes that Rāzī is consistently critical of the rule of one in his *Maṭālib*; "In Pursuit of the World's Creator," 240. For a short discussion of Rāzī's criticism, see Sajad Amirkhani and Keramat Varzdar, "Avicenna on the Faculties of the Soul: A Critical Analysis with an Examination of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Criticisms," *Oriens* 52.1–2 (2024): 112–149, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18778372-12340034>; and Nicholas Heer, "Al-Rāzī and al-Ṭūsī on Ibn Sīnā's Theory of Emanation," in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 115–118. For the principle's broader reception, see Wahid M. Amin, "From the One, Only One Proceeds":

Before going too far into my argument, I would like to address a potential counterargument. One may contend that when Rāzī speaks here, and in the many other occasions in the *Mulakhkhaṣ* where he speaks in the first-person, he is not speaking as himself but as a hypothetical representative of the philosophers' adversaries; namely, the Ash'arī *mutakallimūn*. Rāzī's reliable inconsistency in the positions that he advocates complicates any effort to identify with certainty what he truly believes.²¹ It may even be the case that the *Mulakhkhaṣ*'s likely composition for and use in an Ash'arī *madrasa* setting explains his use of "we." In that sense, when Rāzī declares "the truth, according to us [Ash'arīs]" in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*, it tells us more about the occasion of the book's composition and its intended audience than the nature of Rāzī's personal beliefs. This accords with Griffel's argument that the way to read and classify Rāzī's books is according to their genre. Nevertheless, even if one concedes that Rāzī's objections in the *Mulakhkhaṣ* do not represent his personal views,²² they still challenge the argument that Rāzī maintains Ibn Sīnā's philosophical edifice in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*. This then, complicates the picture of the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* being equivalent representatives of Rāzī's philosophical books and requires reconsidering how we classify them. I will return to this at the end of this paper.

Immediately prior to announcing the "truth" with respect to emanation by necessity vs. creation by choice, Rāzī tells his reader that he has already disproved this fundamental belief of the philosophers (*ibtāl hādhihī l-qā'ida*) in the sections on causes and motion.²³ Let us now turn there to see both what Rāzī says and how he presents it.

In the division (*qism*) on the efficient cause (*al-'illa al-fā'ila*), Rāzī includes a section on the invalidation of infinite regress (*ibtāl al-tasalsul*). There, he begins by presenting the possible causal explanations for a contingent collec-

The Post-Classical Reception of a Key Principle of Avicenna's Metaphysics," *Oriens* 48.1–2 (2020): 123–155, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18778372-04801005>.

- 21 Regarding Rāzī's personal beliefs, Griffel, for example, argues that Rāzī "held the same [as Ghazālī's] position of equal possibility when it comes to the question of whether God has a free will and chooses His creations from alternatives or acts of the necessity of His essence;" *Formation*, 552. Elsewhere, Griffel argues that this studied indecision is characteristic of an eastern school of Arabic philosophy in the 6th/12th century, which led authors like Rāzī to write books in multiple genres (*ḥikma* and *kalām*) in which they present incompatible solutions to certain questions in metaphysics; Griffel, "Two Divergent Schools," 361–363.
- 22 While Hassan cautions against attempting to determine Rāzī's own position based on a single text, she observes that Rāzī affirms God's agency in the *Maṭālib* and other texts; "In Pursuit of the World's Creator," 234, 244, 246.
- 23 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 348b.8–9; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1087.7.

tion (*majmūʿ*) of causes: it is either the totality (*kull*) of the individual causes, each one of them individually, a specific one of them, or something external to the group. He concludes that all are absurd except the last, which he labels the “desired” position (*al-maṭlūb*).²⁴ After entertaining various objections and counter-objections to this position, a questioner (*sāʾil*; Rāzī?) enters the conversation:

The questioner may return and say: If the essence of the pre-eternal cause suffices for the origination of this effect, the temporally originated [effect] must be pre-eternal; this is absurd. If it does not suffice, then there must be an additional restriction with it. If it is privative, then privation is part of the existent’s real cause; this is absurd. If it is existential, the aforementioned absurdities in the first question return.²⁵

The “aforementioned absurdities” refer to the objections that the “questioner” raises against the philosophers’ desired position. The problem with their position on infinite regress, he says, is that it ultimately requires commitment to one of the following three principles: a contingent being that does not need a cause, linking what presently obtains to what existed prior to it but no longer exists, or an infinity of causes and effects all existing at the same time. Each one of these, according to Rāzī, “blocks the philosophers’ door to proving the Necessary Existent.”²⁶ Rāzī concludes with the following statement:

Know that there is no escape from this question if we make the Cause act out of necessity, as the philosophers do. But if we believe that He is a powerful, choosing [agent]—which is the *unambiguous truth*—the problem disappears because a powerful [agent] can cause one of the objects of His power to preponderate over the other without a preponderating factor.²⁷

24 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.5–13; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:580.1–8.

25 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.16–20; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:583.14–584.2.

26 *wa-kullu dhālika yasuddu ʿalā l-falāsīfati bāba ithbāti wājibi l-wujūd*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175b.22–23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:582.12–13.

27 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.20–23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:584.3–5; emphasis added. Following McGinnis, one may understand preponderating factor (*murajjih*) as sufficient reason; Jon McGinnis, “Some Choice Words: Al-Ṭūsī’s Reconceptualization of the Issue of the World’s Age,” in *Contextualizing Premodern Philosophy: Explorations of the Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin Traditions*, ed. Katja Krause et al. (London: Routledge, 2023) 450–470, doi.org/10.4324/9781003309895-24.

The philosophers' position necessarily, inevitably, leads to absurdity. There is no fixing it, only abandoning it for "the unambiguous truth" that God, as creator, acts through His own power and choice. There is a difference between dispassionately presenting two alternatives, attributing one to philosophers and the other to religionists, without placing one's thumb on the scale; and presenting one position, poking holes in it, and saying that the only escape is to adopt the other position and labeling that one as the clear truth. Rāzī is engaged in the latter.

Rāzī is not always so blunt in his assessment of the philosophers. But even when he does not call their thinking "disordered," he still takes the theologians' side. Shortly after Rāzī criticizes the philosophers with respect to infinite regress (*tasalsul*), he addresses the efficient cause. In a section on the necessity of the effect's existence with the cause (*fī wujūb wujūd al-ma'lūl 'inda wujūd al-'illa*), Rāzī introduces the following disjunction in the philosophers' voice: "One may say that everything on account of which God acts upon the existence of contingent beings occurs either in pre-eternity or not."²⁸ In other words, the celestial intermediaries through which God creates terrestrial, temporally originated things are either pre-eternal or temporally originated. In explaining the philosophers' position, Rāzī notes that it cannot be the latter, for "if the temporally originated thing needs another, an infinite regress follows. But if it is based on another in pre-eternity, then the desired position returns."²⁹ Here, "the desired position" (*maṭlūb*) refers to the philosophers' preferred answer. Rāzī then proceeds to voice the alternative stance:

The religionists say: This problem only applies to the cause that acts through necessity. As for the cause that acts through power, then no; because the powerful can preponderate one of its objects of power over another without a separate preponderating factor.³⁰

28 *kullu mā li-ajlihī kāna l-bārī'u mu'aththīran fī wujūdi l-mumkināti immā an yuqāla innahū kāna ḥāṣīlan fī l-azali aw lā yakūn*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176b.6–7; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:584.11–12.

29 *fa-in iftaqara ilā ḥādithin ākhara lazima l-tasalsulu wa-in istanada bi-l-ākhari ilā qadīmīn 'āda ḥuṣūlu l-maṭlūb*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176b.21–22; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:585.10–11.

30 *qāla l-millīyyūna hādha l-ishkālu inna-mā yatawajjahu fī l-mu'aththiri l-mūjibi ammā fī l-mu'aththiri l-qādīri fa-lā li-anna l-qādīra yumkinuhu tarjīhu ba'ḍi maqdūrātihī 'alā l-ākhari lā li-murajjihīn munfaṣīlīn*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176b.22–177a.1; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:585.12–13.

It is worth bearing in mind here that acting through power implies acting through choice. Rāzī then considers several ways in which the philosophers' position may be rehabilitated, ultimately rejecting them all, concluding:

Acting in pre-eternity is not possible because an act is something that has a beginning, but pre-eternity has no beginning. Combining having-a-beginning with its non-existence is impossible. When that is the case, the pre-eternity of an act does not follow from God's pre-eternity.³¹

A key distinction is to be noted in the discussion here. Rāzī opens this section by presenting the philosopher's position (*qālat al-falāsifa*). He then provides the one belonging to the religionists (*qāla al-millīyyūn*). As he expounds the religionists' position, he transitions to first-person plural (*in sallamnā*).³² Even though Rāzī does not explicitly condemn the philosophers here, I argue that here he moves away from an impartial presentation of the two sides' arguments. He attempts to find ways to make the philosophers' position tenable, but ultimately determines that this is not possible because of the impossibility of pre-eternal action.

The impossibility of originated things (sg. *ḥādīth*) not having a beginning (*awwal*, *bidāya*) appears multiple times in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*. The first division (*qism*) of the field (*fann*) on motion and time has a section on whether time has a beginning (*fī anna li-l-zamān bidāya*).³³ Rāzī lets the philosophers open the section, observing that Peripatetics agree that it does not for five reasons. The first is that every originated thing is preceded by its non-existence (*fā-inna 'adamahū qabla wujūduhū*). This non-existence is neither pure negation (*salb maḥḍ*) nor a self-subsisting substance. Rather, it has a substrate which itself cannot be originated, otherwise an infinite regress would ensue. The second is that God's priority to the existence of the universe exists for pre-eternity (*azal*) and post-eternity (*abad*) and can only be understood in conjunction with time. The third and fourth revolve around impossibilities that would ensue if time were itself temporally originated: this would presuppose a time before time (*fā-qabla al-zamān zamān*) and would require a means to discriminate between the moment of time's non-existence and its existence. Lastly, when one says, "the universe did not exist, then it did" (*al-'ālam lam yakun thumma kāna*), it means either that it did not exist at a specific time (*zamān muntaqa-*

31 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 177a.16–18; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:587.1–2.

32 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 177a *passim*; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:587.

33 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 213a.22; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:699.10.

din) or it did not exist in non-existence. Since the latter is absurd, time must be pre-eternal.³⁴

Rāzī then follows with the religionists' rebuttals to each point, one by one (*ajāba al-milliyūn*). He then adds the religionists positive arguments in favor of the finitude of time. The first is that since the universe's cause is a choosing agent (*fā'il mukhtār*), and since that cause must precede its effects, those effects—the *ḥawādīth*—must have a beginning (*awwal*). The second implies that if time were pre-eternal, the universe could never have come into existence.³⁵ Rāzī leaves the final word to the religionists and points the reader to his *kalām* work, *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, for the full elaboration of the argument.³⁶

This is neither the last time that he avers that all originated things must have a beginning nor that he refers his reader to the *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* for further reading. We see this once again in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*'s final book, on divine science, in the section titled "On the Temporal Origination of the Universe" (*fī ḥudūth al-'ālam*). This time, he gives the first word to the religionists:

The widely known argument for the temporal origination of bodies is that each body must have temporally originated things, and that which must have temporally originated things is temporally originated. Bodies, then, are temporally originated.

The explanation of the minor premise is that bodies must have combination and separation, which are temporally originated. The first is necessarily so, since each of two space-occupying things must be touching or not touching. As for the second, it is because non-existence applies to combination and separation. Anything to which non-existence applies cannot be pre-eternal.³⁷

34 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 213a.22–214a.8; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:699.10–701.10.

35 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 214a.8–214b.20; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:701.11–704.1.

36 *wa-tamāmu taqrīri hādhihi l-wujūhi madhkūrun fī kitābinā l-musammā bi-Nihāyat al-'uqūl*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 214b.20–21; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:704.1. If we accept the categorization of Rāzī's *Mulakkhkhaṣ* as a strictly philosophical work, we would expect him to refer his reader to another such philosophical work, like the *Mabāḥith*, rather than a *kalām* work like the *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*. Based on a keyword search of a digital version of Rāzī's *Mabāḥith* in the virtual "Library of the School of Jurisprudence" (*kitābhāna-yi madrasa-yi faqāhat*), it appears that Rāzī does not once refer to his book *Nihāyat al-'uqūl* in the *Mabāḥith*. Keywords searched were *nihāya*, *kitāb al-nihāya*, and *nihāyat al-'uqūl* (<https://lib.eshia.ir/12547/1/1>); accessed 17 December 2024.

37 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 348b.17–23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1087.15–1088.3.

According to this perspective, the universe must be originated in time because it is composed of bodies, and anything corporeal is necessarily temporally originated. Since bodies are produced through the combination and separation of form and matter, and since this implies that there was a moment before a body was produced via combination, non-existence applies to bodies. Bodies, therefore, cannot be pre-eternal.

Rāzī proceeds to explain that anything to which non-existence applies cannot be pre-eternal. First, if the thing in question is necessary in itself (*wājib li-dhātihī*), then non-existence cannot possibly apply to it. If it is contingent in itself (*mumkin li-dhātihī*), then its cause (*mu'aththir*) could either have acted out of necessity or out of choice. If the former, then the thing will only be non-existent when the cause itself is non-existent; otherwise, if the cause exists, so does the effect. Rāzī then posits that the causal influence (*ta'thīr*) of the necessary cause may depend upon a condition (*shart*)³⁸ that is either pre-eternal (*qadīm*) or temporally originated (*ḥādith*). Both cases, he concludes, end in absurdity. If the condition is pre-eternal, then we are back to discussing the effect existing from pre-eternity. Instead, the condition may be something specific and temporally originated (*ḥādith mu'ayyan*); but that does not work, because “it is impossible for what is preceded to be a condition of what precedes;”³⁹ in other words, the pre-eternal, necessary cause’s activity cannot depend on a temporally originated condition. One may resolve this if the condition comprises a series of temporally originated conditions which have no beginning (*lā bidāya*), but Rāzī reminds his reader that “we have argued in the chapter on time for the impossibility of [a regression of] temporally originated things with no beginning.”⁴⁰

At this point, Rāzī presents the disjunction’s alternative: the creator creates by choice. He takes for granted that “every act of a choosing agent is temporally originated.”⁴¹ This allows him to conclude that everything to which non-existence applies is temporally originated and every body must consist of temporally originated things. Since an infinite regress of temporally originated things is impossible, all bodies are temporally originated. The universe, therefore, is temporally originated. Notice how, although Rāzī introduced this position

38 Elsewhere, Rāzī appears to refer to this as a “connection” (*ta'alluq*); see Hassan, “In Pursuit of the World’s Creator,” 239.

39 *li-istiḥālātī an yakūna l-sābiqū mashrūṭan bi-l-masbūq*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349a.9–10; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1088.12.

40 *wa-qad dallalnā fī bābi l-zamāni ‘alā stiḥālātī ḥawāditha lā awwala la-hā*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349a.13; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1088.15–16.

41 *kullu mā huwa fī ‘lu fā‘ilīn mukhtārīn fa-huwa muḥdath*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349a.11; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1088.14.

noncommittally, he presents the arguments that support it in the first person: “we say” (*qulnā*), “we have argued” (*dallalnā*).

Rāzī allows the philosophers a laconic rejoinder consisting of three responses: First, since the universe’s creator is pre-eternal, so must be the universe. Second, temporally originated things are preceded by a pre-eternal matter (*mādda azaliyya*). Since matter and corporeality are inseparable (*lā tanfakk*), matter is pre-eternal. And third, since time is a measure of motion, and since motion is pre-eternal, time is pre-eternal. For each of these rebuttals, Rāzī notes that the full discussion has already transpired.⁴²

Rāzī concludes this section in a manner that may reveal his own position and confirms that he is not, in this philosophical book, in all cases working to improve or even maintain the Avicennan position on the creation of the universe. He declares, “These, then, are the *‘uyūn* of philosophical *shubah* with respect to the question of pre-eternity. Thorough [discussion] of this problem occurs in *al-Nihāya*.”⁴³ I left *‘uyūn* and *al-shubah* untranslated because one can read them in multiple ways. The least generous reading is that these are “the essences of the specious counterarguments” offered by the philosophers with respect to pre-eternity. Put more generously, these are “the sources of doubts,” “points of contention,” or “supreme problems.” Regardless of how one reads it, the result is the same: the philosophers’ arguments are suspect, while the religionists defend the “desired position” and the “unambiguous truth.”

I will conclude this section by presenting how Rāzī concludes his *Mulakh-khaṣ*. The book’s final section deals with theodicy and the ethical nature of human and divine actions. Rāzī begins by observing that “they,” meaning the philosophers, base their discussion of theodicy on two premises: “that good is existence and evil is non-existence.”⁴⁴ From here, they argue that things can either be pure good, pure evil, or a mix of the two. Pure good is the existent to which non-existence does not and cannot apply; this is God. Pure evil is impossible because, if it exists, then it cannot be pure evil, because pure evil would be pure non-existence. Everything aside from God, then, is a mix of good and evil; but, according to the philosophers, good predominates (*al-khayr ghālib*). Rāzī

42 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349a.15-22; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1089.2–11.

43 *fa-hādhihi ‘uyūnu l-shubahi l-falsafiyati fi mas’alati l-qidami wa-l-istiṣā’u fi hādhihi l-mas’alati madhkūrun fi l-nihāya*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, 349a.23-349b.1; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1089.12–13.

44 *anna l-khayra wujūdun wa-l-sharra ‘adam*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349b.22; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1091.8. On Rāzī’s engagement with Avicennan theodicy, see Ayman Shihadeh, “Avicenna’s Theodicy and al-Rāzī’s Anti-Theodicy,” *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* 7.1 (2019): 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2212943X-00701004>.

then raises the typical question: “Why cannot good be free from evil?”⁴⁵ Rāzī has the philosophers reject this as absurd and offer the example of fire: Fire has some benefits, but it also causes some harms. It can be no other way. Even though it can be no other way, this does not infringe upon God’s omnipotence. For even an omnipotent being cannot create something that is impossible.⁴⁶

So much for the philosophers’ position; what about Rāzī? From the get-go, he rejects what they say: “I believe that this examination is rhetorical.”⁴⁷ This is because evil, he argues, is in fact related to existence. Most people—himself included—understand “evil” as “pain and what leads to it.”⁴⁸ But even if one admits the philosophers’ premises, they still stand on shaky ground, as evinced by what Rāzī puts in the voice of an anonymous interlocutor:

Someone may say: This investigation deviates from the philosophers’ [principles] because the Creator, according to them, is a necessary agent through His essence, not a choosing agent. The statement [asking] “Why did He make evil but not good?” can only be directed toward an agent choosing between acting and abstaining, not toward a necessary agent.⁴⁹ Even if we accepted it, we have explained that what is intended by “evil” is pain. Even if it is established that the Creator is necessary in Itself, one must [still] explain the denial of evil with respect to Him by offering an argument for the impossibility of [attributing] pain to Him. They do not mention this argument; indeed, they are satisfied by [these] calamities.⁵⁰

45 *fa-hallā bari’a l-khayru ‘ani l-sharr*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 350a.18–19; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1092.9. Note Ibn Sīnā’s similar use of *hallā* when he entertains this question; *al-Ishārāt*, VII.26, 336.14. For discussion of this question in Ibn Sīnā, see Michael A. Rapoport, *Science of the Soul in Ibn Sīnā’s Pointers and Reminders: A Philological Study* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 92–104, esp. 99–101.

46 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 350a.19–21; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1092.10–12.

47 *wa-‘indī anna hādihā l-baḥṭha lafzī*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 349b.23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1091.9.

48 *al-alam wa-mā yu’addī ilayhi*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 350a.2; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1091.10. For discussion of Rāzī on pleasure and pain and their connection to theodicy, see Ayman Shihadeh, *The Teleological Ethics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Brill, 2006), 158–169.

49 Rāzī says much the same in his commentary on Ibn Sīnā’s *Pointers*, calling his discussion “superfluous;” Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, 164.

50 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 350a.22–350b.6; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1092.14–1093.2. Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich have the more elegant “they were content to leave us in the dark,” presumably reading *al-zulumāt* for *al-tāmmāt*; *The Heirs of Avicenna: Philosophy in the Islamic East, 12–13th Centuries*; Vol. 1, *Metaphysics and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 673. This would be an intriguing emendation. While MSS Istanbul Şehid Ali Paşa 1730 (f. 184b) and Tehran 872ṭ (p. 236) attest to the reading *al-zulumāt*, the majority of witnesses attest

While this rejoinder is presented anonymously, it quickly becomes clear that it represents Rāzī. The “we” who allow the philosophers’ position merely for the sake of argument is Rāzī. The “we” who have explained that evil is pain rather than non-existence, and who believes that God is incapable of experiencing pleasure or pain, is Rāzī. The person judging the philosophers’ position as calamitous is Rāzī.

Rāzī concludes this section, and the book, with one final directive to the reader:

Know that freedom from these problems⁵¹ [comes] from only one of two positions: either professing a necessary agent, in which case this examination becomes nullified; or professing a choosing agent and denying [the intelligibility of] good and evil. And [professing] that He cannot be questioned about what He does,⁵² which is the clear truth and the firm religion.⁵³

In the end, Rāzī lays it out quite simply: either God is a necessary agent, in which case there is no point in discussing theodicy because God could not have acted in any other way. Or God is a choosing agent, in which case there is also no real point in discussing theodicy, though Rāzī does not put it in those terms.

to the more difficult reading (*difficilior*) *al-ṭāmmāt*. Shihadeh glosses “calamities” as “non-sense;” *Teleological Ethics*, 163.

51 Or, less generously, “specious arguments.”

52 Cf. Khaled El-Rouayheb’s translation of this dictum, “[He] is not accountable for what he does,” in “Must God Tell Us the Truth? A Problem in Ash’arī Theology,” in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. Behnam Sadeghi et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 411–412.

53 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 351a.1–5; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1094.1–4. Here Rāzī is quoting Qur’ān 21:23: “He cannot be questioned about what He does, but they will be questioned” (*...wahuḥ yus’alūna*). In his Qur’ān commentary, Rāzī provides eight reasons, which he ascribes to Sunnīs, for why one cannot question God about His actions: The first three assert that asking for the cause of God’s actions inevitability leads to an infinite regress of causes. The next three declare that God cannot be said to act in order to achieve a specific purpose (*gharaḍ*) for this implies a certain impotence in God. The seventh states that one does not ask “why did you do that” (*limā fa’alta dhālika*) to someone who freely disposes of his property (or freely acts within his dominion) (*man taṣarrafa fī milki/mulki nafsihi*). The eighth posits that the question “Why did you do that?” can only be asked by someone who is able to prevent the person being questioned from doing the act. This prevention could be achieved either by promising reward or threatening punishment, which is impossible with respect to God; or by declaring the intrinsic goodness or evil of acts and that God knows the goodness and evil of acts, as the Mu’tazila do; *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 32 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 22:155.19–156.23.

Here Rāzī is advocating that God's will and His actions cannot be subjected to ethical judgments of good or evil. This is because unaided human reason cannot ascertain the nature of God's acts as good (*ḥusn*) or evil (*qubḥ*).⁵⁴ Since, as Richard Frank put it, God's acts and commands "cannot...be explained or rationalized,"⁵⁵ one should not ask questions about what God does. What He does is neither good nor bad; it just is.

3 The *Mabāḥith* and the *Mulakhkhaṣ*: Two Books, Two Philosophies?

The "desired position." The "true position." The "unambiguous truth." "Disorderly thoughts." "Specious (or contentious) arguments." "Calamities." These are not the words of someone who, as Griffel argues, was working "to make Ibn Sīnā's teachings more coherent," to "produce a coherent and convincing solution" to problems in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy, and to "strengthen [Ibn Sīnā's] system or at least to rectify it where he thinks it is wrong" to the point that "the overall philosophical edifice of Avicennan thinking remains intact."⁵⁶ These are the words of someone who has found certain of Ibn Sīnā's positions to be incoherent, who chose to emphasize that incoherence, and who declared that the only refuge from that incoherence is the Qur'ānically supported alternative.

To be fair to Prof. Griffel, he bases his argument on Rāzī's discussion of the celestial spheres in the *Mabāḥith*. He focuses on two sections in particular: first, a section on the celestial spheres' nature having no opposite (*laysa li-*

54 Earlier, classical Ash'arī ethical theory posits that acts do not possess objective values of "good" or "bad." On how Rāzī's consequentialist ethical theory differs from the divine-command ethics of earlier Ash'arites, see Ayman Shihadeh, "Theories of Ethical Value in Kalām: A New Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford University Press, 2016), esp. 402–404, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696703.013.007>; and Shihadeh, *Teleological Ethics*, 56–59. Rāzī expresses the position that the intellect cannot determine the goodness or badness of God's actions in, for example, *al-Maṭālib al-'aliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Salām Shāhīn, 9 parts in 3 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1999), vol. 1, part 3:280 ff.

55 In *Nihāyat al-'uqūl*, Rāzī straightforwardly declares, "Our compatriots [= Ash'arīs] claim that good and evil can only be established by revealed law" (*za'ama aṣḥābunā anna l-ḥusna wa-l-qubḥa lā yuthbatāni illā bi-l-shar'i*); *Nihāyat al-'uqūl fi dirāyat al-uṣūl*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūda, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Dhakhā'in, 2015), 3:235.5. This so-called "divine-command" theory of ethics opposes the Mu'tazilī position that human reason can and must be used to determine what is good and what is evil; Richard M. Frank, "Moral obligation in Classical Muslim Theology," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11.2 (1983): 209–210.

56 Griffel, *Formation*, 332, 335, and 338.

ḥabīʿat al-falak didd) and second on the spheres' not being generated (*al-falak ghayr kā'in*).⁵⁷ After reporting and explaining Rāzī's arguments (the details are not pertinent here, so I will not review them), Griffel proceeds to Rāzī's conclusion: the celestial spheres ("heavens" in Griffel's translation) "exist from past eternity (*min al-azal*) up to now. Its Creator (*mubdī*) precedes it in essence (*bi-l-dhāt*) but not in time."⁵⁸ Rāzī concludes the section with a brief comment that "we must think here about how the particulars of originated things emerge" and then moves on to the next section.⁵⁹ There is no rebuttal, no mention of God as a choosing or necessary agent. Griffel reasonably concludes that "the 'portion' (*qism*) on the heavens in *The Eastern Investigations* is largely a report of teachings that appear in the books of Avicenna."⁶⁰ Griffel then turns to the *Mulakhkhaṣ* for comparison. He remarks that there are some compositional differences between the sections on the celestial spheres in the *Mabāḥith* and the *Mulakhkhaṣ*, but does not attend to all of them. Some of those left unmentioned include that the *Mulakhkhaṣ* does not contain sections equivalent to those in the *Mabāḥith* on which Griffel based his argument. The content of those *Mabāḥith* sections does appear, however, in the final section of the *Mulakhkhaṣ*'s division (*qism*) on the spheres. Griffel discusses this section, but only to clarify a potential misconception about its title, which reads: *fī anna al-samawāt yaṣiḥḥ 'alayhā l-kawn wa-l-fasād*.⁶¹ One may be inclined to read this as "On the fact that generation and corruption apply to the heavens." Griffel cautions against this, arguing that *fī anna* should be read not as "on the fact that" but as "on whether." It thus forms a question rather than a declaration. The answer to the question, according to Griffel, is decidedly "no."⁶² But it may not be so decided.

Rāzī begins this section by declaring Aristotle's answer to the question posed in the title:

Aristotle denied it. But he did not mean by it here that it is pre-eternal and post-eternal. Rather, [he meant] that the bodies that comprise the

57 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:91.10–95.18. Griffel reports that Rāzī characterizes the arguments in both sections as demonstrations (*burhān*); *Formation*, 329. But Rāzī only says this of the section on the spheres' not being generated, which comprises two demonstrations; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:93.8 and 95.1.

58 Translation is Griffel's, *Formation*, 331; Rāzī, *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:97.9–10.

59 *wa-yajibu an natafakkara fī kayfiyyati khurūji juz'iyāti l-hawādith*; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:97.10.

60 Griffel, *Formation*, 331.

61 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 249a.12–13; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:802.6.

62 Griffel, *Formation*, 336, n. 101.

celestial spheres receive only these forms. So long as they [spheres] exist, they are informed by these forms; otherwise, they are non-existent.⁶³

Rāzī's response immediately complicates the argument that he is upholding the pre-eternity of the celestial spheres and, therefore, of the universe. Rather, his interpretation of Aristotle (regardless of how accurate it is) aims to have it both ways: namely, that Aristotle did say that generation and corruption do not apply to the celestial spheres, but that his goal in saying so was not to establish that the spheres are pre-eternal. Rather, it is more simply to assert that the celestial spheres exist only when their forms do.

Rāzī then elaborates the two ways in which he says Aristotle argued for this. The first argument asserts that if the celestial spheres were generated, they would move in a straight motion; since the latter is false, so the former must be. The second argument declares that if a celestial sphere were in its spatial location (*ḥayyiz*) and in its shape (*shakl*) prior to receiving its forms, then it would have been a celestial sphere before becoming a celestial sphere, an obvious absurdity. If that is not the case—meaning, if it were in a different spatial location and a different shape—then its transition to its spatial location and shape would have been through a straight motion. This, Rāzī declares, “is impossible for the delimited [sphere].”⁶⁴ Rāzī does not provide counterarguments to either argument. He does, however, conclude the section in the following cryptic fashion:

Know that we have mentioned in this book, and especially in this chapter, that which, if you were to understand it, the point of this discussion according to these two aspects would not be hidden from you. Success is through God.⁶⁵

What Rāzī means to convey here is admittedly not immediately clear. But it does not seem to be an unqualified embrace of Aristotle's arguments denying that generation and corruption apply to the spheres. He appears, rather, to be encouraging reading between the lines to find the true “point” (*al-wa-*

63 *mana'a Aristū minhu wa-laysa murāduhū minhu hunā kawnahū azaliyyan abadiyyan bal anna l-ajsāma llatī minhā takawwanati l-aflāku lā taqbalu illā tilka l-ṣuwara fa-ḥiya mā dāmat mawjūdatan kānat mutaṣawwiratan bi-tilka l-ṣūrati wa-illā 'adamat;* MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 248b.12–15; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:802.7–9.

64 *wa-dhālika 'alā l-muḥaddadi muḥāl;* MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 248b.11–12; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:803.10.

65 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 249a.12–14; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:803.11–12.

jh) of these two aspects (*al-wajḥayn*), namely, Aristotle's two arguments.⁶⁶ If he agreed with Aristotle or simply intended to present his teachings without opposition, there would be no need to hint that the point of the argument—indeed, the truth—is something else. Ending with “success is through God” (*wa-bi-llāh al-tawfiq*) additionally suggests that the truth is not what the philosophers maintain; minimally, it suggests ambivalence here.

With this in mind, it is difficult to conclude, as Griffel does, that “judging from the part (*qism*) on the celestial spheres in both *al-Mulakḥkhaṣ* and *al-Mabāḥith* there is no opposition to Avicenna's *Fulfillment* [*Shifā'*] and certainly no refutation of the teachings of the *falāsifa*.”⁶⁷ The opposition here may be muted, but it is also not absent. Moreover, if we judge the *Mulakḥkhaṣ* on more than just the part on the celestial spheres, we can see a clear distinction between it and the *Mabāḥith*. I agree with Griffel that in the *Mabāḥith* Rāzī appears to present Ibn Sīnā's philosophy with neither refutation nor opposition. But this is manifestly not the case for the *Mulakḥkhaṣ*. A comparison of the texts will bear this out.

3.1 *Comparing the Mabāḥith and Mulakḥkhaṣ*

To begin the comparison, let us return to what Rāzī says about infinite regress (*tasalsul*). The discussions in the *Mulakḥkhaṣ* and the *Mabāḥith* are quite similar, even if the latter discussion is about three times as long.⁶⁸ They both begin with the assertion that a collection of causes must be contingent because it depends on the individual causes for its own existence. The discussion in both proceeds to analyze whether that cause can be the collection itself, something internal to it, or something external to it. In both texts, all but the latter are rejected. In the *Mulakḥkhaṣ*, but not the *Mabāḥith*, Rāzī further considers whether the external cause may be contingent or necessary. It cannot be contingent,

66 This is precisely what al-Kātibī al-Qazwīnī does in his commentary on the *Mulakḥkhaṣ*. He critiques the explanation of Aristotle's first argument, which relies on the impossibility of the void and the argument that every body has a natural spatial extension. Qazwīnī denies both and remarks that the arguments supporting them are weak and non-demonstrative. Further, he adds that even if one were to accept these arguments, they apply only to a “delimited sphere” (*al-falak al-muḥaddad*), not all spheres, as is claimed. Regarding the second argument, Qazwīnī focuses on the phrase “this is impossible for the delimited [sphere].” He says the same applies to Aristotle's second argument; Najm al-Dīn al-Kātibī Qazwīnī, *Munaṣṣaṣ fi l-manṭiq wa-l-ḥikma al-islāmīyya*, MS Istanbul Şehid Ali Paşa 1680, fol. 491b l.16-492a l.6.

67 Griffel, *Formation*, 336.

68 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.5–176b.4; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:580.1–584.5; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:470.4–477.7.

otherwise it would not be external to the collection of contingent causes, so it must be necessary. This, he concludes, is the desired position (*al-maṭlūb*).⁶⁹

Both texts then articulate responses from the perspective of the *mutakallimūn*. The first is to suggest that terms like “collection” (*majmūʿ*), “totality” (*kull*), and “whole” (*jumla*) suggest finitude insofar as the collection encompasses its individuals.⁷⁰ The next two responses in the *Mabāḥith* are condensed into a single response in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*: If the philosophers permit infinite motion and infinite souls, why do they not also permit infinite causes?⁷¹ The final response in both texts declares that sensible, originated things (*al-ḥawādith al-maḥsūsa*) have a cause.⁷² If the cause is pre-eternal, so are the effects; but that still suggests an infinite regress of originated causes. The cause, then, must be pre-eternal but dependent upon a condition (*shart*). If the condition is pre-eternal, then the effect is again pre-eternal, so the condition must be originated. Even then, the condition is linked to the temporally originated effect, so one still does not avoid an infinite regress. If it is prior to the effect, the cause only produces its effect when the condition does not exist. This is absurd. Even if one grants that the condition can be linked to the effect, the condition is either privative (*ʿadamī*) or existential (*wujūdī*). It cannot be privative, because something existent cannot rely on something non-existent for its existence. And if it is existential, then either circularity or an infinite regress ensues.

The first significant difference between the two discussions then follows. In the *Mulakhkhaṣ*, the *mutakallim* objector then announces that the philosophers’ position on the impossibility of an infinite regress leads to the commitment to one of three principles:

[1] the contingent does not need a cause, [2] what obtains relies on what was existent prior to it, or [3] professing an infinity of causes and effects at the same time. Each one of those blocks the philosophers’ door to proving the Necessary Existent.⁷³

69 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.13; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:580.8.

70 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.13–17; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:580.9–11; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:471.15–17.

71 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.17–18; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:581.1; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:471.18–21.

72 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175a.21–175b.19; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:581.2–582.10; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:472.

73 *istighnāʿu l-mumkinī ʿani l-muʿaththirī awi stinādu l-ḥāṣili ilā mā kāna mawjūdan qablu awi l-qawlu bi-stinādi asbābin wa-musabbabātin lā nihāyata la-hā dufʿatan wa-kullu dhālika*

No such rebuttal appears in the *Mabāḥith*.

After this, the texts are in sync once again. Both then present the philosophers' responses to the *mutakallim*'s objections. The first is to assert that for any collection of things, its cause exists outside of it. This is a reasonable statement whether the collection is considered finite or infinite;⁷⁴ but in the *Mabāḥith*, Rāzī dismisses any discussion beyond this as rhetorical (*fī mujar-rad 'ibāra*).⁷⁵ The second (and third, for the *Mabāḥith*) is that the philosophers only claim that if every individual in a group is contingent, the group must also be contingent.⁷⁶ If the *mutakallim* wants to claim that this means that if every individual in a group has a beginning and therefore the group must also have a beginning, then they should offer a proper argument. In the *Mabāḥith*, Rāzī characterizes the last of the *mutakallim*'s objections as the most difficult (*aş'ab*).⁷⁷ Otherwise, the counter-response is the same in both texts: Originated things rely on a pre-eternal cause. Each originated thing is a condition for what comes after it. This is given order by a pre-eternal motion. But the pre-eternal cause's "being-a-cause" (*mu'aththiriyya*) does not itself require a cause. This is because "being-a-cause" (the condition discussed above in the *mutakallim*'s fourth objection) does not exist in concrete reality and so is not existential.⁷⁸

At this point, the two texts once again diverge. The *Mabāḥith* proceeds to discuss two more brief demonstrations against infinite regress, neither of which receives an objection.⁷⁹ In the *Mulakkhkaş*, meanwhile, the "questioner" (*al-sā'il*) returns.⁸⁰ As I have already discussed above, the questioner declares that the only way to escape from the mess of absurdities and impossibilities that the philosopher's position entails is to profess the unambiguous truth (*al-haqq al-şarīḥ*): the ultimate cause, God, is an omnipotent, choosing agent (*qādir mukhtār*) who is capable of causing one of the objects of His power to preponderate over another without a sufficient reason (*muraĵijih*).

yasuddu 'alā l-falāsifati bāba ithbāti wājibi l-wujūd; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 175b.20–23; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:582.11–13.

74 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.1–5; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:582.14–583.4; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:474.6–14.

75 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:474.10.

76 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.5–11; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:583.5–13; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:474.15–475.15.

77 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:475.16. This is the fourth objection in the *Mabāḥith*, but only the third in the *Mulakkhkaş*.

78 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.15–16; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:583.12–13; *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:475.20–476.1.

79 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 1:476.10–477.7.

80 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 176a.16; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:583.14.

This reveals a key distinction between the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* and the *Mabāḥith*. It is not that the former is an abridgement of the latter. Their textual similarities have been known for some time. It is that in the *Mabāḥith*, Rāzī stays on the sidelines while presenting the philosophers' positions and the *mutakallimūn*'s objections. He may declare a particular objection to be rather difficult, as he does in the case of infinite regress. But he does not declare either side to be in possession of the truth. This is not the case for the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*. While his presentation of topics and debates in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* may bear similarity to the *Mabāḥith*, he ultimately steps onto the playing field and chooses a side.

The truth, we are told time and again in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*, lies with the *mutakallimūn*. In every instance where I have found Rāzī to declare a position to be the truth in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*, he fails to do so in the *Mabāḥith*, where he is either impartial or even favorable to the philosophers. When discussing transmigration of souls (*tanāsukh*) in the *Mabāḥith*, an issue on which Avicennan philosophers and the *mutakallimūn* happen to agree is impossible, Rāzī presents arguments from philosophers and theologians. He does so without providing objections or otherwise indicating what the "truth" is.⁸¹ But in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*, Rāzī allows an objector to argue that it is permissible for the soul to have knowledge of past states of its existence, as this is a consequence of "the truth" (*al-ḥaqq*) that God is a choosing agent.⁸² Rāzī's objector then offers another criticism directed specifically at "the philosophers who profess [that God is] a necessary agent" (*al-falāsifa al-qā'ilīna bi-l-mūjib*).⁸³ In this case, neither criticism is intended to support transmigration, only to illustrate that some of the philosophers' arguments against it are weak. This, of course, is not the same as saying that the theologians are right and the philosophers are wrong. The point here is that Rāzī is consistently more favorable to the theologians in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* in a way that he is not in the *Mabāḥith*.

The following section in both texts pertains to the soul's survival of the body's death. The sections themselves are quite different, however, insofar as they present different arguments. In the *Mabāḥith*, objections to the philosophers' position appear, but are unrelated to God's being a choosing or necessary agent. Rāzī remains an impartial presenter of alternatives. Ultimately, the philosophers get the last word.⁸⁴ But in the *Mulakkhkhaṣ*, the objector announc-

81 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:397.2–398.4.

82 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 316a.9–11; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:994.5–6.

83 MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 316a.15; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:994.10.

84 *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:398.16–400.10.

es that the philosopher's position "is built on the denial of the Choosing Agent, which is false."⁸⁵

The two preceding sections form part of the chapter (*bāb*) on the soul's attributes (*fi ṣifāt al-naḥs*) in the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and on "the simplicity of the human soul, its origination, its perpetuity, and the rest of its characteristics" (*fi tajarrud al-naḥs al-insāniyya wa-ḥudūthihā wa-baqā'ihā wa-sā'ir aḥkāmihā*) in the *Mabāḥith*. The penultimate section of the *Mulakhkhaṣ*'s chapter is on prophecy (*fi l-nubuwwāt*). The *Mulakhkhaṣ*'s section on prophecy opens with the gist of what Ibn Sīnā says (*ḥāṣil madhhab al-Shaykh*), namely that just how the celestial soul's conceptualizations (*taṣawwūrāt*) are principles for sublunary events, so can the human soul's conceptualizations be the principle of events in the elemental world. This is immediately met with an objection. The objector first explains that an individual human is himself because of his particular humoral temperament (*mizāj*). A rare temperament allows for the power to perform miracles. "This," the objector says, "is according to the philosophers' principles."⁸⁶ Immediately thereafter, he continues: "As for the true position, which is establishing the choosing agent, you have not offered a decisive argument that it is not within God's power to create for his servant the power to create a body."⁸⁷ There is no comparable section on prophecy in the *Mabāḥith*. Of the relevant sections that appear in the *Mabāḥith* but not in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*,⁸⁸ Rāzī presents Ibn Sīnā's positions without giving room for an objector to proclaim that the truth is otherwise.

At this point, the distinction between the *Mabāḥith* and *Mulakhkhaṣ* should be clear. In the *Mabāḥith*, Rāzī presents the philosophers' doctrines and objections to them, but remains relatively impartial. Of the sections that I have reviewed, at no point does he allow the *mutakallim* objector to claim the truth; nor does he do so, however, for the *falāsifa*. Rāzī leaves it to the reader to determine the truth. This is evidently not so in the *Mulakhkhaṣ*. The *mutakallim* objector, and potentially Rāzī himself intervening in the first person, regularly proclaims to possess the truth. That truth is that God is a choosing agent (*ḥāḍir mukhtār*) who possesses power (or omnipotence, *qādir mukhtār*). The objec-

85 *mabnī 'alā naḥy l-fā'ili l-mukhtāri wa-innahū bā'it*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 317b.10; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:997.16.

86 *hādihā 'alā uṣūli l-falāsifa*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 320b.21; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1005.17.

87 *ammā l-qawlu l-ḥaqqu wa-huwa ithbātu l-fā'ili l-mukhtāri fa-lam taqum dalālatan qāṭi'atan 'alā annahū laysa fi maqdāri llāhi an yakhlūqa li-l-'abdi qudratan 'alā khalqi l-jism*; MS Bodleian Hunt. 329, fol. 320b.21-321a.1; Hanoğlu (ed.), 2:1005.17-1006.2.

88 These include "On how one informs on the Unseen" (*fi kayfiyyat al-ikhbār 'an al-ghayb*) and "On the strange things that emerge from strong souls" (*fi l-umūr al-ghariba allatī taṣdur 'an aqwīyā' al-nufūs*); *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya*, 2:422 and 424.

tor is even allowed, as we have seen, to denigrate the philosophers' reasoning. Even if one does not accept that Rāzī is speaking for himself through the objector, one cannot maintain that in the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and, more broadly, in all his books on *ḥikma*, "al-Rāzī argues in favor of a God who is pure necessity, for instance, and who creates this world from past eternity."⁸⁹ This may be so for the *Mabāḥith*, but not the *Mulakhkhaṣ*.

4 Philosophical Philosophy and Islamic Philosophy

This distinction calls for more nuance in how we classify Rāzī's philosophical books (*kutub ḥikmiyya*) and, more broadly, how we talk about philosophy in the Postclassical, post-Avicennan era. One fitting taxonomy is offered to us in the catalog of manuscripts in Sultan Bāyezīd 11's (r. 886/1481–918/1512) library, prepared by the librarian 'Āṭūfī.⁹⁰ This catalog separates philosophical works into two categories: *ḥikma falsafīyya* ("philosophical philosophy") and *ḥikma islāmīyya* ("Islamic philosophy").⁹¹ In his evaluation of the catalog, Dimitri Gutas has argued that the distinction between the two philosophies hinges "on the degree of adherence to Islamic doctrine." He bases this on 'Āṭūfī's own marginal comments in the manuscript, in which he describes *ḥikma islāmīyya* as "the one in which research is conducted in accordance with the rules of the noble Prophetic Law." Gutas suggests that this may minimally constitute adherence to the three positions that Ghazālī declared place the *falāsifa* beyond the pale of Islam: God's knowledge of particulars, the creation of the universe in time, and the resurrection of bodies. Per Gutas, if this is what constitutes Islamic philosophy, then *ḥikma falsafīyya* must be the converse, which could be understood as a non-Islamic philosophy; or, in anachronistic terms, a secular or scientific philosophy.⁹² Griffel, who briefly discusses 'Āṭūfī's catalog and the

89 Griffel, *Formation*, 338.

90 On the catalog, see Dimitri Gutas, "Philosophical Manuscripts: Two Alternative Philosophies," in *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3–1503/4)*, 2 vols., ed. Gülru Necipoğlu et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1:907–933.

91 The phrase "philosophical philosophy" (*al-ḥikma al-falsafīyya*) appears in ms Istanbul Ahmed III 3447, a collective volume (*majmū*) containing eighty-four texts attributed to Ibn Sīnā. A description of the volume says it contains texts "on logic, philosophical philosophy, medicine, and more" (*fī l-mantiq wa-l-ḥikma al-falsafīyya wa-l-ṭibb wa-ghayrihī*). The text belonged to Sultan Bāyezīd 11's library. The earliest we can date it is to his reign. It is possible that this description was added by 'Āṭūfī himself.

92 *wa-ḥiya llatī yubḥathu fihā 'alā qānūni l-shar'ī l-sharīfī l-nabawī*. Translation from Gutas, "Philosophical Manuscripts," 908–909; see also Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna and After: The Development of Paraphilosophy. A History of Science Approach," in *Islamic Philosophy*

placement of Rāzī's *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* therein, proposes that *ḥikma falsafīyya* be understood as Avicennan philosophy or "philosophy related to Avicenna" because in the 6th/12th century *falsafa* had acquired a clear association with Ibn Sīnā's works and system.⁹³

With those two categories in mind, we can attend to classifying the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith*. Given that the *Mulakhkhaṣ* regularly allows the spokesperson for the *mutakallimūn* to lay claim to the truth and even disparage the philosophers; that the content of the *mutakallim*'s truth, at least insofar as I have discussed it here, aligns with the quasi-orthodoxy that Ghazālī attempted to establish in his *Precipitance of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*) and enforce in the fatwa included therein; and that it concludes by quoting the Qur'ānic assertion that we must not question what God does, we could classify the *Mulakhkhaṣ* as a work of Islamic philosophy. The *Mabāḥith*, meanwhile, gives no such allowances to the *mutakallimūn*, remains largely neutral between the philosophers' and *mutakallimūn*'s arguments, and ultimately allows Ibn Sīnā's anathematized positions to stand. As such, it could be seen as a work of philosophical/Avicennan philosophy. This is, in fact, precisely how 'Āṭūfī categorized both works.⁹⁴

Having identified the key distinction between the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* and used that distinction to affirm 'Āṭūfī's classification of them, it is worth briefly discussing precisely what we might understand by "Islamic philosophy" and "philosophical philosophy" and what it meant to be a philosopher in the Postclassical, post-Avicennan era. While Gutas might find 'Āṭūfī's classification of Rāzī's *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* perspicacious, he ultimately disagrees with the validity of "Islamic philosophy" as a meaningful category. He argues that the phrase "Islamic philosophy"—and the similar, broader term "philosophical theology"—is ultimately absurd because, like theology, it "violate[s] all basic principles of what historically had meant to do science, which was the open-ended rational investigation of all reality."⁹⁵ According to Gutas, then, what constitutes philosophy as a discipline is that it must be open-ended, meaning not working from pre-determined conclusions; rational, meaning allowing only arguments and evidence based on reason and experience; and

from the 12th to the 14th Century, ed. Abdelkader Al Ghouz (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2018), 48–49, <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737009003.19>.

93 Griffel, *Formation*, 561.

94 Gutas observes that it is unlikely that 'Āṭūfī would have read and understood all the texts in his inventory, so the decision of where to place certain works, especially superficially similar works like the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith*, presumably reflects the consensus of the scholarly tradition at the time; Gutas, "Philosophical Manuscripts," 908, 915, 929.

95 Gutas, "Avicenna and After," 43.

that it take the whole of reality as its object of study. A work that fits these characteristics is a work of philosophy, and a scholar who fits these characteristics is a philosopher. Even if most medieval philosopher-scientists maintained some personal adherence to religious narratives about the nature of the universe, Gutas argues, “they nevertheless found different ways to accommodate it to the superior scientific truth,” as in the case of allegorical explanation.⁹⁶ This is certainly an apt description of Ibn Sīnā, but one may also suggest that it applies to Ghazālī insofar as he was willing to allow allegorical interpretation of revealed text when scientific argument (*burhān*) demands it.⁹⁷ Where Ghazālī falls short of meriting the moniker “philosopher,” per Gutas, is his allowance of supra-rational means of acquiring knowledge and his limitation of philosophical inquiry in the fatwa appended to his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*.⁹⁸

Gutas proposes that the genre of works that adopt the aura of philosophy—its topics, methods, and rules of evidence—but do not fully adhere to the three characteristics of science actually engage in “clandestine theologizing” and should be categorized as “paraphilosophy,” a term he coined to signify “doing what appears as philosophy/science in order to divert attention from, subvert, and substitute for philosophy/science, and as a result avoid doing philosophy/science.”⁹⁹ Is Rāzī’s *Mulakhkhaṣ*, then, a work of paraphilosophy? If we accept Gutas’s criteria for distinguishing philosophy from non-philosophy, then: Yes, it is a work of paraphilosophy. I will explain using Gutas’s three criteria as a guide.¹⁰⁰ I will also question the validity of these criteria.

First, the question of scope: Is the *Mulakhkhaṣ* an investigation of all reality? No, but this criterion is too limiting in any effort to discriminate between science and non-science. It is a fair question to apply to an entire discipline (which, admittedly, is how Gutas frames it), but not to each work that may fall within that discipline. Certainly, current scholars—Gutas included—accept

96 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 29. For one such example, see Warren Zev Harvey, “On Maimonides’ Allegorical Readings of Scripture,” in *Interpretation and Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 181–188, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400158_009.

97 See Griffel’s discussion of Ghazālī’s “Rule of Interpretation” in *Al-Ghazālī’s Philosophical Theology* (New York University Press, 2009), 111–122.

98 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 36–42. Gutas gives as an example here of Ghazālī’s use of “taste” (*dhawq*), a term and concept that he adapts from Ibn Sīnā. For Ghazālī’s use of the term, see Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 48–63. For Ibn Sīnā’s use of *dhawq*, see Rapoport, *Science*, 122–124; and “Sufi Vocabulary, but Avicennan Philosophy: The Sufi Terminology in Chapters VIII–X of Ibn Sīnā’s *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt*,” *Oriens* 47.1–2 (2019): 169–176, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18778372-04701003>.

99 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 43.

100 Gutas discusses the criteria at “Avicenna and After,” 43.

Ibn Sīnā's *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* as a work of philosophy even if it does not investigate all of the topics that his *Shifā'* does. In fact, if we apply this criterion in the strictest sense, it would exclude all works that are not truly comprehensive from being considered "philosophy," something I do not think Gutas intended.

Second, the question of reason: Does it allow for supra-rational modes of acquiring knowledge, or for evidence not based on reason? From what I can tell, the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* largely relies upon argument and evidence based on reason. Rāzī regularly chastises the philosophers for not providing demonstrative proofs (*burhān*) or even arguments (*dalāla*) to support all their positions. I have not seen any appeal to suprarational means of acquiring knowledge, like *dhawq* ("taste").¹⁰¹ But as I have shown above, when it comes to the question of the ethical nature of human and divine action, Rāzī supports the traditional Ash'arī *bi-lā kayfa* position through quoting the Qur'an's assertion that God's actions cannot be questioned (Q 21:23). But he does not rely solely on a *bi-lā kayfa* argument; rather, this complements rational argumentation.¹⁰²

This leads us to the third and final criterion: Is the *Mulakkhkhaṣ* an open-ended investigation and Rāzī an open-ended investigator? Before answering the question, I should first address whether it is reasonable and how we might go about answering it. Even though it may be reasonable to include this in a conceptualization of philosophy/science, barring unambiguous textual evidence that speaks to an individual scholar's open-endedness, I am not sure we can answer this question with sufficient confidence for it to be a criterion delimiting specific examples of science from non-science in a historical context.¹⁰³ In the absence of direct textual evidence, I worry that we might otherwise base

101 Damien Janos studied the question of whether Rāzī admitted a non-rational form of knowledge ("mystical knowledge") and ultimately concluded that he does not. The study considered the *Mabāḥith* (but not *Mulakkhkhaṣ*) and several of Rāzī's *kalām* works; "Intuition, Intellection, and Mystical Knowledge: Delineating Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Theories," in *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī. Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary*, ed. Georges Tamer (vol. 1) and Frank Griffel (vols. 2), 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2015–2016), 2:189–228.

102 This is similar to how he argues for a beneficent creator in the *Maṭālib*; Hassan, "In Pursuit of the World's Creator," 249–250.

103 I cautiously say *may be* reasonable rather than definitively *is* reasonable here because I am inclined to agree with Jari Kaukua's observation that "philosophers today, as in the past, argue from a variety of background assumptions that they may never subject to open-ended scrutiny," irrespective of the nature of those assumptions; Jari Kaukua, "Post-Classical Islamic Philosophy—A Contradiction in Terms?," *Nazariyat* 6.2 (2020): 9, <https://doi.org/10.12658/Nazariyat.6.2.M0110en>. I would add that this applies not only to modern philosophers, but to scientists, as well.

it on a scholar's willingness to publicly diverge from revealed dogma. I see this as the inverse of a question that Jari Kaukua poses in an essay responding to Gutas: "Why should Rāzī's preparedness to doubt the foundations of Aristotelian doctrine...be a mark of a non-philosophical attitude or anti-scientific attitude?"¹⁰⁴ In other words, we cannot assume that just because a scholar was willing to doubt the foundations of religious doctrine that they were necessarily arguing from an open-ended mindset.¹⁰⁵

To answer the question with which I began the previous paragraph: Rāzī's *Mulakhkhaṣ* is largely, but not entirely, an open-ended investigation. Regarding this, I refer to the previously discussed passage with which Rāzī concludes the *Mulakhkhaṣ*.¹⁰⁶

The key factor here is not what position Rāzī defends, but how he defends it. By stating that one should not ask about the ethical nature of God's actions, Rāzī is declaring some topics to be off limits. They should not be investigated but rather should be accepted without asking why (*bi-lā kayfa*).¹⁰⁷ There is an affinity here with some of Rāzī's theological works, which also adduce Qur'ān 21:23 when arguing in favor of the Ash'arī position that God's actions cannot be subjected to ethical judgment and that human reason alone cannot determine whether an act is good or evil.¹⁰⁸ This likewise dissociates the *Mulakhkhaṣ* from Rāzī's other philosophical works—the *Mabāḥith* and *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt*—insofar as he does not reference this verse in either.¹⁰⁹ Even if this *bi-lā kayfa* approach is limited only to some topics—though "God's actions" could be quite

104 Kaukua, "Post-Classical," 16.

105 To be clear, I am not claiming that this is Gutas' argument. I am merely claiming that, absent textual evidence attesting to a scholar's open mindset, I fear this might be used as a proxy.

106 See above, pp. 85–86.

107 Griffel argues that the *bi-lā kayfa* approach is characteristic of Rāzī's works in *kalām* rather than *ḥikma*; Griffel, *Formation*, 558–559. From this perspective, the *Mulakhkhaṣ* does not belong to Rāzī's philosophical works (*kutub ḥikmīyya*).

108 Rāzī concludes the chapter on the creation of acts (*khalq al-af'āl*) in his *al-Arba'īn fī uṣūl al-dīn* by stating simply, "He does what He wishes and judges what he wills, and He cannot be questioned about what He does" (*yaḥ'alu mā yashā'u wa-yaḥkamu mā yurīdu...*); *al-Arba'īn fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kullīyyāt al-Azhariyya, 1982), 1:322.20–21. Rāzī also adduces this Qur'ānic verse when discussing the creation of acts in the *Muḥaṣṣal*; *Kitāb al-Muḥaṣṣal wa-huwa Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wa-l-muta'akhhirīn min al-ḥukamā' wa-l-mutakallimīn*, ed. Hüseyin Atay (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth, 1999), 459.9.

109 I base this claim on a keyword search of the digital versions of Najafzādī's edition of Rāzī's *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and the Intishārāt-i Bīdār edition of *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* available at <https://lib.eshia.ir/73005> and <https://lib.eshia.ir/12547/1/1>, respectively (accessed 20 January 2025).

expansive—it is undoubtedly opposed to an open-ended inquiry and could justifiably be considered non-philosophical/scientific. Nevertheless, Rāzī's adoption of an anti-scientific attitude with respect to a given topic in a work should not compel us to dismiss the work in its entirety. Such an approach would be too reductive and would neglect the potential for authors in a variety of disciplines and genres from contributing to scientific and philosophical debate.¹¹⁰

5 Conclusion

On this account, if we accepted Gutas's criteria for distinguishing science from non-science, Rāzī's *Mulakhkhaṣ* would be an example of paraphilosophy. But as I have argued, these criteria are too limiting. Beyond that, it seems impossible to establish an individual's intent to subvert scientific inquiry through writing a given text. It may be profitable, instead, to return to 'Āṭūfī's categories of "Islamic philosophy" and "philosophical philosophy" (or "Avicennan philosophy"). Like Gutas, Griffel also rejects this categorization, but for far different reasons. Despite the differences between the *Mulakhkhaṣ* and *Mabāḥith* in terms of composition and style, Griffel argues that they do not differ in philosophical conclusions.¹¹¹ I have made the opposing case here and consequently suggest that 'Āṭūfī seems to have been correct in placing the *Mulakhkhaṣ* under works of Islamic philosophy and the *Mabāḥith* among works of philosophical/Avicennan philosophy. Of course, this current essay is a study of elements of two texts by a single scholar. The extent to which these conclusions are generalizable to Rāzī's corpus and that of other Postclassical authors must await the results of future research.

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111 Griffel, *Formation*, 561.

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Sleepers Awake! Rūmī on the People of the Cave

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Abstract

Much to its peril, the contemporary field of Quranic studies seldom regards Sufis and philosophers as major theorists of the Quran. A case in point is the great Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, whose poetry has always been seen in the pre-modern Islamic tradition as amounting to nothing short of a profoundly engaged and engaging *tafsīr*. This article will therefore outline one of the countless instances wherein Rūmī comments upon the Quran through his poetry, paying particular attention to the story of the People of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) recounted in Q 18:9–26. Showing how the tale gives rise to Mawlānā's penetrating exposition of the reality of sleep and wakefulness on the one hand, and the nature of the heart on the other, the paper will then segue into an exploration of a related theme in Rūmī's writings, namely that of the "friend of the cave" (*yār-i ghār*), which alludes to another important Quranic pericope.

Keywords

Rūmī – Sufi poetry – Quranic commentary – remembrance – awakening – heart – inwardness

1 *Kankam için*. This paper grew out of a lecture I delivered at a conference dedicated to Rūmī at the Berliner Institut für Islamische Theologie (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin) in the fall of 2024. I am grateful to Professor Tuba Işık for her kind invitation. For their helpful feedback on the article, thanks are due to Taha Abdollahi and the anonymous reviewers.



O chevalier! Take these poems to be like a mirror. After all, you know that in a mirror there is no form in itself—but whoever looks at the mirror will be able to see his own form. Likewise, you should know that poetry in itself has no meaning at all—but anyone can discern his present state and own perfection from it. If you were to say that the meaning of poetry is what the poet wants it to be and that others can derive other meanings from it, that would be like someone saying, “The form of the mirror is the face of the polisher whose form first appears in it.”²



The title of this article, “Sleepers Awake!” is a reference to the famous Church cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach (d. 1750) first performed nearly three hundred years ago in Leipzig, where Bach rests. This highly spiritual cantata is inspired by the famous Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1–13, whose rich symbolism is related to the theme of awakening to the reality of the Presence of God.

Like the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, the Quranic account of the People of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*) mentioned in *Sūrat al-Kahf*, verses 9–26 (Q 18:9–26), also has multiple layers of meaning. At the most basic and outward level, the story tells of a group of pious youths who fled from their people on account of their polytheism and immersion in worldliness. They sought to devote themselves to the worship of God by seeking refuge in a cave far removed from society. When in the cave, God caused them to fall asleep for 309 years, but they looked as if they were awake. This is why Q 18:18 states, *And you would have thought them to be awake, although they were asleep.*

As would be expected, there are scores of non-Sufi and Sufi interpretations of the story of the People of the Cave.³ Sufi theorists of the Quran, such as Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), view the youths as an exalted class of believers who had been singled out with the gift of *maʿrifā*, or the recognition

2 ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt, *Nāma-hā*, ed. ‘Alī Naqī Munzawī and ‘Afif ‘Usayrān, 3 vols. (Tehran: Asāṭir, 1998), 1:260.

3 See the comments upon Q 18:9–26 in Seyyed Hossein Nasr *et al.* (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 731–738.

of God.⁴ In his major Persian Quran commentary, Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī (d. ca. 520/1126) gives us a window into God's special solicitude for them. Commenting upon Q 18:14, *And We placed a tie on their hearts when they stood up and said, "Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth,"* Maybudī says the following:

We bound them with the tie of sinlessness, kept them on the carpet of recognition, and firmed them up with the cord of love. We lit the candle of kind favor for them in the streambed of solicitude. We taught them the courtesy of companionship in the grammar school of the Beginningless and they set forth in holiness itself, busying themselves in the cave with the mystery of the Haqiqah.⁵

Among Sufi poets, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) has a great deal to say about the People of the Cave; and this is but one aspect of his wider engagement with the Quran.⁶ Contemporary Quranic studies, much to its peril, would seldom regard someone like Rūmī as a major Quranic theorist. Yet this is precisely how the pre-modern Sufi tradition in particularly the Persianate world regarded him, which explains why the *Mathnawī* is known as "The Quran in Persian" (*Qurʾān dar zabān-i Pahlawī*). As a theorist of the Quran, Rūmī "sees" the story of the People of the Cave in very original ways, offering us a penetrating exposition of the reality of sleep and awakening on the one hand, and the nature of the heart on the other.

Mawlāna tells us that the 309 years of sleep experienced by the People of the Cave was on account of their having been drunk on the wine of divine

4 See the discussion in Badiozzaman Forouzanfar and Sayyid Ja'far Shahīdī, *Sharḥ-i Mathnawī-yi sharīf*, 8 vols. (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i 'Ilmī wa-Farhangī, 1967–2000), 1:181–182. For *ma'rifa* as recognition, see William C. Chittick and Mohammed Rustom, "Recognition (*ma'rifa*)," in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe *et al.*, 2025: <https://www.sae.ac.uk/Islam/Recognition> (last accessed: August 2, 2025) and Rustom, "Recognizing Recognition: *Ma'rifa* in Sufi Thought," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 37.1 (2026): 31–53.

5 Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, *The Unveiling of the Mysteries and the Provision of the Pious*, partial trans. William C. Chittick (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), 297. See also pp. 299–300.

6 For Rūmī's engagement with the Quran, some helpful places to start are Hādī Ḥā'irī, *Nukhbat al-'irfān* (Tehran: Ḥāqīqat, 2004), Bahā' al-Dīn Khurramshāhī and Siyāmak Mukhtārī, *Qurʾān wa-Mathnawī* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qaṭra, 2022), and Amer Latif, "Qur'anic Narrative and Sufi Hermeneutics: Rumi's Interpretation of Pharaoh's Character," (PhD Diss., Stony Brook University, 2009). Particularly apt here is the observation made by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 125: "He must in fact be ranked among the foremost of Quranic commentators (*mufasssīrīn*)."

love.⁷ These youths are therefore special intimates of God constantly in a state of spiritual inebriation. But their state of intoxication should not lead one to think that they are somehow unaware of their surroundings. As Rūmī explains, there is a world of difference between the “sleep” experienced by the People of the Cave and the sleep of ordinary individuals. The sleep of the People of the Cave is pure wakefulness (*bīdārī*); that is, the wakefulness of the heart, which cannot be explained in words, however exalted their form:

وصف بیداری دل ای معنوی
در نگنجد در هزاران مثنوی

O seeker of meaning! The description of heart-wakefulness
cannot be contained in thousands of couplets!⁸

This form of wakefulness is fundamentally characterized by divine knowledge.⁹ Another way to understand wakefulness, specifically in the context of sleep, is to look to the Friends of God (*awliyā*). Their reality can be gleaned by us from our normal state of sleep—for when we sleep, we are unaware of the world around us and move about with no conscious volition of our own.¹⁰ This is precisely how the Quran describes the People of the Cave—God *turned them to the right and to the left* (Q 18:18).¹¹ This leads Mawlānā to make the natural connection: the People of the Cave are Friends of God:

اولیا اصحاب کھف اند ای عنود
در قیام و در تقلب هم رقود

7 See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 309.

8 Rūmī, *Mathnawī-yi maʿnawī*, ed. and trans. R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawī of Jalāl'uddīn Rūmī*, 8 vols. (London: Luzac, 1925–1940), 3:1228 (book 3, line 1228). All translations from Rūmī's writings are my own.

9 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 2:39.

10 See Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:3186 and 6:214–221.

11 The verse goes on to reveal that there was a dog who had accompanied the People of the Cave. For the positive and negative image of dogs in Rūmī's poetry, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāl'oddīn Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), index s.v., “Dog.” The dog's name in Sufi literature is “Qitmir,” and is a symbol of purity. See Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 195–196. For the general image of dogs in Sufism, one may profitably consult Javad Nurbakhsh, *Dogs from a Sufi Point of View* (London: Khanaqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 1989).

می کشدشان بی تکلف در فعال
 بی خبر ذات الیمین ذات الشمال
 چیست آن ذات الیمین فعل حسن
 چیست آن ذات الشمال اشغال تن

O obstinate one! The Friends are the People of the Cave—
 in standing and turning, *They are asleep*.¹²

Without taking it upon themselves to act, He pulls them
 to the right [and] to the left,¹³ with no awareness on their part.

What is to the right? Beautiful acts.

What is to the left? Bodily occupations.¹⁴

The Friends of God see this world as a state of sleep, for “they have gone to nonexistence, which has no door.”¹⁵ The reality of the world, all of its trappings, and our constant hankering over it are all seen as meaningless when death comes knocking at our door. This is one of the meanings of the famous Prophetic saying, “People are asleep; when they die, they awaken.”¹⁶ In his *Fīhi mā fīhi*, Rūmī likens worldly desire to a dream, the futility of which becomes clear upon awakening from that dream:

To want worldly things is like someone who wants to eat something in a dream, which is then given to him. In the end, when he wakes up, he does not at all benefit from what he ate in the dream.¹⁷

As Friends of God, the wakeful slumber of the People of the Cave entails that they are asleep not only to the world per se, but to our usual, ratiocinative ways of knowing which always implicate the thinking subject into a form of duality that entails the antipode of spiritual wakefulness, and is in fact more akin to

12 Q 18:18.

13 Q 18:18.

14 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:3187–3189.

15 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:3554.

16 For more on this tradition, see the discussion in Rustom, “Psychology, Eschatology, and Imagination in Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī’s Commentary on the *Ḥadīth* of Awakening,” *Islam & Science* 5.1 (2007): 9–22. See also Forouzanfar (ed.), *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānīshgāh-i Tīhrān, 1955), 81, for another Hadith that equates the world to a sleeper’s dream.

17 Rūmī, *Fīhi mā fīhi*, ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1969), 284.

sleep.¹⁸ It will be noted that the Quran says that the People of the Cave looked like they were awake, although they were actually asleep. This gives Mawlānā the perfect occasion to explain the gaping divide between the “wakefulness” of the Friends of God and the wakefulness of the rest of us:

ای بسا بیدار چشم خفته دل
خود چه بیند دید اهل آب و گل

O, many are those whose eyes are awake, but whose hearts are asleep.
But what can the eyes of the people of water and clay see?¹⁹

Even when the eyes of the Friend of God shut for sleep, his wakeful heart can still enliven and awaken those who are in spiritual slumber. The model for this kind of wakefulness is of course the Prophet Muhammad, who famously said, “My eyes sleep, but my heart is awake.”²⁰ In the following verses, Rūmī describes the contagious nature of the wakeful heart and also offers some advice:

آنک دل بیدار دارد چشم سر
گر بخسپد بر گشاید صد بصر
گر تو اهل دل نه بیدار باش
طالب دل باش و در پیکار باش

Even when his eyes are closed, the one whose
heart is awake opens up a hundred eyes.
If you are not a person of the heart, wake up!
Be a heart-seeker—go to battle!²¹

In his *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, Mawlānā clarifies what kind of “battle” he has in mind. It is nothing less than waging war against one’s ego:

بیدار شو بیدار شو هین رفت شب بیدار شو
بیزار شو بیزار شو وز خویش هم بیزار شو

18 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 6:4463–4464.

19 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:1222.

20 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, # 1155, in vol. 2 of *Jam‘ jawāmi‘ al-aḥādīth wa-l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa-l-sunan wa-l-masānīd* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Jam‘īyyat al-Maknaz al-Islāmī, 2000).

21 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 3:1223–1224.

Awake, awake! Beware, night has passed, so awake!
 Forsake, forsake! Even yourself, forsake!²²

In his most complete exposition of the reality of the People of the Cave, namely the recognizers, Rūmī explains how physical sleep is akin to death. "Sleep is the brother of death" is the Prophetic saying that informs Mawlānā's commentary here,²³ as are Q 6:60 and Q 39:42, which speak of sleep as a kind of partial death. Our poet begins by noting that every night God releases people from their bodies and their worldly concerns. In their state of sleep, they are relatively free of care. Likewise, the recognizer, who is asleep to the world, is free of care. Her consciousness is pure not only of worldly occupations, but of the sensory, psychic, and imaginal impressions that cloud a regular person's perception of reality on both sides of sleep. The recognizer is moved by God, like a moving pen in the hands of a writer:

می رهند ارواح هر شب زین ققص
 فارغان از حکم و گفتار و قصص
 شب ز زندان بی خبر زندانیان
 شب ز دولت بی خبر سلطانیان
 نی غم و اندیشه سود و زیان
 نی خیال این فلان و آن فلان
 حال عارف این بود بی خواب هم
 گفت ایزد هم رقود زین مرم
 خفته از احوال دنیا روز و شب
 چون قلم در پنجه تقلیب رب
 آنک او پنجه نبیند در رقم
 فعل پندارد بجنبش از قلم
 شمه زین حال عارف و نمود
 خلق را هم خواب حسی در ربود
 رفته در صحرای بی چون جانسان
 روحشان آسوده و ابدانسان

22 Rūmī, *Dīwān-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*, ed. Badiozzaman Forouzanfar, 10 vols. (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1956–1968), v. 22, 571.

23 See Forouzanfar (ed.), *Aḥādīth-i Mathnawī*, 5. See also Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:400.

Every night, spirits are set free from this cage,
 freed from judgement, speech, and banter.
 At night, prisoners are unaware of their prison
 and sultans are unaware of their property,
 with no grief and worry over profit or loss,
 and no thought of this person or that person.
 The recognizer's state is like this, but without sleep.
 God says, *They are asleep*²⁴ but do not scorn them!
 Night and day they are asleep to the affairs of this world,
 for the pen moves by the hands of their Lord.
 One who does not see his hand when writing
 perceives its action when gliding with the pen.
 God gives people a whiff of the recognizer's state
 when they are snatched away by the sleep of the senses.
 Their spirits depart to the desert of the Howless,
 and their spirits and bodies are at ease.²⁵

Let us return to the part of Q 18:18 that speaks of the People of the Cave as appearing to be awake while they are asleep. As Mawlānā states, we encounter the People of the Cave all the time—they seem awake like the rest of us, participating in the world the way we do. In reality, however, they are asleep to our ordinary experience of the world and even to the order of time and change itself. They are perpetually awake in the blissful remembrance (*dhikr*) of God and are thus with Him,²⁶ even though they seem to be with us. We, of course, do not see them for who they are because we only see the surface of things, and thus fail to discern what is unfolding before our very eyes:

ای بسا اصحاب کھف اندر جهان
 پہلوی تو پیش تو هست این زمان
 غار با او یار با او در سرود
 مہر بر چشمست و بر گوشت چہ سود

24 Q 18:18.

25 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:389–396.

26 For a penetrating exposition of the joy-inducing nature of *dhikr*, see Atif Khalil, “The Tranquility of Remembrance,” in *I of the Heart: Texts and Studies in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Muhammad U. Faruque, Atif Khalil, and Mohammed Rustom (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 183–198.

In this world there are many People of the Cave,
 right now, asleep next to you and in front of you.
 The Cave is with them, and the Friend is with them, speaking melodiously.
 But of what use is it to you, since your eyes and ears are sealed?²⁷

The connection announced here between the Cave and the Friend is essential to paint a complete picture of Rūmī's philosophy of awakening. He equates love with the Cave (*ghār*), which is where the Friend dwells.²⁸ And since love and God are not distinct for Mawlānā,²⁹ God is not only in the Cave, but is the Cave itself:

یار مرا غار مرا عشق جگر خوار مرا
 یار تویی غار تویی خواجه نگهدار مرا

I have a Friend, I have a Cave—I have a grieving love.
 That Friend is You, that Cave is You—O Master, protect me!³⁰

Common to traditional symbolism is the intimate relationship between the cave and the heart.³¹ Both are interior spaces that contain mysteries and divine realities, and both represent a center—the heart is situated at the center of a human being, and the cave is in the “center” of a mountain. Yet Rūmī also explicitly identifies the heart, which is the center of human consciousness and awareness, with God.³² He thus wants to say that the Cave is the Heart. The way to wakefulness is therefore clear, at least as far as Ḥaḍrat-i Mawlānā is concerned. One must enter the Cave, which means one must awaken to one's true

27 Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, 1:405–406. See also the explanation in Kenan Rifai, *Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi*, trans. Victoria Holbrook (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 56.

28 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Love*, 217.

29 See Rustom, “The Ocean of Nonexistence,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 4 (2013): 188–199.

30 Rūmī, *Dīwān*, 477.

31 René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, ed. Michel Vâlsan and Martin Lings; trans. Alvin Moore Jr. (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995), 145–148.

32 See Gholamreza Aavani, *Rumi: A Philosophical Study* (Chicago: Kazi, 2016) and Rustom, “Rumi's Metaphysics of the Heart,” *Mawlana Rumi Review* 1 (2010): 69–79. For the heart in the Sufi tradition, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oludamini Ogunnaiké, “The Heart (*qalb*),” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al., 2024: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/Heart> (last accessed: August 2, 2025).

self by turning inward, into one's heart and spiritual Center. It is there that God resides, in the interior, spaceless space that is the heart.

The search for the heart is tantamount to the search for God, whose aid is always present. Rūmī likens God to a physician who is ever-ready to heal us and bring us to wholeness. All we need to do is acknowledge our ailment, which is the lack of love:

آمد ندای آسمان آمد طیب عاشقان
خواهی که آید پیش تو بیمار شو بیمار شو

The call of Heaven has come; the Physician of the lovers has come.
Do you want the Physician to visit you? Become ill, become ill!³³

The single most memorable place in Rūmī's writings where he links the Heart, the Cave, and the need for one to withdraw into them to be with God occurs in the following haunting lines from the *Dīwān*, with which this article shall close. Mawlānā refers to the "friend of the cave" (*yār-i ghār*), a symbol derived from Q 9:40 in relation to the Prophet's Companion Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), who entered the Cave of Thawr with him in order to escape the enemies hot in their pursuit during the time of the Prophet's Hijra.³⁴ Like Abū Bakr, we too should flee from our enemies—the material world and our own egos—and enter into the *khabwa* of the cave of our hearts in order to be with our Friend:

این سینه را چون غار دان خلوتگه آن یار دان
گریار غاری هین بیا در غار شو در غار شو

Consider this breast as a Cave—the place of retreat for that Friend.
If you are the friend of the Cave, hurry and come! Enter the Cave, enter the Cave.³⁵

33 Rumī, *Dīwān*, 22,576.

34 See the commentary upon Q 18:16 in *Study Quran*, 734.

35 Rumī, *Dīwān*, 22,577–22,578.

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Book Reviews



al-Sharīf al-Raḍī. *Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ‘Alī*. Parallel Arabic-English Text. Edited and translated by Tahera Qutbuddin. Islamic Translation Series. Leiden: Brill, 2024. xiii + 1010 pp. Glossary, appendix, bibliography, indexes. E-Book (PDF). ISBN 978-90-04-68260-3. Open Access. Hardback. ISBN 978-90-04-68259-7. \$300.00.

Few works in Arabic literature have exerted simultaneous command of the heart, intellect, and tongue as powerfully as *Nahj al-balāgha*. Celebrated not only for its rhetorical brilliance but also for its enduring spiritual and moral insight, after the Quran it stands as one of the most profound treasuries of guidance in the Islamic tradition. The teachings it preserves are attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, the fourth Caliph in Sunni Islam, and regarded by many, especially within the Shi‘i tradition, as the Prophet’s spiritual heir. Imam ‘Alī’s sayings offer a compelling vision of doctrine, philosophy, ethics, counsel, and practical wisdom. His sermons, letters, and aphorisms were later selected and compiled in the fourth/tenth century by the distinguished scholar al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015) whose editorial hand shaped the work’s lasting impact and literary form. This award-winning volume was edited and translated by Tahera Qutbuddin, who is the Abdulaziz Saud Albabtain Laudian Professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford. It offers not only a critical edition and an elegant English rendering, but also a significant scholarly introduction that contextualizes the text’s historical, theological, and literary importance. The accompanying Arabic text (the parallel Arabic-English text format is standard in Brill’s Islamic Translation Series) is particularly useful to seasoned Arabists, as it gives them a clear window into the linguistic power and energy of the original language.

The structure of the volume mirrors the traditional tripartite division established by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī: orations (*khuṭab*), letters (*rasā’il*), and sayings (*ḥikam*). ‘Alī’s orations, articulated in rhythmic prose (*saja’*), are filled with powerful imagery and cover a vast range of themes from divine unity and hu-

man mortality to political counsel and spiritual exhortation. The letters, addressed to governors, companions, and adversaries, reveal ‘Alī’s administrative prowess and ethical integrity. The sayings offer distilled wisdom in the form of maxims and aphorisms, many of which have come to form the fabric of Islamic ethical thought.

This edition and translation is accompanied by extensive appendices and back matter, which serve as a vital resource for students and researchers alike. The “Glossary of Names, Places, and Terms” provides historical and biographical context for figures mentioned in the text, while the “Appendix of Sources” traces the provenance of individual sermons, letters, and sayings, enabling critical engagement with the textual tradition. The work also includes a comprehensive bibliography and multiple indexes that have been meticulously crafted to facilitate cross-referencing and thematic exploration: an “Index of Names and Places;” “Index of Terms;” and an “Index of Quran, Hadith, Poetry, and Proverbs.” The inclusion of an Arabic “Index of Religious and Moral Concepts” (فهرس المفاهيم الدينية والأخلاقية) underscores the work’s utility for Arabic-speaking audiences and scholars of Islamic ethics. These supporting materials elevate the volume from a literary translation to a full-fledged academic edition that invites both close textual study and broader theological reflection.

Qutbuddin’s introduction is itself a masterwork. She presents a detailed study of ‘Alī’s life, his political struggles, and his multifaceted legacy across the Sunni, Shi‘i, and Sufi traditions. She traces the oratorical culture of early Islam and explores the question of authenticity through orality theory and textual criticism, drawing on her earlier research in *Arabic Oration*. The manuscript base for her Arabic edition includes some of the earliest surviving codices, several of which were compared against versions that go back to al-Raḍī himself.

This volume is without doubt the definitive edition of the *Nahj al-balāgha*. A work of this caliber requires not only complete command of the Arabic language, but also deep proficiency in the full spectrum of the classical literary sciences. These include syntax (*‘ilm al-naḥw*), morphology (*‘ilm al-ṣarf*), philology (*fiqh al-lughā*), and etymology (*‘ilm al-ishtiḳāq*), all of which underpin the semantic precision of Arabic expression. Equally essential are the disciplines that constitute rhetoric (*‘ilm al-balāgha*): contextual semantics and sentence construction (*‘ilm al-ma‘ānī*), figurative language and clarity (*‘ilm al-bayān*), and ornamentation and linguistic devices (*‘ilm al-badī‘*). Mastery of prosody (*‘ilm al-‘arūḍ*) and rhyme (*‘ilm al-qāfiya*) further allows one to appreciate the rhythmic force and sonic architecture of ‘Alī’s oratory. Furthermore, disciplines related to the Quran, such as Quranic exegesis (*‘ulūm al-tafsīr*), theology (*‘ilm al-kalām*), ethics (*akhlāq*), and spirituality (*taṣawwuf*), are crucial for unpacking the layered meanings, scriptural allusions, and resonances that character-

ize this text. For the most part, Qutbuddin's translation is both faithful and fluid: the English translation often matches the intensity of the Arabic.

For the remainder of this review, I would like to focus on the translations of two passages that address an important theme in *Nahj al-balāgha*, namely the distinctive spiritual and ethical qualities of the faithful believer (*mu'min*).

(1) 3:319 (p. 783) outlines the characteristics of the believer:

المؤمن بشره في وجهه وحزنه في قلبه أوسع شيء صدرأ وأذل شيء نفساً

Qutbuddin renders this as: "A believer shows his joy in his face and hides his sorrow in his heart. His generosity is vast, his humility is deep." While elegant, this translation introduces the verbs "shows" and "hides," which are not present in the Arabic. The original phrasing, *bishru-hu fi wajhihi wa-ḥuznuhu fi qalbihi*, offers no verbal markers, thus emphasizing the *state* of the believer rather than implying any deliberate display or concealment. This subtlety is important: it suggests that the believer's joyous countenance and inward sorrow are intrinsic aspects of his being and not performative displays.

The following two descriptions are expressed in the superlative: *awsa'u shay'in ṣadr^{an}* (the broadest in breast) and *adhallu shay'in naḥs^{an}* (the humblest of self). Here, the term *ṣadr*, unfortunately flattened into "generosity" in the translation, warrants closer attention. In Arabic, *ṣadr* literally means "chest" or "bosom," but it signifies far more: an expansive inner capacity, a heart open to divine light, tolerance, and spiritual receptivity. The Quran refers to this in its address to the Prophet: "Did We not expand your breast for you?" (*a-lam nashraḥ laka ṣadrak*, Q 94:1), alluding to the Prophet's capacity to bear the gravity of revelation. In the Sufi tradition, the *ṣadr* is considered the first and outermost station of the heart—preceding the *qalb* (heart), *fu'ād* (inner heart) and *lubb* (kernel), and thus represents the entry point for divine illumination.

The phrase *awsa'u shay'in ṣadr^{an}* implies a magnanimity that surpasses all else, a vastness of spirit that can encompass creation and reflect divine attributes. When paired with "the humblest of self," this forms a classical *balāgha* paradox: the more capacious and spiritually radiant the inner being, the humbler and more effaced the self. In this rhetorical symmetry, magnanimity and humility are not opposites but correlates; the greater the expansiveness of the breast/heart, the greater the dissolution of one's ego and selfhood before the divine presence.

Finally, the contrast between joy on the face and sorrow in the heart gestures toward the inner dialectic of *rajā'* (hope) and *khawf* (fear), central to spiritual psychology. The believer carries both—offering the world the light of joy,

while bearing in his heart the burden of awe, compassion, and longing. Such layers of meaning, deeply embedded in the Arabic phrasing and cosmology, call for a translation that can reflect not only the semantic range, but the spiritual architecture of the original.

(2) 1.217 (p. 500) describes the stages of the believer's journey back to God:

قد أحيا عقله وأمات نفسه حتى دقّ جليله ولطف غليظه وبرق له لامع كثير
البرق فأبان له الطريق وسلك به السبيل

Qutbuddin translates this phrase as: “This man resuscitated his intellect and killed his sentient soul, until his body became emaciated and his frame became slight. Lightning shone in a brilliant flash that illuminated the road for him and showed the way.” In this difficult and densely symbolic passage, however, “resuscitated” is not the most felicitous choice. In English usage, “resuscitate” typically denotes restoring life after clinical or physical death, a connotation that risks suggesting the *‘aql* (intellect) was lifeless or inert. This does not reflect the sense of *ahyā*, which here denotes enlivening, activating, or bringing the intellect to full realization. The term participates in the broader spiritual vocabulary of *ihyā*, signaling awakening rather than revival from extinction.

Similarly, the *nafs* in this context is not best rendered as the “sentient soul,” but rather what Q 12:53 refers to as the lower self that commands to ugliness (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi-l-sū*). Accordingly, “killing the ego” better captures the intended meaning, pointing to the disciplined spiritual struggle (*riyāḍa*) by which the ego is subdued under the guidance of the illumined intellect. The paired expressions *daqqa jaliluhu* and *laṭufa ghalizuhu* further complicate a purely physical reading. While these phrases may allude to bodily refinement, their primary force lies in ethical and spiritual transformation: what was once coarse, weighty, or harsh, whether in form or character, has become subtle, gentle, and refined. This recalls the juxtaposition in Q 3:159 between *ghilẓat al-qalb*, or harshness of heart, and the prophetic virtue of *luyūnat al-qalb*, or gentleness of heart.

The subsequent imagery—“a brilliant flash, with frequent lightning, shone for him”—functions as a classic symbol of sudden unveiling (*kashf*) and repeated moments of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*). The light does not merely illuminate the path abstractly, it actively discloses the way and carries the seeker forward upon it. In this respect, the passage stands as one of the most eloquent articulations of mystical epistemology and spiritual wayfaring in the Sufi tradi-

tion: the activation of the intellectual faculty (*'aql*), the subjugation of the ego (*nafs*), the refinement of character, the reception of divine flashes of insight, and the attendant luminous journey back to God.

Nevertheless, the translation of the passage in question does admirably succeed in capturing the arc of transformation that lies at the heart of 'Alī's vision, as well as the spirit and momentum of his stunning Arabic style.

Nahj al-balāgha has long occupied a special place in my intellectual and spiritual formation. Like the translator, I was introduced to its luminous teachings at an early age, when I could barely fathom the depth of its philosophical insights and moral gravity. Yet its words left an indelible mark on my being, imperceptibly shaping my ethical compass and spiritual sensibility. Only later did I come to recognize the extent to which its wisdom helped chart the course of my path as a practitioner and scholar. In reading Qutbuddin's masterful translation, I felt once again the stirrings of that early encounter, now deepened, clarified, and magnified through her faithful and elegant rendering. Through this marvelous edition and translation, the wisdom and light of Imam 'Alī's words are now accessible to a new generation of students and scholars; and for this, we are all deeply indebted to Tahera Qutbuddin.

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Sherman A. Jackson. *The Islamic Secular*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. xiii + 527 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. Hardback. ISBN 978-0-19-766178-9. \$52.00.

Is it possible to appropriate a concept that is already deeply embedded in particular discourses and imbue it with a different meaning altogether? Or is it best not to bother with such efforts, since the confusion that results in the act of re-appropriation may cause further misunderstandings? These are the questions underlying Sherman Jackson's provocative monograph, and he answers the first question in the affirmative by arguing that the "secular" and the "Islamic" are not only reconcilable but that it is imperative for Muslims to understand how bringing these two concepts together enables an understanding of many quotidian aspects of life as part of their *dīn* broadly understood. Whereas dominant Western scholarship posits the secular as a realm in which the religious is absent or marginalized and Orientalist scholarship reduces Islam to the *sharī'a*, Jackson pursues his act of appropriation by arguing that the non-*sharī'*, secular realm already exists within Islam. Jackson argues that an acceptance of the role of the "secular" in Islamic civilization would lead Muslims to realize that Islam cannot be reduced to the *sharī'a* and that the "Islamic Secular" is actually part and parcel of their *dīn*.

Dominant Orientalist and Islamist conceptions of Islam regard the *sharī'a* as a pre-given, complete and over-determined collection of duties and dictates rather than merely a legal system (p. 6). This has the unfortunate effect of rendering the *sharī'a* as co-terminus with Islam, such that there can be no space outside of Islam that is not governed by the *sharī'a*. In contradistinction, Jackson argues that actions can be Islamic without necessarily being under the purview of the *sharī'a*, for *sharī'a* does not exhaust all that can be called Islamic (p. 10). According to Jackson, the *sharī'a* is a bounded or limited realm, beyond which exists a "differentiated realm" that remains within the broader purview of Islam. It is this "differentiated realm" beyond the *sharī'a* but within Islam that Professor Jackson refers to as the "Islamic Secular."

It would be a mistake to assume that the acceptance of the "Islamic Secular" also necessitates a secularization of Muslim societies or that the "Islamic Secular" adopts the ideology of secularism (p. 248). For Jackson, the "Islamic Secular" does not refer to a Western approach to secularization nor to an acceptance of the ideology of secularism overlaid onto Islam. Instead, he argues that entirely different meanings can be given to the "secular" within the circle of Islam (p. 4). For instance, he argues that in order to deal with the contingencies of life, life itself demands more than reliance on revelation and sacred law. We need also "reason, imagination, taste, talent, fantasia, experience, phronesis, etc." (p. 372), all of which may fall outside the purview of juristic reasoning but

which are part of the religious experience of human beings. To render them outside of religion and to classify these elements as “secular” is to be trapped by a very narrow and specific conception of religion and sacred law. So long as these non-*sharī* elements are filled with an awareness of the divine presence, God consciousness (*taqwā*), and the attempt to gain proximity to God, they fall under the purview of the secular component within Islam. In a particularly moving passage, Jackson writes:

Obedience is the response to God’s concrete dictates in the form of *sharīah*; obeisance is a function of the non-*sharī* dictates of *taqwā*, informed by a conscious awareness of the divine presence and gaze. Ultimately, obeisance underscores the fact that neither divine guidance nor the full worship of God is exhausted by what God communicates concretely in the form of revelation.... [A]s a differentiated “secular” domain or obsession, the Islamic Secular does *not* stand in contradiction to “religion” (p. 53, emphasis in original).

The problem arises, though, of how to convince Muslims and non-Muslims that “Islam” and the “secular” not only do not contradict each other but actually already co-exist. This is the deeper task that Jackson takes on in the book, and it is not an easy one, given firstly how strong the commitment is among some Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to an understanding of the “secular” as opposing religion and, secondly, how Islam is regarded as co-terminus with the *sharīa*. Indeed, it appears that Professor Jackson is even more concerned to convince Muslims than non-Muslims of the acceptance of the “Islamic Secular” (see, e.g., p. 38), and there is at times a self-avowedly confessional and normative tone to the book.

The argument develops in two parts. Part I (chs. 1–3) provides the theoretical underpinnings of the “Islamic Secular” whereas Part II (chs. 4–6) addresses the practical relation of the “Islamic Secular” to the modern nation-state. Chapter 1 addresses the position advanced by the late Shahab Ahmed that Muslims need to impose limits on the jurisdiction of the *fuqahā’* or jurists to allow Islam as a civilization to fully flourish. Jackson counters that the limit on juristic authority is already imposed from within by the jurists themselves, and so there is no need to look outside in order to restrict the *sharī* aspects of Islam. Therefore, Islam as civilization can flourish not in spite of the *fuqahā’* but because jurists themselves acknowledge and accept the limitations of juristic reasoning. This line of inquiry is taken further in chapter 2, where Jackson develops his argument that classical Muslim jurists, such as Fakr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Qarāfī among others, had already imposed “clear and distinct limits”

to the *aḥkām sharʿiyya* (juristic rulings). “In other words,” it was understood that there are “*aḥkām*... other than the *aḥkām sharʿiyya*... that are relevant to the instantiation of Islam as a lived reality” (p. 104). Chapter 3 seeks to further clarify the concept of the “Islamic Secular” by investigating to what extent political authority and governance (*siyāsa*) represented a differentiated realm from *sharʿa* in classical Islamic thought, since the realm of *siyāsa* seems to rely upon non-*sharʿi* Islamic secular authority.

Part II shifts to Islam’s relationship to the modern state. Jackson investigates this relationship by delving into the work of three authors. Chapter 4 tackles Wael Hallaq’s thesis to the effect that the modern state and the Islamic state are inherently contradictory because each makes equally totalizing claims of sovereignty and legitimation and each seeks a monopoly over various dimensions of quotidian life. Jackson argues that Muslims may, as Hallaq avers, wish to reject the modern state for many reasons, but to assume that its structure is inherently contradictory to Islam-cum-*sharʿa* is to fail to see how the “Islamic Secular” provides the space where the non-*sharʿi* aspects of Islam may be reconciled with the demands of the modern state.

Chapter 5 shifts to the work of Abdullahi An-Na’im and his claim that the only space for Muslims to be fully Muslim is a secular state that separates religion from politics insofar as a secular state allows the full development of one’s belief without external constraint. Jackson responds by arguing that An-Na’im simply replicates Western conceptions of an individualist, secular ethos, one which does not appreciate the possibility of a non-*sharʿi* space within Islam. Poignantly, he writes that because An-Na’im is unable to recognize the differentiated realm of the “Islamic Secular,” in An-Na’im’s work “‘religion’ and the authority of the *fuqahāʾ* who represent it, balloons to omnivorous proportions that can then be domesticated only by overblown appeals to the ‘secular’” (p. 256). In other words, on An-Na’im’s view, a bloated conception of Islam-cum-*sharʿa* requires a bloated conception of secularism.

Whereas all the previous chapters dealt with Muslims in majority contexts, chapter 6 shifts to an examination of Andrew March’s focus on Islam and liberal citizenship and the predicament of Muslim minorities in liberal democracies, America in particular. March’s thesis, as Jackson presents it, is that Islam as a “juridical and ethical tradition” is compatible with liberal citizenship at the level of doctrine (p. 304) in that Islamic doctrine permits Muslims to entertain the following four possibilities:

- (1) to reside in non-Muslim polities
- (2) to be loyal to non-Muslim polities

- (3) to recognize moral pluralism and non-Muslims as moral equals
- (4) to have solidarity with non-Muslim fellow citizens.

Jackson largely accepts March's overall thesis, at least on a theoretical level. What Jackson adds, though, is that it is not sufficient to demonstrate such compatibility in terms of juristic reasoning alone. What is needed are the non-*sharʿ* elements *within* Islam that must also be recognized and dealt with. It is here that Jackson engages directly with the problems of race and racism, questions about the permissibility of polygyny, and the other challenges confronting Muslim minorities today.

Readers familiar with Jackson's earlier construction of the compound term "blackamerican" will recognize similar linguistic issues at play in the construction of the "Islamic Secular." The aim is not to simply juxtapose two distinct terms and demonstrate their commensurability. Instead, Jackson's intent is to construct an entirely new meaning by bringing together concepts that appear at first glance to be in tension with one another. Methodologically, this is not an etymological or genealogical endeavor. That is, the aim here is not to discern the roots of the concept and demonstrate how the linguistic bases of secularism and Islam are connected. Rather, it is a hermeneutic endeavor. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr pointed out in another context, the meaning of an element (in this case, the meaning of the "secular") is not solely given by its etymological or genealogical history. Instead, it is derived from the whole of which it is a part. For example, Nasr argues that while one can trace the roots of post-Enlightenment science back to classical Arab and Muslim science, post-Enlightenment science takes on significantly different meanings from Islamic conceptions of science because of the whole in which it is implicated. Thus, we are able to understand Jackson's argument that the "Islamic Secular" is radically different from Western conceptions of the secular because it is embedded in a different civilizational milieu.

This is a profoundly learned and superbly well referenced investigation on the possibility of a differentiated realm within Islam not governed by its religio-legalistic and political theory. But two critical points need to be addressed. Firstly, given that Jackson is intent on demonstrating the limits of juristic reasoning from within Islam, why does he not engage with Sufism and its broad cultural and civilizational appeal throughout the house of Islam, from past to present? This is to say that in Sufi culture one already finds a long-established critique of the reduction of Islam to its juristic dimension—a critique that has historically not only been advanced by those who in some way or another loosely came under the purview of Sufism's massive spiritual and aesthetic influence, but by many practicing Sufis who often also happened to be trained

jurists themselves. Indeed, had Jackson drawn upon the embarrassing riches of the Sufi tradition, he would have had a much easier time convincing his readers that there is more to Islam than just the *sharīʿa*.

Secondly, and almost as significantly, for a book that seeks to challenge the universalist claims of the modern, Western project of modernity and its differentiation of the secular from the religious, it is surprising that Jackson chose not to engage even in passing with the work of Jürgen Habermas, who is the most vocal proponent of the universalist ambitions of (Western) modernity and arguably the leading critic of the notion of alternative modernities.

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *A Sufi Commentary on the Tao Te Ching: The Way and Its Virtue*.

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There are several ways of “doing” comparative philosophy: one rather standard mode is to isolate a foundational concept or logical problem upon which two (or more) traditions are brought to bear. This dialogic pursuit rests upon a dynamic interplay of similarity and difference: on the one hand, the traditions, thinkers, or texts in question must sufficiently resonate with one another such that a shared theme or idea is discernible across their hermeneutic boundaries; on the other, these interlocutors must be meaningfully distinct so that a fertile, *cross-border* conversation can unfold. Comparativism brings the antithetical pulls of proximity and distance, affinity and alterity, into a delicate equipoise, and thus re-directs the work of philosophy towards robustly relational ends. Indeed, the thrill (and peril) of comparative philosophy is precisely that it de-reifies the firm frontier between self and other—glimpses of the other are seen in the self, even as the self is witnessed anew through the other.

This generative and generous register of philosophizing is the beating heart of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *A Sufi Commentary on the Tao Te Ching: The Way and Its Virtue*, which weaves the spiritual tapestries of Taoism and Islam into a richly textured dialogue. Nasr does this not by undertaking a systematic analysis of these two conceptual universes (the standard route of comparative philosophy noted above), but by reading the core text of Taoist ontology *through the lens* of Islamic metaphysics. With a supple translation of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, and a vibrant Sufi commentary on its verses, Nasr paints a colourful correspondence between Taoist and Islamic sensibilities—a correspondence of which this work is not merely an academic *exposition* but an immersive *enactment*. Indeed, in form and content, in style and substance, this work bodies forth the promissory plenitude of relationship: Nasr’s text *is* relationship “all the way down,” from its genesis (a collaborative English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* by Nasr and Toshihiko Izutsu) to its genre (a deft fusion of translation and exegesis), and from its methodology (a contemplative engagement with one tradition in the shimmering light of another) to its subject matter (the elemental kinship between two distinct cosmologies).

Reflecting this majestic relational reach, Nasr’s translation and commentary radiate a kaleidoscopic thematic breadth: they are as replete with ontological subtleties as they are infused with moral mandates; they are as oriented to the eternal as they are directed to the everyday. The words of this scriptural world are, moreover, as poetically profound as they are politically pertinent; as gently reflective as they are fiercely incisive. The reader is, with Nasr as her guide,

submersed in this resplendent holism of the *Tao Te Ching*—a text which, as Nasr affirms, “not only explains the philosophical and metaphysical principles of the realm of existence but also illuminates ethical and practical teachings on both individual and societal levels” (p. 16). On the “philosophical and metaphysical” front, a tantalizing paradox is reiterated throughout the text: the Tao, which is the “Absolute Truth Itself” (p. 14), is simultaneously inaccessible and omnipresent; it transcends the bounds of the finite world and yet it stably sustains that world at every moment. Indeed, the Tao is utterly “formless” and “unfathomable” (p. 54), but “It governs the principles of all things” (p. 71); the Tao “cannot be seen” or “heard” (p. 54), although “It goes around everywhere, never becoming exhausted” (p. 80). It is no surprise, then, that the *Tao Te Ching* opens by foregrounding the essential inability of language (and therefore, of its own discourse) to capture That of which it speaks: “The Name that can be named is not the eternal Name” (p. 27). The act of naming “folds” that which is named into the dualistic structures of language—structures that can never finally contain the “invisible depth” of the Tao (p. 27).

Nasr sees in this metaphysics a striking resemblance to the Islamic theological vision, wherein the divine reality is beyond all name, form, definition, and description and yet Its signs glimmer everywhere (Q 10:6, 41:53). The (seeming) conceptual puzzle of divine transcendence and divine immanence fascinated scores of Muslim philosophers across time and space, and it also catalyzed much of Islam’s finest mystical poetry. Indeed, Sufis have sung relentlessly of the intimate nearness of the divine beloved who nevertheless eludes their grasp—and so, in a delightfully creative paradox, they go on seeking the One who is always already present. In elaborating this enchanting inexhaustibility of the Absolute, Nasr cites the great Persian poet Sa’dī (d. ca. 690/1291) who addresses God thus: “O Thou who art beyond imagination, analogy, conjecture and fantasy and beyond everything said, we heard or read. The gathering has ended and life has come to an end, yet we still remain at the beginning of describing Thee” (p. 27). This is just one, eminently beautiful, instance of Nasr’s seamless sprinkling of Persian verse throughout his commentary: the reader is treated to steady snippets of Sufi poetic wisdom that echo and reprise key Taoist motifs. The effect of these literary interludes is nothing short of invitational; they call us to an exquisitely spacious interpretive horizon upon which the aesthetic splendours of one tradition can illustrate and illumine those of another.

This expansive hermeneutics is further embodied in Nasr’s discussions of the Taoist and Islamic notions of human perfection. The *Tao Te Ching* abounds with remarkable insights into the frailties, fixations, and follies that govern so much of human behaviour, and it insistently sketches a higher way of being. This way has several constituent principles, many of which subvert the reg-

nant ideals of our modern age—humility is the route to spiritual elevation; wisdom is not mere technical knowhow but something altogether deeper; the tranquillity of the soul outvalues the consumptive habits of the self; true glory is attained not through enshrining the ego but through surrendering it. The text explores these principles in distinctive applications—we are told what humility, wisdom, tranquillity, and self-surrender look like in everyday social interactions, in the domain of political governance, and even on the battlefield. Nasr skilfully draws these virtues (and more) into conversation with Islamic vocabularies of spiritual poverty, servanthood, selflessness, and serenity, and so, once again, the reader's interpretive lens is extended and enriched. Through Nasr's elegant relational prism, Islam and Taoism emerge as parallel pilgrims, treading jointly on the path towards goodness and beauty.

For its meticulous conceptual analyses and capacious spiritual insights, *A Sufi Commentary on the Tao Te Ching* will be of interest to all comparative philosophers and theologians seeking larger, fresher paradigms for their scholarly work. What Nasr offers us in the pages of this text are the luscious fruits of sustained and unhurried dialogic labour; a labour which bends irrepressibly towards ideas of the most perennial import. By rendering the fundamental text of Taoism into English prose, and by expounding its principal themes in Sufi metaphysical language, Nasr models for us an alternative practice of comparative philosophy which recuperates relationality, spirituality, and a wondrously creative vision of philosophy as a way of life. Above all, in an age dominated by violence, spectacle, and environmental catastrophe, Nasr's scintillating work calls us to *re-cognize* the sacred depths of the human and the divine, and everything that lies in between them.

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