

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE ISLAMIC MEONTOLOGICAL TRADITION:
LANGUAGE, ONTOLOGY, AND APOPHASIS IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

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For my teachers

از وجودی ترس که اکنون در ویی
آن خیالت لاشی و تو لاشیی

Be afraid of the existence,
By which you are surrounded now.
Phantasy of yours is nonexistent.
So are you.

—Rumi, *Mathnawī* VI

τὸ μὴ ὄν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό...ἔστιν ἀδιανόητόν τε καὶ ἄρρητον καὶ ἄφθεγκτον καὶ ἄλογον

What just simply is not...cannot be expressed in thought or language at all.

—Plato, *Sophist* 238c10

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INTRODUCTION

i.1. Major themes of Islamic meontology

i.2. Organization of the dissertation

i.3. The history of research

i.4. Methodology

The concept of nonbeing plays a crucial role in medieval Muslim thought and history.

Metaphysicians show interest in studying existing things. But when it comes to classical Muslim theologians, they are more interested in things that do not exist. This is especially the case before Avicenna who had a great influence on the penetration of discussions of *wujūd* (being) into post-classical *Kalām* writings. One can easily recognize the significance of nonbeing for them by maintaining a panoramic view of their works. For instance, 11th century theologian al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) centers his attention on the problem of the nonexistent even when dealing with the concept of *shay'* under the title *al-Qawl fī al-shay' wa ḥaqīqatihi* (On the Concept of *Shay'* and its True Meaning). After he treats the problem under three more titles, he allots only one-two pages to a discussion of existing beings (*mawjūdāt*). In other parts of his *al-Shāmil*, he continues exploration of the problem by associating it with other theological issues.¹ In fact, we witness the same phenomenon in Ismaili works. Meontology similarly has a key function in their elaborations of transcendent God. To such an extent, ontological categories are discussed and analyzed, not as an end itself, but as a means to better articulate the Ismaili-Neoplatonic

¹ 'Abd al-Mālik b. 'Abdullaāh al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī Ūṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. 'A. S. al-Nashshār (Alexandria : Munshu'at al-Ma'ārif, 1969), pp. 124-131;

disontological account of God. So, it would not be wrong to say that Islamic theology in the classical period is predominantly theology of nonbeing rather than theology of being.

As far as we have learned from sources available to us, early Muslim intellectuals were unfamiliar with the idea of *nihil*, let alone making philosophical speculations on it. There was no single word in use which would connote it. However, starting from the second half of the 8th century, a variety of coined words that would designate the idea began to circulate, specifically as an expression of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The word '*adam*', one of the best candidates for expressing *nihil*, ordinarily connotes non-possession of property or wealth, and is derived from the social categories of common experience. For instance, in implying how his tribe conquered his foes and took the booty of battle, the 6th century warrior-poet Ṭarafa (d. 569) attests to the conventional meaning of the term:

Tadhkurūna idh nuqātilukum
Lā yaḍurru mu'diman 'adamuhu

Do you remember
The time when we fought you?
Poverty would harm
None of us who is poor.

At times, possibly after Muslims were in close contact with other cultures and their philosophical speculations, '*adam*' started circulating among writers as an equivalent of nonbeing.² Thus, this crucial term, a term never attested in the Qur'an and by which the Arabs designated non-possession of property in a socio-economic context, had meant, in its new philosophical-

² Van Den Bergh argues that it is possibly in the process of the translation of Aristotle's works into Arabic that it began to come into use as a synonym for of the Greek στερησις (*privatio*). See "'Adam,'" *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 06 March 2024 http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0296

theological setting, lack or absence of being or existence. In other words, the term has begun “from a simpler, concrete usage with a human reference point.”³

i.1. Major themes of Islamic meontology

In the Islamic Middle Ages, the concept of nonbeing has been discussed in several settings, though they are, in one way or another, related to each other. I will briefly sketch out four major themes below.

a) The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*

First, the concept is associated with the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. It has been expressed through a multitude of words and phrases that somehow reflect the choices of differing interpretative communities and strategies. Numerous scholars drew attention to the crucial role John Philoponus (d. 570) (known to Arabs as Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī) occupied in the formation of the Islamic doctrine of creation from nothing. Medieval Muslim bibliographers bear testimony to the circulation of his two polemical works among Muslim thinkers, *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum* and *contra Aristotelem*.⁴ Unfortunately, the translations are no longer extant. However, it is through the studies of Davidson and Rashed that we have learned that since the mid-9th century, Philoponus’ works, or at least some fragments of them, were available to Medieval

³ For a socio-cultural and anthropological analysis of the origins of the Ionian conceptual structure, see, e.g., Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 193

⁴ See Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Gustav Flügel (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1871-1872), Vol. 1, 254; al-Qifṭī, *Tārīkh al-Ḥukamā’*, ed. Julius Lippert (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), pp. 354-357; Ibn Abī ‘Uṣaybi‘a, *Kitāb ‘Uyūn al-anbā’ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā’*, ed. August Müller (Königsberg: Selbstverlag, 1884), p. 154-155).

Arabic writers such as al-Kindi (d. 873) and his circle of scholars and translators and al-Nawbakhtī (fl. ca. 900). We can also see traces of his ideas in circulation in several other ways—to mention some, (1) the Christian Nestorian Ibn Ṣuwar’s (d. 1017) testimony in his brief treatise, which argues for the superiority of Philoponus’ argument on the createdness of the universe (*ḥadath al-‘alam*) over that of the *Mutakallimūn*, (2) al-Fārābī’s (d. 950) polemics against him in favor of the eternity of the world in a recently discovered manuscript published by Muhsin Mahdi as well as in his lost treatise *On Changeable Beings (fī l-mawjūdāt al-mutaghayyirah)* often cited in later works, (3) Kraemer’s important discovery of a passage in a recension of Abu Sulaymān al-Sijistānī’s (985) *Siwān al-Ḥikma*, which is thought to have belonged to Philoponus’ lost refutation of Aristotle and which runs parallel with Simplicius’ Commentary on *De caelo*, (4) the latest findings of the Arabic manuscripts by Beeston, Pines, and Hasnawi, which are considered either a small section of Philoponus’ two monumental works or of a separate but parallel study by him, and finally, (5) Stern’s invaluable finding on Pseudo-Ammonius which introduces the key concepts designating *creatio ex nihilo*.⁵

⁵ See Ahmad Hasnawi, ‘Alexandre d’Aphrodise vs. Jean Philopon: notes sur quelques traités d’Alexandre « perdus » en grec, conservés en arabe,’ *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 53-109; Alexander Altmann, and Samuel Miklos Stern, *Isaac Israaeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 68-74; A.F.L. Beeston, “An important Christian Arabic manuscript in Oxford,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 19 (1953): 197-205; Bernhard Lewin, “L’Idéal antique du philosophie dans la tradition arabe: un traité d’éthique du philosophe Bagdadien Ibn Suwār,” *Lychnos* (1954-5): 267-84; *Idem.*, La notion de *muḥdath* dans le *kalām* et dans la philosophie: Une petit traité inédit du philosophe chrétien Ibn Suwār. *Orientalia Suecana* III (1954): 84-93; Herbert A. Davidson, “John Philoponus as a source of Medieval Islamic and Jewish proofs of Creation,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2 (1969): 357-391; Ibn Suwār, “Maqāla fī anna dalīl Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī ‘alā ḥadath al-‘ālam awlā bi l-qabūl min dalīl al-mutakallimīn aṣlan,” in *Neoplatonici apud Arabes*, ed. ‘A. Badawī (Cairo, 1955), pp. 243-247; Joel L. Kraemer, “A Lost Passage from Philoponus’ Contra Aristotelem in Arabic Translation,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85.3 (1965): 318-327; Marwan Rashed, “Nouveaux fragments antiprocléens de Philopon en version arabe et le problème des origines de la théorie de l’« instauration » (*ḥudūth*),” *Les études philosophiques* 105.2 (2013): 261-392; Muhsin Mahdi, “Alfarabi against Philoponus,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26.4 (1967): 233-260; *Idem.*, The Arabic text of Alfarabi’s Against John the Grammarian. In: *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in Honor of Aziz Suryal Atiya*, ed. S. A. Hanna (Brill, Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 268-284; S. Pines, “An Arabic summary of a lost work of John Philoponus,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 320-352.

b) The privative theory of evil

Second, ‘*adam*’ is employed to describe the privative theory of evil. The notion goes back to Plotinus. The Neoplatonic account of privation (*sterêsis*) in reference to evil has a discernible echo in the works of Muslim philosophers—such as al-Fārābī (d. 950), Avicenna (d. 1037), and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). The theory basically proposes that evil is a lack or privation (‘*adam*’) of the good. Since evil does not essentially exist (*ma ‘dūm*), it is not caused by an efficient cause, but rather by a deficiency (*naqṣ*) of the good proper to a thing. They regarded it as a by-product of the best possible order of the world. They argued that the good is existence. Just as evil and nonexistence is interchangeable, so, too, are good and existence. In their writings, there is always a dialectical dichotomy between evil and nonexistence and between good and existence. The idea of evil as a privation also spread among Sufis and theologians like Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1263).⁶

c) The disontological account of God

⁶ Al-Fārābī, *The Fuṣūl al-madanī: Aphorisms of the Statesman of al-Fārābī*, ed. and trans. D. M. Dunlop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), Aphorisms 72-73; Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā’ / Ilāhiyyāt* (2), eds. Muḥammad Y. Mūsā, Sulaymān Dunyā and Sa’īd Zāyed, revised and introduced by Ibrāhīm Madkour (Cairo: al-Hay’at al-‘Āmma li-Shu’ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyya, 1960), pp. 355-356; 414-422; G. F. Hourani, “Ibn Sīnā’s ‘Essay on the secret of destiny,’” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29 (1966):25-48; Ḥusayn Khaliqī, *Āfirīnīsh va naẓar-i faylasūfān-i Islāmī dar bārah-’i ān* (Tabrīz: Intishārāt-i Mu’assasah-’i Tārīkh va Farhang-i Īrān, 1975); Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute over al-Ghazali’s Best of All Possible Worlds* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 14, 27; William C. Chittick, *The Sufī path of knowledge : Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics of imagination* (Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 33–44, 89– 97; Mūnā Ahmad Muhammad Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-khayr wa al-sharr fī al-falsafa al-Islāmiyya: Dirāsa muqārana fī fikr Ibn Sīnā* (Beirut: Al-Mu’assasa al-jāmi’iyya li- al-dirāsāt wa al-nashr wa al-tawzī, 1411/1991); Shams C. Inati, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sīnā’s Theodicy* (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, 2000), pp. 65-101; Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden : Brill, 2007), pp. 177-179; 195-196, 200-208; Ayman Shihadeh, “Avicenna’s Theodicy and al-Rāzī’s Anti-Theodicy,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 7 (2019):61-84.

The concept of nonbeing was also in circulation among *Mutakallimūn* who propose the idea of apophatic God. In their expression of negative statements, the negative copula “is-not” plays a pivotal role, which mediates between two phrases on the subject of which God always is put. Hence, the emergence of nonbeing. “Is-not” is articulated through resort to a variety of negative particles like *lā* and *laysa*, often in nominal sentences and only occasionally in verbal sentences. In his *Maqālāt*, al-Ash‘arī (d. 936) testifies to the circulation of the apophatic view of God among early Mu‘tazilites. He provides us with a two-page report attributing a great deal of negative statements to them, such as God is-not a substance and he is-not an accident.⁷ Ismaili theologians in fact present the most radical form of apophasis. Neoplatonic cosmology and apophasis, as well as the strict form of Islamic monotheism, help them to develop a unique meontological view of God.

d) The notion of nonbeing of a dialectical and epistemological nature: *Ein dialektisches Spiel*

Lastly, there is a line of thought that treats the notion of nonbeing with respect to divine knowledge. The controversy over this aspect of the concept has been formulated in the following question: “Whether the non-existent is a thing” (*hal al-ma‘dūm shay‘un am lā*).⁸ As Schwarz has rightly identified, this concept was of a rather conceptual, epistemological, and semantic nature.⁹

⁷ See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30), pp. 155-156

⁸ See Abū al-Faṭḥ Ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-iqdām fī ‘ilm al-kalām*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Bayrūt : Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyah, 2004), p. 89

⁹ Schwarz rather elucidates the nature of the problem as such: “...at least in the classical period of *Kalām* this was a problem of a conceptual, semantic and epistemological nature, but not an ontological question.” See Michael Schwarz, “Who were Maimonides’ Mutakallimūn” Some Remarks on *Guide of the Perplexed* Part I Chapter 73,” In: *Maimonidean Studies*, ed. Arthur Hyman, vol. 3 (New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 1992-1993), p. 147

De Boer (d. 1942) defines the problem as “*ein dialektisches Spiel*” (a dialectical game).¹⁰In the classical period, Sunni theologians extensively contributed much to the development of this notion. But in the post-classical period, Zaydi writers adopted and further developed it.

i.2. Organization of the dissertation

In modern times, scholars have studied the reception of the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* in Islamic thought closely enough. On the other hand, the view of evil as privation of good did not attract attention of classical Muslim theologians. It is only in the post-classical period that theologians began to show interest in the topic. Therefore, my project will be confined to the study of debates of the classical period over the last two dimensions of the concept of nonbeing mentioned above, namely the Ismaili disontological view of God and the dialectical, epistemological, and semantic aspect of the concept of nonbeing. So then, this dissertation is organized into two parts. In **Part I**, I discuss the formation and development of nonbeing as a notion of a dialectical, epistemological, and semantic character in the classical period. In **Chapter 1**, I deal with the origin of this notion. I argue that it proceeded from a complex socio-cultural and political processes in effect during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties of the late 7th-early 9th centuries. During this period, attention focused more on the Imamite discussions of the second half of the 8th century on the doctrine of *badā'* (God's change of his decision on the ground of new knowledge), which in turn led to the emergence of late-8th-first half 9th century Imāmī-Mu'tazilite controversy over the question whether God *ab aeterno* knows things. But anti-predestinarian and anti-eternalist tendencies also seem to have contributed to the

¹⁰ Tjitze J. De Boer, *Geschichte der Philosophie im Islam* (Stuttgart: F. Frommann, 1901), p. 54.

development of the nonexistent. In **Chapter 2**, I revisit the origin of Avicenna’s essence-existence distinction. I argue that his distinction can be traced back to the Abū Hāshim’s (d. 933) dichotomy between *ṣifat al-wujūd* (the attribute of existence) and *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence), the latter of which he defines what an entity essentially is (cf. Avicenna’s definition of essence) and the former of which he views as an additional category to nonexistent essences.

Chapter 3 can be seen as a continuation of the argument proposed in the previous chapter. I discuss the philological and logical basis for Basran Mu‘tazilī-Ash‘arī theologians’ conflicting approaches to the doctrine of *ṣifat al-dhāt* expressed in the form of self-predicational sentences (*S is S*), e.g., “The substance is a substance even in the state of non-existence.” I suggested that their approaches could be read against the backdrop of the two interpretations of the copulative verb *kawn* (to be) either as indicating identity/essence or existence. In **Part II** of the dissertation, I explore the meontological ideas of the 10th century Ismaili theologians of the Fatimid period, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 943), al-Sijistānī (d. 971) and al-Kirmānī (d. 1021). This part three objectives. First, Ismaili authors reconstruct their account of apophasis through frequent negation of me/ontological concepts (*huwiyya* vs. *lā-huwiyya*; *ays* vs. *lays*). Therefore, I explore in some detail the intricacies and complexities of these concepts in their understanding. Second, these authors are not uniform in their formulations, a question that previous studies have ignored. Finally, I explain how their use of negation (*nafy*) as an expression of God’s transcendence forges a strong link connecting their perspective to the Neoplatonic tradition.

Chapter 4 discusses the failure of al-Nasafī’s attempt to develop the negative path of speaking of God on the basis of double negation. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning his ideas as his integration of me/ontological categories into the Ismaili thought laid the foundation for the formation of double negation in its full scope in later period. In **Chapter 5**, I discuss the

significant role al-Sijistānī played in the formation of Ismaili apophysis in comply with the hierarchical cosmology of Neoplatonism. To this end, he offers the apophatic perspective of double negation. He thus establishes a hierarchy not only in Neoplatonic cosmology, but also in apophatic discourse. What is higher in the hierarchy of being has a more meontological-negational power: the more intense degree of nonbeing and negation a thing possesses, the higher, the more complete, the more certain it is. In this respect, his god *mubdi'* (the Originator) who is two-fold negated is ontologically higher than other things that are either one-fold negated (e.g., the act of origination and spiritual beings) or non-negated (i.e., physical beings). Contrary to what is generally assumed, his double negation is more complicated than it at first appears. He presents two forms of double negation. **Chapter 6** examines how al-Kirmānī diverges from al-Sijistānī's double negation in his work *Kitāb al-Riyād*, though he remains loyal to it in *Rāḥat al-'Aql*. I argue that refusal of the idea of the originating act (*ibdā'*) as an intermediary principle between God and the Intellect, as well as the confinement of the use of negative particle (*lā*) to God, appears to result in his invalidation of double negation, which aims to express the transcendence not only of God, but also of the originating act and spiritual beings (the Intellect and Soul).

i.3. The history of research

Chapter 1 enters into an implicit dialogue with various credible sources on the origin of the conception of nonbeing of a dialectical, epistemological, and semantic nature. In the classical period, the concept was indeed a problem that continuously evolved and adapted to a changing intellectual atmosphere but was never resolved to the satisfaction of each theological school.

Nothing fated this concept to have such a career except its difficult-to-solve indeterminacy. In modern times, the problem met with the same fate once again, another form of indeterminacy, though transforming this time into a problem of history. This problem huddled 20th century historians of ideas together to find out its origin. We meet a great deal of multicolored historical perspectives and reconstructions.

To begin with, Martin Schreiner (d. 1926) parenthetically touched upon the problem in a context where he discussed Saadia Gaon's (d. 942) idea of the infinite divisibility of matter. He proposed that our concept goes back to Democritus (Metaphysics I, 4, 985b, 4-8).¹¹ Pines and Gutas argued that there is no conclusive evidence showing Muslim theologians' engagement with Democritus.¹² In 1912, Max Horten (d. 1945) rather put forward the claim that the concept goes back to the Nyâya-Vaiśeṣika doctrine of *abhâva*, according to which the nonexistent is something real (*die Lehre der Vaiśeṣika vom Nichtsein als etwas Positivem*).¹³ His claim received support from Shlomo Pines (d. 1990).¹⁴ But Henrik S. Nyberg (d. 1974) levelled charges of anachronism against Horten. He stated, "...Horten's hypothesis completely turns the chronological circumstances upside down...The term "*abhâva*" is for the first time found in the

¹¹ In addition to the existence of the plenum (τὸ πλήρες), Leucippus and his disciple Democritus affirmed the existence of the void (τὸ κενόν) that they identified with nonbeing (τὸ μὴ ὄν). They argue that nonbeing is no less real than being (διὸ καὶ οὐθὲν μᾶλλον τὸ ὄν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἶναι φασιν, ὅτι οὐδὲ τοῦ κενοῦ τὸ σῶμα). Martin Schreiner, *Der Kalam in der jüdischen Literatur* (Berlin, 1895), p. 8-9 (n. 5); Shlomo (Salomon) Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen atomenlehre* (Berlin [Gräfenhainichen, Gedruckt bei A. Hein gmbh], 1936), p. 116 (n.2); Harry A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 360-361

¹² Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen atomenlehre*, p. 102; Dimitri Gutas, "Pre-Plotinian Philosophy in Arabic (Other than Platonism and Aristotelianism): A Review of the Sources," in Wolfgang Haase (ed.): *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1993), Vol. II 36.7, 4958;

¹³ Max Horten, *Die philosophischen Systeme der spekulativen Theologen im Islam* (Bonn: Cohen, 1912), pp. 3, 341-342, 379-381, 473-474.

¹⁴ Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen atomenlehre*, p. 116 (n.2); Wolfson mentions this assumption in his *The philosophy of the Kalam*, p. 360

logician Śrīdhara's work *Nyāyakandalī*, which he authored in 991 A.D. In Islam, the doctrine of nonbeing already exists in Shaḥḥām's classical formulation at the end of the 9th century." The second problem he finds with Horten's perspective lies in his argument that *abhāva* has only a logical implication, while the topic we are considering here does not.¹⁵

In his commentary on *Inshā' al-Dawā'ir* by Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), Nyberg rather held that our concept preferably betrays an influence of the Eastern Christian *Logos* and the Platonic-Neoplatonic κόσμος νοητός (intelligible world).¹⁶ I think his perspective is marked by some superficial similarities rather than by authenticated documentation. It is true that Muslim theologians treat the idea of the nonexistent in relation to divine knowledge. But the Qur'anic origin of the idea is no less evident. Moreover, his proposal of κόσμος νοητός might be confronted with the question whether it is associated with the concept of the nonexistent in Neoplatonic works.¹⁷

The perspectives of Harry A. Wolfson (d. 1974) and Albert Nader (2004) run parallel with that of Nyberg. Wolfson similarly explains the formation of the concept in reference to Plato's *prima materia*. He discusses the issue with special reference to al-Baghdādī's (d. 1037)

¹⁵ H. S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-Arabī, nach Handschriften in Uppsala und Berlin zum ersten Mal hrsg. und mit Einleitung und Kommentar versehen von H. S. Nyberg* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1919), p. 53-54: „Denn erstens hat *abhāva* nur logischen, nicht aber ontologischen Sinn), und zweitens stellt die Hypothese Hortens der chronologischen Verhältnisse vollständig auf den Kopf. Der Terminus *abhāva* findet sich zum erstenmal beim Logiker Śrīdhara in seinem Werke *Nyāyakandalī*, das um 991 nach Chr. verfasst ist). Im Islam light die Lehre vom Nichtsein in klassischer Formulierung schon bei al-Šaḥḥām (Ende des 9. Jahrhunderts) vor.“

¹⁶ Nyberg refers to Ibn 'Arabī's quote from al-Ḥajjāj's statement: "Thing is what is real in God's knowledge." He interprets it by saying, "The world was present in God's knowledge before creation, that is, it was real as a known object, had a logical being, and this logical being is the ontological ground of the existing world." See Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-Arabī*, p. 47-49

¹⁷ This last argument has been put forward by Josef van Ess. He states: "...es verschlägt vielleicht nicht so viel, wenn, wie Wolfson an sich mit Recht bemerkt (...ähnlich schon Horten in: *Der Islam*)..., der κόσμος νοητός nie als ‚nichtseiend‘ bezeichnet wird.." See *idem*, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḥudaddīn al-Īcī. Übersetzung und Kommentar des ersten Buches seiner Mawāqif* (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1966), p. 197

al-Farq, Ibn Ḥazm’s (d. 1064) *Fisāl fī al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, and al-Shahrastānī’s *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*. He argues that the vital problem regarding the question “whether the nonexistent is nothing or something” reflects a late antique controversy over “whether the world was created *ex nihilo* or out of an eternal antemundane matter.” He states, “...while retaining the already established formula that the world was created *min al-ma’dūm*, that is, ‘from the nonexistent’, the Mu‘tazilites took ‘the nonexistent’ (*al-ma’dūm*) in the formula to refer to Plato’s pre-existent matter, which according to their interpretation, was, like Aristotle’s substrative matter and perhaps also like Plotinus’ emanated matter, something.” Thus, his argument continues, “the controversy over the question whether the world was created out of nothing or out of a pre-existent matter took the form of a controversy over the question whether “the nonexistent (*al-ma’dūm*) in the established creation formula was to be taken to mean “nothing” or “something.”¹⁸

On the basis of relatively later authors (e.g., al-Shahrastānī and Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Fanārī), Albert Nader argues that the notion of a dialectical and epistemological character originated from the Mu‘tazilīs’ tendency to show a real distinction between essence and existence. This allowed them to explain the creation of the world from the nonexistent, though not *ex nihilo*, but from *materia prima* which essentially lacks existence (cf. Aristotle’s *steresis*). He adds that this is actually what Plato calls a difficult and obscure form (*Timaeus* 48e-491: χαλεπὸν καὶ ἀμυδρὸν εἶδος), or Aristotle’s πρώτη ὕλη; in either case the nonexistential matter is waiting to receive form and to be actualized by God.¹⁹

¹⁸ Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 359-372; *Idem*, “The Kalam Problem of Nonexistence and Saadia’s Second Theory of Creation,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, *New Series*, 36 (1946):371-391

¹⁹ See Albert N. Nader, *Le système philosophique des Mu‘tazila (premiers penseurs de l’Islam)* (Beyrouth: Dar El-Machreq Sarl, 1984), pp. 129-130, 131 (n.2)

Since S. Horovitz's study, the assertion of a Stoic influence on our notion has also been made by several scholars such as van den Bergh and Pines. The proponents of this assertion very likely came to this conclusion as a result of being impressed by the Mu'tazilite *ma'dūm-shay* formula. By providing Seneca's *Epistulae Morales* as a subtext, Pines suggests that the Stoic term *ti* (something; *etwas*) might be the context for the Mu'tazilites to develop *shay'* as a general category covering not only what is, but also what is not.²⁰ Jolivet evaluates and refuses the possibility that the Greek *pragma* is the equivalent of *shay'*, and concludes that the latter has no Greek antecedent.²¹ One major problem with the assumptions of den Bergh and Pines lies in the fact that we have not been supplied with documentation for the alleged Stoic origin of this notion.²²

In his work on the fourteenth-century scholar 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's (d. 1355) theory of knowledge, Van Ess provides a general overview of hypotheses about the origin of the idea of *ma'dūm*, some of which have been mentioned above. Van Ess first expresses his appreciation of the previous scholarship by pointing out that it is worth considering all pieces of evidence supposedly supporting the assertion that the Islamic point of view of the non-existent should be explained through reference to Greek texts. But he brought to the attention of readers a variety of historical-methodological difficulties with the claim to foreign influence. For example, Nader

²⁰ See S. Horovitz, "Über den Einfluß des Stoizismus auf die Entwicklung der Philosophie bei den Arabern," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 57 (1903): 177-196 ; van den Bergh indirectly deals with the problem of the *ma'dūm* in making an analysis of the notions *hāl* and *shay'*, two of the significant components of the idea of non-existent. Simon van den Bergh, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut (The incoherence of the incoherence) Translated from the Arabic with introd. and notes*, 2 volumes (London: Luzac, 1954), II., 4, 3.6; S. Pines, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre*, p. 117

²¹ Jean Jolivet, "Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sina," in *Études sur Avicenne*, Ed. Jean Jolivet and Roshdi Rashed (Paris : Belles Lettres, 1984), pp. 15-16

²² Gutas, "Pre-Plotinian Philosophy in Arabic," in Haase (ed.): *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Vol. II 36.7, 4959-4963

and Wolfson's assumption of *einer idealen atomaren Materia* (an ideal atomic matter) would be conflict with the Islamic theory of divine omniscience that atoms do not exist eternally beside God, but rather in God's knowledge.²³ Moreover, van Ess argues that Wolfson hardly puts his best foot forward in terms of documentation because he seeks to reconstruct the problem on the basis of later Islamic sources like al-Baghdādī's (d. 1037) *al-Farq*, Ibn Ḥazm's (d. 1064) *Fisāl fī al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* and al-Shahrastānī's *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*.²⁴ For the reasons similar to this, van Ess approaches the allegations of influence deliberately. He writes, "Between the last Greek Neoplatonic texts and the kalām of the 9th century lies several dark centuries, and we will have to assume *a priori* that ideas have been detached from their context or amalgamated differently. Moreover, and this is indeed true of everything, one should not underestimate the originality of the Mu'tazilite *Mutakallimūn*, who, of course, approached the handed down property with their own questions."²⁵ Our final writer who deals with our concept is Richard Frank. He remained indifferent to the problem of origin by rather undertaking a close reading of Muslim sources. He authored two articles on the topic, doubtless supplying us with a most detailed, and probably most accurate, account of the nature of the problem. He specifically discusses the concept of

²³ In his criticism of Wolfson and Nader, van Ess argues that their suggestion of *materia prima* as the origin of our concept of nonbeing would not fit in well with the Islamic theory of divine knowledge that atoms do not exist eternally beside God, but rather in God, in his spirit (Geist). He states: „Mag schon von vornherein die Atomtheorie neben der Frage des göttlichen Allwissens gestanden haben, die Atome bestehen nicht ewig neben Gott, sondern ewig in Gott, in seinem Geiste.“ He might have meant 'divine knowledge' when he describes the substratum of intelligible objects as in God or his spirit" because this would precisely run counter to the Islamic perspective of divine knowledge. *Idem, Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḥudaddīn al-Īcī*, p.197

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 197

²⁵ Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḥudaddīn al-Īcī*, pp. 196-197: „Zwischen den letzten griechischen neuplatonischen Texten und dem kalām des 9. Jh's. liegen mehrere dunkle Jahrhunderte; und man wird a priori annehmen müssen, dass sich Ideen aus ihrem Zusammenhang gelöst oder anders amalgamiert haben. Zudem, und das ist bei allem festzuhalten, sollte man die Originalität der mu'tazilitischen mutakallimūn, die ja doch mit ihren Fragen an das tradierte Gut herangingen, nicht zu gering bewerten.“

nonbeing with regard to the Bahshamite Mu‘tazilite account of attributes (*ṣifāt*) and states (*aḥwāl*).²⁶

Chapter 3 discusses the origin of Avicenna’s essence-existence distinction. A considerable body of research dealt with the same problem.²⁷ Some scholars find its root in the philosophies of earlier authors like Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus. In the course of the last forty years, however, Western experts on Avicenna began to consider a possible link between his philosophy and early Islamic theology. Jean Jolivet and Robert Wisnovsky are two leading scholars of this assumption.²⁸ I am of two minds about their claim. On the one hand, I agree that Avicenna’s distinction goes back to early *Kalām* discussions. On the other hand, it is hard to find a coherent and rewarding explanation for his distinction only by mapping out the relations between thing (*shay’*) and existent (*mawjūd*). As I have argued in the chapter, this distinction has already been transmitted to him in some fledging form through discussions of the theory of *aḥwāl* (states). In Chapters 4-6, where I discuss the Ismaili meontological account of God, I actively engages dialogues with the perspectives of diverse modern authors such as Henry Corbin, Paul Walker, Daniel De Smet, Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, Eva-Maria Lika and A. Kars who have penned about the Ismaili doctrine of double negation.²⁹

²⁶Richard Macdonough Frank, “Al-Ma‘dūm wal-Mawjūd. The Non-Existent, the Existent and the Possible in the Teaching of Abū Hāšim and his Followers,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 14 (1980): 185–210; *idem*, “The Non-existent and the Possible in Classical Asharite Teaching,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 24: (2000): 1-37; *idem*, *Beings and their attributes: the teaching of the Basrian school of the Mu‘tazila in the classical period* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1978), pp. 53-55;

²⁷ See Amos Bertolacci, “The distinction of Essence and Existence in Avicenna’s Metaphysics: The Text and Context,” in *Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas*, ed. Felicitas Opwis and David Reisman (Leiden: Boston, Brill, 2012), p. 258 (n. 2)

²⁸ Jean Jolivet, “Aux origines de l’ontologie d’Ibn Sina,” in *Études sur Avicenne*, Ed. Jean Jolivet and Roshdi Rashed (Paris : Belles Lettres, 1984), pp. 11-28 ; Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 145-160

²⁹ H. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne: textes édites avec traduction française et commentaires* [Teheran, Département d’iranologie de l’Institut franco-iranien, 1961], pp. 10-11 ; 18-20 ; 30-31 ; 35-36 ; 53 ; Paul Walker, *Early*

i.4. Methodology

There is no doubt that all authors mentioned above made meaningful, useful contributions to the expansion of the scope of our conversation by bringing along niceties and complexities of other cultures. But their perspectives at the same time imply some (prejudiced) verdicts that seem to have had a low opinion of the achievements of Muslim writers in terms of the formation of the concept. The major reason underlying this tendency might have been related to the *voie diffuse* theory that gained wider currency among historians of this period. Indeed, the fact of parallels between Greek and Arabic texts would not always necessarily show the impact of the former on the latter. Moreover, the correspondences and similarities with previous traditions are usually cursory and superficial and not remarkable. Considering intricate details, complexity of arguments, internal dynamics and concerns, and immediate intra-textual settings, it would not even be easy to match earlier texts with later ones. More importantly, as Dimitri Gutas has maintained, we need to see documented investigation and demonstrable influences and documentation for the alleged origin of any idea. Another issue with previous studies lies in their reconstruction of the problem in reference to relatively late writers like al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), Shams al-Dīn al-Fanārī (d. 1430).

philosophical Shiism : the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.72-80; D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l'intellect : néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l'œuvre de Hamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/XIe s.)* (Leuven : Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 1995), pp. 90-100; Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, "The Concept of Tawhid in the Thought of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmānī" (PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 1986), pp. 47-89; Eva-Maria Lika, *Proofs of Prophecy and the Refutation of the Ismā‘īliyya: the Kitāb Ithbāt Nubuwwat al-Nabī by the Zaydī al-Mu‘ayyad bi-Ilāh al-Hārūnī* (d. 411/1020) (Berlin/Boston : De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 69-74; Aydogan Kars, *Unsayings God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2019]), pp. 23-72

My work is an exercise in the history of ideas. I primarily employ what is called today in literary studies a close or deep reading. As occasion arises, however, I also bring to my investigation of the topic several other perspectives—for example, source-critical methods and comparative linguistic and philological analysis. One of the most difficult problems that I faced in studying the topic is that there are no extant texts from the 9th century apart from al-Ash‘arī’s (d. 936) doxographical work *maqālāt al-islāmīyīn* and al-Khayyāṭ’s (d. 932) book *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*. These sources not only presented much of the material in a polemical mode, but also did not give the context of the whole theological discussion. In accordance with the historiographical approach laid out by historians who have reconstructed and revealed Presocratic thought through quotations and paraphrases preserved in the work of later philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Simplicius, I will seek to provide, on the basis of the newly available texts from the 10th-11th centuries, some tentative suggestions regarding the general structure of these debates in the earlier formative period, thereby filling in the gaps in the presentation of these authors. One shortcoming of previous research is that because many Mu‘tazilite sources have not, until recently, been brought to light, 19th-20th century scholars mostly had to limit themselves to works written in defense of Ash‘arī and his school, thus reading the Mu‘tazilite point of view of the nonexistent through the Ash‘arites’ eyes. In this work, I sought to make the Mu‘tazilites’ voice heard in reference to their works.

**PART I: THE DIALECTIC OF NONBEING: THE FORMATION OF
THE CONCEPT AND THE THEORIES OF *AḤWĀL* (STATES) AND
ESSENCE-EXISTENCE DISTINCTION**

CHAPTER 1: The Imamite-Mu‘tazilite controversy: The formation of the concept of nonbeing

1.1. Introduction

1.2. Political crises and the Imamite doctrine of *badā’*

1.3. Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam’s formulation of *badā’*: The genesis and development of the Mu‘tazilite understanding of nonbeing

1.4. Continuity and discontinuity: the Ash‘arite position

1.5. Conclusion to the chapter

1.1. Introduction

Nonbeing was one of the most discussed ontological concepts in history of Islamic theology. The concept was more often discussed with reference to such topics as creation *ex nihilo*, the apophatic description of God by way of negation of me/ontological categories, and the privative aspect of evil (*privatio boni*). Today, it is generally accepted that through translation of Philoponian and Neoplatonic materials into Arabic, the above mentioned meontological perspectives drifted into the ontological and cosmological frame of the 8th-10th century Muslim writers. There is another significant line of thought that attracted attention of modern scholars. Having been developed and crystallized in the last quarter of the 8th century and the first half of the 9th century, this line of thought was examined with particular regard to divine knowledge. Early heresiographers like al-Khayyāṭ and al-Ash‘arī bore witness to the formulation of the

problem in the following question: whether God knows things in eternity.¹ De Boer (d. 1942) considered theological discussions over this perspective of nonbeing to be a dialectic game (*ein dialektisches Spiel*). For discourse occurred over several centuries between two or more groups of scholars, the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites in particular, who held and propped up their own respective positions about the topic and usually without showing sympathy toward each other’s position. As I will explore in the second chapter, they adapted language to their own sectarian cosmology and beliefs to which they had subscribed. For instance, they construed the same syntactical structure in different ways. More specifically, they brought for discussion the question of whether *a parte ante* self-predication (e.g., *al-ashyā’ ashyā’ fī l-‘adam*, “entities are entities even in the state of non-existence) would denote essence or existence. Thus, they constructed language according to the metaphysical and theological categories, that they advocated. However, their concern is not restricted to this question. They further discussed other relevant issues, e.g., whether the nonexistent (*ma‘dūm*) is a thing (*shay’*), whether entities can be named in a state prior to existence, and whether entities can be characterized by an attribute before existence. When responding to all these questions, they did not use the same rules of language use for me/ontological words such as *ma‘dūm* and *shay’*, which led to further misunderstanding, thereby deepening the disagreement and conflict between them. For this reason, Frank rightly states, “...the disputes between the Ash‘arites and the Mu‘tazilite school of al-Jubbā’ī concerning the nonexistent was, in large part, a polemic quarrel over terminology.”² Thus, the problem of the nonexistent is a problem of a dialectic and linguistic character

¹ See, for instance, al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Albert N. Nader (Beirut: al-Matba‘at al-Kathūlīkiyyah, 1957), pp. 49-50 and al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30), pp. 158-163

² Richard M. Frank, “The Non-existent and the Possible in Classical Ash‘arite Teaching,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 24 (2000), p. 10

consisting of different theological and philosophical sub-themes, e.g., the idea of *badā'* (change of divine knowledge according to the emergence of new circumstances), divine foreknowledge, the theory of attributes, the relation between the nonexistent and ontological concepts like *shay'*, *mawjūd*, *jism*, and theories of identity, ontology, knowledge, and language.

Such a conception of a dialectical and logico-linguistic and semantic nature has a well-established career extending from the mid-9th century to the 14th- and 15th centuries, and even further. The conception huddled the 19th-20th century historians of ideas to find out its origin. They were most often inclined to explain its formation through external factors as seen in both Nader and Wolfson's assumption of a *materia prima*,³ M. Horten's suggestion of the Nyâya-Vaiśeṣika notion of *abhâva*,⁴ and Nyberg's proposal of *kosmos noêtos* (intelligible world) in light of an interesting material from Neo-Platonism and the Christian doctrine of *Logos*.⁵ Since the breakthrough research of S. Horovitz, the assertion of a Stoic influence on Islamic theology has also drawn the attention of several scholars such as van den Bergh and Pinès.⁶ In his work on the fourteenth-century scholar 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's (d. 1355) theory of knowledge, Van Ess remained silent about the claim to foreign, though he suggested that one should not

³ See Albert N. Nader, *Le système philosophique des Mu'tazila (premiers penseurs de l'Islam)* (Beyrouth: Dar El-Machreq Sarl, 1984), pp. 129-144; Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 355-372; Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The *Kalam* Problem of Nonexistence and Saadia's Second Theory of Creation," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, *New Series*, 36 (1946):371-391, at 371-384

⁴ Max Horten, *Die philosophischen Systeme der spekulativen Theologen im Islam* (Bonn: Cohen, 1912), pp. 342, 379-380, 428, 473, 507

⁵ H. S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-Arabī, nach Handschriften in Uppsala und Berlin zum ersten Mal hrsg. und mit Einleitung und Kommentar versehen von H. S. Nyberg* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1919), pp. 48-56

⁶ See S. Horovitz, "Über den Einfluß des Stoizismus auf die Entwicklung der Philosophie bei den Arabern," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 57 (1903): 177-196; Simon van den Bergh, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut (The incoherence of the incoherence) Translated from the Arabic with introd. and notes*, 2 volumes (London: Luzac, 1954), II., 4, 3.6; S. Pinès, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre* (Berlin, 1936), p. 117.

underestimate the originality of the idea.⁷ Finally, scholars like Richard Frank became indifferent to the problem of its origin. He authored two articles on the topic, doubtless supplying us with a most extensive Islamic account of the topic. I think the major contribution he made to the understanding of the concept lies in his treatment of the problem on the basis of divine knowledge.⁸

In what will follow, I will deal with the question of origin by giving more priority to the authority of extant earlier texts. What exactly do these texts say? And how do they say? By these texts I mean particularly ‘Uthmān al-Dārimī’s (894) *al-Radd ‘alā al-Jahmiyya*, al-Khayyāṭ’s (d. 913) *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, and al-Ash‘arī’s (d. 936) *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* as well as the earliest extant writings of the Imamites such as Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī (d. 923), Muḥammad ibn Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī (d. 941), Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī Ibn Babawayh al-Qummī (d. 991) and Abū Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad known as al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022). For a review of the Ash‘arite account, I will focus on Ibn Fūrak’s *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash‘arī*. Based on all these works, I will here demonstrate: (1) that this second line of thought emerged as a result of the controversy between the 8th-9th century Imamite and Mutazilite figures over the ideas of divine knowledge and *badā’* (God’s change of mind in response to new circumstances); (2) that the anti-predestinarian and (anti-)eternalist perspectives seem to have been involved in the

⁷ Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aḥudaddīn al-Īcī. Übersetzung und Kommentar des ersten Buches seiner Mawāqif* (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1966), p. 196-197

⁸ Richard M. Frank, “The Non-existent and the Possible in Classical Ash‘arite Teaching,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 24 (2000): 1-37; *Idem.*, “al-Ma‘dūm wal-mawjūd: The Non-existent, the Existent and the Possible, in the Teaching of Abū Hāshim and His Followers.” *Mélanges de l’Institut dominicain d’études orientales du Caire* 14 (1980), 185-210.

development of this line of thought; and (2) that these early debates all contributed to the development of the Ash‘arite understanding of nonbeing.

1.2. Political Crises and the Imamite doctrine of *badā’*

The relation between the Mu‘tazilites and Imamites in the 8th century has long been discussed in modern times. The Mu‘tazilite school originally emerged as a religious school which focused their concern on such theological issues as the five fundamental principles, especially the doctrine of intermediate rank. As modern scholars have maintained, it is political neutrality that chiefly led to the formation of the movement as represented by Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā (d. 748-9) and ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd (d. 761). They showed tolerance towards different political views. Not only did they abstain from taking a position on ‘Alī and his opponents, but also they remained indifferent to contemporary political turbulences. Rather, they were occupied with learning and worship possibly inspired by Hasan al-Baṣrī’s (d. 728) asceticism.⁹ As for the Imamite sect or, the *Rāfiḍīyya* used by the Sunnis as a derogatory term for them, it was originally a politico-religious movement in every sense of the word. In the Umayyad period the followers of Alī already formed quite a distinct group within the Muslim communities and were actively involved in anti-Umayyad political issues such as the rise and fall of Husayn’s regime in 680, the uprising of the Petinents (*tawwābūn*) in 683-684 and Mukhtār al-Thaqafī’s revolt in 686-687. By the beginning of the 8th century the Imamite movement broke off from the mainstream Islam by pursuing their

⁹ Racha El-Omari, “The Mu‘tazilite Movement (I): The Origins of the Mu‘tazila,” in ed. Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016]), pp. 130-141

own political agendas. Thus, the question of succession to the prophet Muhammad was constitutive for the movement. In this period where religious issues were being debated and various schools began to grow within the Islamic world, they took a stand on theological matters, mostly pursuing the opinions of Muḥammad b. Alī al-Bāqir (d. 733) and his son Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765). The emergence of Imamism is usually thought to have started with these two important figures of the House of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*). The crystallization of the Imamite doctrine, however, took place only after Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s death. Participants in theological speculations up until the first half of the tenth century mostly had recourse to the hadiths of the Prophet and the Imams. Unlike the traditionalists, however, there is a line of Imāmī tradition which relied on some forms of speculative theology (*kalām*) and the use of reason for the establishment of the fundamentals of faith. As a result, there are two opposite successive traditions in the history of Imamism. Characterized as being nonrational, esoteric and mostly nurtured by the *hadith* collections, the former originated in Kufa and saw its continuation in Rayy and Qum. The end of this period coincides with the beginning of the Buyid period, in which the latter began to make its appearance in Baghdad through introduction of rational theology (*kalām*).¹⁰

The Mu‘tazilite-Imamite opposition found expression in the whole spectrum of their religious polemics and debate. It is this exact polemical atmosphere that led to speculations on the conception of nonbeing. Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāt’s (d. 913) *Kitāb al-Intiṣār* is the earliest extant source, which witnessed, and even was actively involved in, this polemical atmosphere.

¹⁰ Wilferd Madelung, “Imamism and Mu‘tazilite Theology,” in *Le Shi‘isme imāmīte. Colloque de Strasbourg (6-9 mai 1968)* (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1970), pp. 14-30; Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi‘ite Islam: Abū Ja‘far ibn Qiba al-Rāzī and His Contribution to Imāmīte Shi‘ite Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, Inc, 1993), pp. 53-59; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, “Early Shi‘ī Theology,” in ed. Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016]), pp. 81-90

As the prominent member of the Mu‘tazilite Baghdad school, al-Khayyāt took his education from ‘Īsā ibn al-Haytham al-Şūfī and Abū Mujālid Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḍarīr. He showed particular interest in theological issues circulating among the theologians of his school as well as the criticisms of the Mu‘tazila by the Imamite Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 859), who was a co-pupil of ‘Īsā ibn al-Haytham al-Şūfī. He authored eight books against Ibn al-Rāwandī, but only a refutation of his *Faḍīḥat al-Mu‘tazila* entitled *Kitāb al-Intiṣār* is available to us. It is of critical importance to my discussion here. Al-Khayyāt supplies a great deal of material about our topic. More importantly, he shares actual fragments from Ibn al-Rāwandī’s *Faḍīḥat* representing the Imamites’ position on the problem. What is followed by his quotes is his refutations in reference to the opinions of the Mu‘tazilite theologians.¹¹

Al-Khayyāt informs us that the Imamites’ religio-political perspectives provoked the severe censure of the Mu‘tazilites, who primarily approached issues from a theological point of view. He presented a list of theological views on account of which the Mu‘tazilites could bring charges of heresy against them. Of the Imamites’ opinions he brands as heretical and deviation from religion, the two are of central importance to our discussion here: the doctrine of *badā’* and divine knowledge. Al-Khayyāt introduces the major problems with their position as follows:

T1: al-Kayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, Section 2, p. 14: *Wa-ammā jumlātu qawli l-rāfiḍa fa-huwa anna allāha ‘azza wa jalla dhū qaddin wa şuratin wa ḥaddin yataḥarraku wa yaskunu wa yadnū wa yab‘udu wa yakhiffu wa yathqulu; wa anna ‘ilmahu muḥdathun wa annahu kāna ghayru ‘ālimin fa-‘alima wa anna jamī‘ahum yaqūlu bi-al-badā’ wa huwa anna allāha yukhbiru annahu yaf‘alu al-amra thumma yabdū lahu fa-lā yaf‘aluhu.”*

“What all Rafidites say is that God—Mighty and Majestic is He—has corporeal limits and shape, that he moves and rests, he is near and away, and he is light and heavy, that his knowledge is produced in time; he did not know [things eternally], but he came to know [them after their existence], and that a majority of them held the doctrine of *badā’*, that is

¹¹ For information on al-Khayyāt’s biography, see J. Van Ess, “al-Khayyāt,” *EP*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs

to say, the doctrine that he announces that he would create a thing but later something intervened (*yabdū lahu*), which compelled him to decide not to do it.”¹²

As will be shown below, it is the issues of *badā'* and divine knowledge from which theological debates on the problem of nonbeing seem to have emerged. Defined as a change of God's decision or ruling on the grounds of new knowledge that he did now have before, *badā'* is accepted in the most absolute sense in the ultra-Shī'ī sects such as the followers of al-Mukhtār ibn Abī 'Ubayd al-Thaqafī (*kaysāniyya* or *mukhtāriyya*).¹³ Most early Shi'ite scholars, however, offered a moderate expression of the doctrine by excluding or minimizing the possibility of the mutability of God's knowledge.¹⁴ During the 9th-10th centuries quite a few books were written solely on the topic.¹⁵ The doctrine had intensely been defended in various forms by the Imami sect up until Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) and his disciple Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 1325) reformed the fundamentals of faith based on the Mu'tazilite principle of reason.¹⁶

¹² Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 14

¹³ Al-Nawbakhtī identifies *Mukhtāriyya* with *Kaysāniyya*. See al-Ḥasan ibn Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-Shī'a*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Āl Baḥr al-'Ulūm (Najaf: al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥaydariyya, 1355/1936), pp. 23, 27

¹⁴ Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-Shī'a*, ed. Āl Baḥr al-'Ulūm, pp. 64-65; 69-73; 88-90; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Tehrān, 1381/1961), p. 146-149; Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Babawayh al-Qummī, *al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṭehrānī (Tehrān: Mu'assasa al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1430/2008), pp. 323-328; al-Mufīd, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad, *Awā'il al-Maqālāt fī al-Madhāhib wa-al-Mukhtārāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1403/1983), p. 91 (see also p. 57)

¹⁵ Al-Najāshī ascribes a book on the same subject to the following Imami theologians, such as Yūnus ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 823), Abū Ahmad Muḥammad ibn Abī 'Umayr al-Azdī (d. 832), Abū Ja'far Aḥmad ibn Abī Zāhir al-Ash'arī al-Qummī (fl. before 876), 'Abd Allāh ibn Ja'far al-Ḥimyarī (d. 922), 'Alī ibn Abī Ṣāliḥ, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Shalmaghānī (d. 934), Muḥammad ibn Mas'ūd al-'Ayyāshī (d. early 4th/10th century) and Ya'qūb ibn Yazīd. See al-Najāshī, Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Asadī al-Kūfī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī*, ed. Mūsā al-Shubayrī al-Zanjānī (Iran: Mu'assasa al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1986), 88, 219-220, 257, 326-327, 350-352, 378-9, 446-447, 450.

¹⁶ Madelung, "Imamism and Mu'tazilite Theology," p. 27

As both Sunnī and Imamī sources have maintained, the doctrine of *badā'* was brought into use in response to the problems that new socio-political circumstances created.¹⁷ The first case in which recourse was had to the idea of *badā'* was when pro-Alids, under the leadership of 'Abdullāh ibn Nawf or al-Mukhtār ibn Abī 'Ubayd al-Thaqafī (d. 687), were defeated by Muṣ'ab ibn al-Zubayr.¹⁸ According to al-Ṭabarī's report, 'Abdullāh ibn Nawf, before going into battle against Mus'ab's forces, proclaimed that God promised victory over the enemy. But he suffered an obvious defeat. Thus, the assumed prophecy was proved false. When 'Abdullāh ibn Sharīk al-Nahdī asked him why he then vowed they would be victorious, he replied, saying: "Have you not read in God's book the verse (Q 13:39) 'God blots out or confirms whatever he wills; and with him is the Mother of the Book.'"¹⁹ Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) tells an almost same story about al-Mukhtār, though with different details. In his report, when offering a justification or explanation for his defeat before Mus'ab, al-Mukhtār is narrated to have used a clear *badā'* formulation and stated: "Indeed, God has promised this [victory] to me, but something had intervened, which compelled him to alter his mind" (*inna allāha ta'ālā kāna qad wa'adanī dhālika; lākinnaḥu badā lahu*).²⁰ The Imamites also resorted to it in the case of Ismā'īl, who

¹⁷ For studies on the doctrine of *badā'*, see I. Goldziher and A.S. Tritton, "Badā'," *EP*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Vol. 2, pp. 850-851; Mahmoud Ayoub, "Divine Preordination and Human Hope a Study of the Concept of Badā' in Imāmī Shī'ī Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (Oct.-Dec., 1986):623-632; W. Madelung, "Badā'," *Elr*, 3:354-5; Abdulaziz Abdullhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1981), p.153; H.A.R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, "Badā'," in *Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), pp. 53-55

¹⁸ Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 491-492; Abū Manṣūr 'Abd al-Qāhir ibn Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Farq bayna al-Firaq : wa-bayān al-firqaḥ al-nājiyah minhum* (Miṣr [Egypt] : Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1328 [1910]), p. 36; Al-Shahrastānī (Mukhtār), Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, ed. W. Cureton, (London: Printed for the Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-45), pp. 109-110

¹⁹ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam wa al-Muluk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarī (Cairo:n.d.), 6:103-104

²⁰ Al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, p. 36

unexpectedly died after his father the Imam Ja‘far al-Şādiq appointed him as the new Imam. Regarding the death of his son, he is reported to have stated, “God has been led by a new consideration in the case of my son Ismā‘īl’s imamate.”²¹ Therefore, the Imamite passed to his other son. Endowed with infallible knowledge, the Imam’s changing decision to vest his other son with authority is illustrated as an example for *badā’*. Thus, the Shi‘ite community had been so obviously defeated to such an extent that no hope was left that they could realize the prophecies the Imams proclaimed about their victory. Or their leadership plan had been turned upside down by the unexpected so that they remained disappointed by the Imam’s mistaken vision. In order to compensate their followers for their disappointment at their failure, reestablish the Imam’s authority and sustain their faith, Imamite leaders proposed the doctrine.

In the Shiite *hadith* literature, much attention has been given to the theological significance of *badā’*. There are several traditions in al-Kulaynī’s *al-Kāfī*, the earliest work of the Imamī Shi‘ite *hadith* canon, which regards it as an act of worship and a divinely ordained command, such as the saying transmitted from Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Jafar al-Şādiq, “God has not been worshipped or magnified so truly as he is through *badā’*” and the one transmitted from the Imam ‘Alī Riḍā, “God has never sent a prophet without prohibiting the use of wine and affirming *badā’* of himself.”²² These tradition evidently show that *badā’* is of great importance for the Imamī sect. However, Imamite scholars are not uniform in their interpretation and application of the doctrine.

²¹ Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-Shī‘a*, ed. Āl Baḥr al-‘Ulūm, p. 73

²² al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfī*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, pp. 146 and 148; Ibn Babawayh, *al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṭehrānī, pp. 323-325

Shi'ite traditions are careful enough not to make *badā'* equal to God's total knowledge. But there is always an irreconcilable tension between them. For this reason, traditions about the doctrine tend to revolve around finding a reasonable solution to this tension. As it becomes clear from them, difficult issues regarding *badā'* were debated and resolutions were developed through spoken or unspoken interactions between the Imams and their followers. This is articulated in the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's catechismal conversation with Manṣūr b. Ḥāzim. Al-Kulaynī writes:

T2: al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, p. 148 “Is there anything today that was not in the God's knowledge yesterday?” Manṣūr ibn Ḥāzim asked Abū 'Abd Allāh [Jafar al-Ṣādiq]. He replied, saying, “No, God will dishonor whoever claims such a thing.” I further asked, “Do you then think that everything that existed and will exist up until the Day of Resurrection is all in God's knowledge?” “Yes,” replied he, “before he created creation.”²³

Ja'far al-Ṣādiq establishes here that God *ab aeterno* has an immutable and comprehensive knowledge of all things that have existed and will exist. Another tradition that is attributed to him explicitly responds to the issue of *badā'*'s association with God's eternal knowledge: “God has never altered his decision about anything. But it was already in his knowledge before he changed it” (*Mā badā li-allāh fī shay'in illā kāna fī 'ilmihī qabla an yabdū lahū*).²⁴ Thus, he interprets *badā'* as being within the scope of God's entire knowledge; in other words, he sees changes take place within divine knowledge itself. This tradition seem to have safeguarded the Imams or Imami figures' ability to prophesy future events. But the simultaneous acceptance of these two seemingly incompatible theories raises two fundamental questions in the reader's mind: (I)

²³ al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Vol. 1, p. 148: “‘An manṣūr ibn ḥāzim qāla: Sa'altu abā 'abd allāh aleyhissalām: hal yakūnu al-yawma shay'un, lam yakun fī 'ilm allāh bi-al-ams? Qāla: lā. Man qāla hādihā fa-akhzā-hu allāh. Qultu: Araayta mā kāna wa mā huwa kā'inun ilā yawm al-qiyāma alaysa fī 'ilm allāh? Qāla: balā qabla an yahklūqa al-khalq.”

²⁴ *Idem.*, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. 'Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Vol. 1, p. 148

Should God, then, be defined as mutable and changeable in his knowledge? and, as Madelung has rightly asked, (II) Why could he then report his previous decision to the Imams knowing that he would change it soon?²⁵ Other traditions add further dimension of complexity to the topic. On the authority of Abū Baṣīr, Jafar al-Ṣādiq is narrated to have put forward the idea of the two kinds of divine knowledge: “God’s knowledge is of two kinds: One is hidden and stored with God, which no one knows except him and only in which *badā’* takes place, and the other is that which he teaches his angels, messengers and prophets, and of which we [Imams?] too have knowledge.”²⁶ It is not hard to observe herein a clear tension between the knowledge which he keeps secret for himself, part of which constitutes *badā’*, and the knowledge which he manifests to messengers, prophets and imams. This statement apparently provides a somewhat reasonable explanation for the justification of the failures of Shī‘ī figures’ prophecies. This would mean, then, that God had eternally intended change of mind to take place at some point in time. Therefore, they could not be charged with any failure. But it is still incapable of answering the second theological difficulty that I mentioned above, namely why God then revealed to the Imam his decision that he would change soon.

A more reasonable position was reflected in a tradition that views any knowledge imparted by God to his angels, prophets, and imams as conditional. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq states, “God informed Muḥammad of everything that had existed from the beginning of the world and that would exist until the end of the world. He notified him of some things that were unalterable

²⁵ W. Madelung, “Badā’,” *EIr*, 3:354-5

²⁶ *Idem.*, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Vol. 1, p. 147: “*Inna lillāhi ‘ilmān: ‘ilmun makhnūnun makhzūnun, lā ya‘lamuhu illā hu, min dhālika yakūnu al-badā, wa ‘ilmun ‘allamahu malā‘ikatahu wa rusulahu wa anbiyā‘ahu fa-naḥnu na‘lamuhu.*”

(*maḥtūm*) and made all other things an exception to it.”²⁷ Thus, the Imam here exhibits a tendency to remove the tension between divine knowledge and imams’ knowledge by giving more priority and authority to the side of the former. And he declared the knowledge that God granted to imams conditioned by his will. This position has been improved and enriched by Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭūsī (d. 1067), who, following his master Abū al-Qāsim al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), places reason at the heart of his understanding of the fundamentals of faith. In his *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, where he specifically debates changes of divine decision, specifically those concerning the time of arrival of the Mahdī and promises made to the followers of imams, he brings to the attention of readers the idea of common good (*maṣlaḥa*). He mentions two kinds of information given to imams, one unchangeable and taken as certain and evident, such as those reports about divine attributes, past events, and the rewards of believers. The other, he states,

T3: Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, 431-432: “...is that which may change, as common good varies based on conditions. We certainly deem this change possible concerning reports about future events except in cases where there appears a new report informing that what has been reported will not change; we could then declare it certain. Thus, certainty hinges on many reports. For we have been notified that they will never change and therefore we have a definite knowledge of them.”²⁸

In fact, Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭūsī’s reference to *maṣlaḥa* is essentially Mu‘tazilite. He adapted and incorporated into his understanding of *badā’* the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of *aṣlāḥ* (the optimum),

²⁷ *Idem.*, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Vol. 1, p. 148: “Inna allāha ‘azza wa jalla akhbara muḥammadan—ṣallā allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallama—bi-mā kāna mundhu kānat al-dunyā wa bi-mā yakūnu ilā inqida’ al-dunyā; wa akhbara-hu bi al-maḥtūm min dhālika wa-istathnā ‘alayhi fīmā siwāhu.”

²⁸ Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, eds. ‘Ibād Allāh al-Ṭahrānī and ‘Alī Aḥmad Nāṣih (Tehran: Mu‘assasa al-Ma‘ārif al-Islāmīya, 1424/2005), p. 431-432: “*Qulnā: al-akhbāru ‘alā ḍarbayn: ḍaribun lā yajūzu fīhi al-tagḥayyuru fī mukhbarātihi; fa-innā naqta ‘u ‘alayhā li-‘ilminā bi-annahu lā yajūzu an yataghayyara al-mukhbaru fī naṣiḥi; ka-al-ikhbār ‘an ṣifāt allāh ta‘ālā wa ‘an al-kā’ināt fīmā maḍā, wa ka-al-ikhbār bi-annahu yuthību al-mu‘minūn. Wa al-ḍarbu al-ākharu huwa mā yajūzu tagḥayyuru fī naṣiḥi li-tagḥayyuri l-maṣlaḥa ‘inda tagḥayyur shurūṭi; fa-innā nujawwizu jamī’ dhālika; ka-al-ikhbār ‘an al-ḥawādīth fī al-mustaqbal illā an yarida al-khabaru ‘alā wajhin yu‘lamu anna mukhbaruhu lā yataghayyaru; fa-hīna ‘idhin naqta ‘u bi-kawnihi; wa li-ajli dhālika qarana al-ḥatmu bi-kathīrin min al-mukhbarāt; fa u‘lminā annahu mimmā lā yataghayyaru aṣlan; fa-‘inda dhālika naqta ‘u bihi.*”

which claims that God chooses the best for his creatures and his plan is based on what is the most beneficial for them. Despite his straightforward hostility to speculative theology (*kalām*) Abū Ja‘far ibn Babawayh (d. 991), two or three generations before Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭūsī, had already drawn on the same doctrine so as to corroborate the idea of *badā’*. Instead of *māṣlaha* he rather employed the term *ṣalāḥ* (salutary). He states that anyone who admits the view of God’s abrogation of his laws (*naskh*) for the interest of people (*ṣalāḥ*) would pretty much admit *badā’*.²⁹ 9th-10th century Imamite theologians often examined *badā’* in comparison to the Qur’anic doctrine of *naskh* as well, which was approved by all Muslim theologians. However, the Mu‘tazilites deemed it problematic to associate *badā’* closely with *naskh*. Al-Khayyāt makes a visible distinction between them, stating that *naskh* elucidates a change in religious commandments based on context (*fī al-amr wa al-nahy min al-qawl*), whereas *badā’* expresses an alteration in reports about things and events (*al-akhbār fī shay’*).³⁰

In history of the Imamites, there have been several other attempts to find a solution to the problem of *badā’* that could not violate the infallibility of the Imams. As shown above, early Imamī scholars—such as al-Kulaynī and Ibn Babawayh—opted for a traditionalist interpretation of the topic in accordance with the transmitted reports of the Imams. They did not usually tend to establish the doctrine of *badā’* through resort to reason in their arguments. Following the warnings of the Imams they even had an uncompromising opposition to rational disputations and speculations about God. The forms of *Kalām* and its use of speculative reasoning in religious issues despite the general tendency to cling to the *hadiths* of the Prophet and the Imams was

²⁹ Ibn Babawayh, *al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṭehrānī, p. 327

³⁰ Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 93 (Section 84): “*Fa-ammā al-rāfiḍatu bi-asrihā fa-innahā taqūlu bi-al-badā’ fī al-akhbār wa laysa al-qawlu bi bi-al-naskh fī al-amr wa al-nahy min al-qawl bi al-badā’ fī al-akhbār fī shay’in.*”

observed in the second part of the 8th century. Among those who engaged in rational arguments can be mentioned Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. Nu‘mān (known as ‘Ṣāḥib al- Ṭāq’), Hishām b. al-Ḥakam and Hishām b. Sālīm al- Jawālīqī.³¹

1.3. Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam’s formulation of *badā’*: The genesis and development of the Mu‘tazilite understanding of nonbeing

Abū Muḥammad Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 795), as a prominent disciple of Jafar al-Ṣādiq, approached the problem of *badā’* from a different theological point of view so that he could get rid of the tension between the immutability of divine knowledge and the doctrine of *badā’*. In this section, I will first argue that his formula for the resolution of the tension is an inchoate anticipation of the formation of the idea of nonbeing. By engaging in a close reading of the relevant passages in al-Khayyāt’s *al-Intiṣār* and al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt*, I will attract attention to the impact the Mu‘tazilites’ polemics with Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 795) had on the development of the Mu‘tazilite view of nonbeing, which in turn contributed to the emergence of the Ash‘arite position.

Ibn al-Ḥakam could be considered the most prominent Imāmī theologian of the 8th century. Born in Kufa, the center of Iraq’s Shiites, Ibn al-Ḥakam laid the foundations of the Shi‘ite doctrine of the Imamate. In the presence of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786-809) he is said to have involved in *Kalām* debates with his opponents, especially Zaydī and the Mu‘tazilite theologians. As al-Kulaynī (d. 941) and al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 1022) have pointed

³¹ For the study of the early development of the Imāmī theology, see Madelung, “Imamism and Mu‘tazilite Theology,” in *Le Shī‘isme imāmīte*, pp. 14-30 and Amir-Moezzi, “Early Shī‘ī Theology,” in ed. Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, pp. 81-90

out, his rise to prominence was the result of Ja‘far al-Şādiq’s putting him forth to enter into a dispute with a man known as a Syrian (*al-shāmī*).³² Ibn al-Ḥakam is claimed to have originally been a follower of the Jahmite doctrine and later converted to the Imamite doctrine. But his disagreement with the Jahmiyya with regard to the doctrine of God renders this claim a remote possibility. For, his idea of God as a body is clearly dissonant with the Jahmite apophatic God. Van Ess argues that this idea must have been passed on to him by Abū Shākir al-Daysānī, who had a contact with the Imamite community, over his theological conversation with Ja‘far al-Şādiq.³³ The current of his thoughts acquired a new direction after his meeting with al-Daysānī. Ibn al-Ḥakam followed him not only in his image of God as a body, but also when he proposes that bodies are the only constituents of the world and therefore that all secondary qualities like color, smell and taste are somewhat corporeal.³⁴

Ibn al-Ḥakam introduced into his doctrine of atomism several ontological categories like *mawjūd* (existent), *jism* (body), and *shay’* (thing). By recognizing no accidents (*a’rād*), he held

³² al-Kulaynī, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Vol. 1, p. 172; Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Shayk al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād* (Tehran:Najaf: Manshūrāt al-Maktaba al-Ḥaydarīya, 1962), p. 278. Both sources narrates Ja‘far al-Şādiq as addressing the Syrian in the same words: “*fa-qāla li al-shāmī: kallim hādhā al-ghulām, ya ‘nī hishām ibn al-ḥakam.*” See also Wilferd Madelung, “The Shiite and Khārijite Contribution to Pre-Ash‘arite *Kalām*,” in Perviz Morewedge (ed.), *Islamic Philosophical Theology* (Albany, NY: 1979), p. 122 and Josef van Ess, *Theology and society in the second and third centuries of the Hijra : a history of religious thought in Early Islam*, trans. From German by John O’Kane (Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2017), Vol. 1, p. 414

³³ Ibn Babawayh, *al-Tawḥīd*, ed. Al-Sayyid Hāshim al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṭehrānī, p. 285; For the reports concerning his dialogue with Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, see also pp. 129 and 283. Ibn al-Ḥakam’s link with al-Daysānī has also been confirmed by al-Khayyāt. Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intisar*, ed. Nader, p. 37. For the assertion that there seems to be no possibility that Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam had a link with the Jahmiyya, See Madelung, “The Shiite and Kharijite contribution to pre-Ash‘arite kalam,” p. 135, f. 46 and Josef van Ess, *Theology and society*, trans. John O’Kane, Vol. 1, p. 417

³⁴ Josef van Ess, *Theology and society*, trans. John O’Kane, Vol. 1, p. 417. For the relevant passages, see Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut, p. 31-32: “*Aṣḥāb hishām ibn al-ḥakam al-rāfiḍī yaz ‘umūna anna ma ‘būdahum jismun wa la-hu nihāyatun wa ḥaddun ṭawīlun ‘arīḍun*” See also *Idem.*, p. 369: “*wa-ikhtalafa al-nāsu fī al-ma ‘ānī al-qā’ima bi-al-ajsām ka-al-ḥarakāt wa al-sukūn wa mā ashbaha dhālika hal hiya a’rādun aw ṣifātun. Fa-qāla qā’ilūn: naqūlu annahā ṣifātun wa lā naqūlu hiya a’rādun wa naqūlu hiya ma ‘ānin wa lā naqūlu hiya al-ajsām wa lā naqūlu ghayruha li-anna al-tagḥāyura yaqa’u bayn al-ajsām; wa hadhā qawlu hishām ibn al-ḥakam.*”

the view that there exist only bodies in which characteristics (*ṣifāt*) subsist. What Ash‘arī quotes him as calling *al-ḥarakāt wa al-af‘āl* (movements and actions), such as standing and sitting, willing something and not willing it, obedience to God or sin, belief and unbelief, are not a body nor are they other than it. By excluding the accident of rest, Hishām proposes that movement alone has a certain reality. However, he distinguishes this reality from that of a body.³⁵ In order to support this distinction, he resorts to the category of *ma‘nā* (momentum). A body (*jism*) is a thing (*shay‘*) and existent (*mawjūd*), whereas movement is only a momentum, which has no permanent characteristic of a body.³⁶ What is more, he here equates body with the concepts of thing and existent. Hishām employs almost the same phraseology to speak of divine reality. He assigns God these three concepts as proof of his reality. As yet, his God is a body unlike bodies (*jism lā ka l-ajsām*). Thereby, he defends a sort of transcendent anthropomorphism.³⁷ Thus, in his theology three concepts *jism*, *shay‘* and *mawjūd* are all identical extensionally and intentionally. Ibn al-Ḥakam’s word choice also has been supported by al-Ash‘arī, who quotes him as claiming that the meaning of *mawjūd* with regard to God is that he is a body as it is existent and a thing (*mawjūd shay‘un*).³⁸ His follower Ibn al-Rāwandī is reported to have penned a work entitled *Kitāb Lā shay‘ illā mawjūd* (There is no thing except the existent), which equates thing with

³⁵ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut, p.344.9-12: “*al-ḥarakāt wa sār al-af‘āl min al-qiyām wa al-qu‘ūd wa al-irāda wa al-karāha wa al-ṭā‘a wa al-ma‘ṣiya wa sār mā yuthbitu al-muthbitūn al-a‘rāda a‘rādan annahā ṣifāt al-ajsām lā hiya al-ajsāmu wa lā ghayruhā; annahā laysat bi-ajsāmin fa-yaqa‘a ‘alā al-taghayyuru...p. 344.15-345.3 ...kāna lā yaz‘umu anna ṣifāt al-insān ashyā‘un li-al-ashyā‘ hiya al-ajsāmu ‘indahū, wa kāna yaz‘umu annahā ma‘ānin wa laysat bi-ashyā‘in....anna al-ḥaraka ma‘nan wa anna al-sukūna laysa bi-ma‘nan.*”

³⁶ Josef van Ess, *Theology and society*, trans. John O’Kane, Vol. 1, p. 422

³⁷ *Idem*, p. 419

³⁸ See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 521: *Wa-za‘ama hishām ibn al-ḥakam: anna ma‘nā mawjūd fī al-bārī annahu jismun li-annahū mawjūdun shay‘un.*

existent.³⁹ It is the very position of Hishām, parenthetically speaking, which may well have set the stage for the Ash‘arites rendering the latter two concepts synonymous.

In early Imamite *hadith* works, the doctrine of *badā’* was discussed specifically in the chapters on divine knowledge; the Imams treated divine knowledge as an essential element of the doctrine of *badā’*. Something happened, which God did not indeed anticipate to happen, because he had no foreknowledge. Ibn al-Ḥakam further associated the Imamite ideas of *badā’* and divine knowledge with the issues of nonbeing and human freedom. Three major sources available to us give enough information on his perspective. Originally a Mu‘tazilite, Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 859) wrote during his Shī‘ī phase a book now lost, entitled *Faḍīḥat al-Mu‘tazila*, as a reply to al-Jāhiz’s (d. 868) *Faḍīlat al-Mu‘tazila*. He provides a defense of Kufan Imamism in the person of Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam. In this early period, Kufa was the central city for Imamism where the doctrine of *badā’* was disseminated.⁴⁰ Many fragments of *Fāḍihāt* are fortunately extant in Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāt’s (d. 913) polemical work *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*. Possibly inspired by Ibn al-Rāwandī’s arrangement of his own book, he accordingly discusses the doctrine of *badā’* in a link with divine knowledge. Furthermore, we learn from his presentation that Ibn al-Ḥakam introduces the problem of nonbeing as the corollary of *badā’* and divine knowledge. Al-Khayyāt devotes a considerable number of sections (39, 48, 71-74, 77-87) to a treatment of the topic. In his narrative al-Ash‘arī (d. 936), the founder of the Ash‘arite theological tradition, largely runs parallel with al-Khayyāt.⁴¹ As Helmut Ritter said, it is the consensus of these two rival writers

³⁹ Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. XXVIII.

⁴⁰ ⁴⁰ *Idem.*, *Theology and society*, trans. John O’Kane, Vol. 1, p. 366

⁴¹ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 37; 221-222; 491-494

that would support the truth and authenticity of their narration (*ṣiḥḥa al-riwāya*).⁴² However, his work accommodates the rich variability of structures, concepts and issues to sketch out the idea of nonbeing. Whereas al-Khayyāt discusses the opinions of his Shiite opponents in a more polemical way, al-Ash‘arī uses a more highly objective tone in his recording of opinions. One last distinction between them is that al-Ash‘arī adds one more theme—human freedom—to other three themes in his treatment of Ibn al-Ḥakam’s position.

The concept of nonbeing was already implied in the formulation of *badā’*; taken as an alteration in God’s foreknowledge of future events it had evoked the idea of nonbeing since the beginning. Ibn al-Ḥakam is credited with the clearest expression of the concept of nonbeing in his discussion of the problem of divine knowledge.⁴³ Al-Khayyāt quotes Ibn al-Rāwandī as saying,

T4: al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, Section 79, p. 90: *Thumma qāla: wa qad ajma‘a al-muwaḥḥidūn ‘alā anna allāha kāna wa lā shay‘a; fa-idhā kāna hādihā hakadhā wa kāna al-‘ilmu lā yaqa‘u illā ‘alā shay‘in fa-lā ma‘nā li-qawl al-qā’il lam yazal allāhu ‘āliman bi-al-ashyā’ qabla kawnihā; idh al-ashyā’ lā takūnu ashayā’a.*

He [Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam] said next, “The true monotheists (*muwaḥḥidūn*) agreed that God was while there was not anything with him. As no intelligible thing can exist with him, his knowledge should only pertain to truly existent things (*shay‘*). Therefore, there is no reason to claim that God eternally knows things prior to their existence. For, things cannot be themselves before their existence.”⁴⁴

⁴² *Idem*, p. 18

⁴³ The relation of the problem of nonbeing with divine knowledge and *badā’* has first been recognized by Goldziher and Tritton. See I. Goldziher and A.S. Tritton, “Badā’,” *EP*², ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Vol. 2, pp. 850-851

⁴⁴ Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 90

In Section 39, al-Khayyāt associates this statement with Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam.⁴⁵ Sunni heresiographers also contain a parallel saying attributed to him.⁴⁶ As I will mention in Chapter 4, Muslim theologians from an early period held on to the transcendental existence of God through resort to the “God was while there was not anything with him” (*kāna allāhu wa-lā shay’a*) locution. Though repeatedly narrated in the *hadith* collection, the same expression was also attributed to Empedocles Arabus in Neoplatonic sources.⁴⁷ This was one of the most common ways of saying that there is one God and he alone is eternal. In this quote, Ibn al-Ḥakam argues that God has no knowledge of nonexistent objects until they exist because this would designate their immediate existence. It would also run contrary to the unity of God. Therefore, Ibn al-Ḥakam limits his knowledge to a post-creation reality; God knows things not eternally but only at the time of their existence.

None of Ibn al-Ḥakam’s many writings are extant. Therefore, we have the difficulty to fill in the gaps in Ibn al-Ḥakam’s perspective. Yet his ideas are often quoted in both Sunni and Imamite works. ‘Abd al-Jabbār reports that he would argue for the anthropomorphic view of God, the createdness of his knowledge, and the doctrine of *badā’* (*anna Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam qāla bi al-tajsīm wa bi- ḥudūth al- ‘ilm wa bi- jawāz al-badā’*).⁴⁸ In fact, his idea of divine

⁴⁵ *Idem.*, p. 49-50

⁴⁶ See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 37; al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, p. 49; Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, ed. Cureton, p. 141; Ibn Ḥazm, ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad, *al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā’ wa al-Niḥal*, eds. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣīr and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Umayra (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, [1995]), Vol. 5, p. 40

⁴⁷ Ulrich Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios: ein Beitrag zur Neuplatonischen Überlieferung im Islam* (Stuttgart : Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner Wiesbaden, 1989), pp. 33-36

⁴⁸ ‘Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-al- ‘adl* ([Cairo] : Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Irshād al-Qawmī, al-Mu’assasah al-Miṣrīyah al-‘Āmmah lil-Ta’līf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr, [196-?-]), vol. 20/1; p. 38;

knowledge perfectly complies not only with the doctrine of *badā'* as expressed in the Imamite *hadith* collections, but also with his anthropomorphic view of God.⁴⁹ As discussed in the previous section, the necessary relationship between *badā'* and divine knowledge is beyond dispute. So then, Ibn al-Ḥakam's comments in **T4** cannot be taken into consideration without regard for *badā'*. What is more noteworthy is that he laid the foundations of the Shiite theory of the Imamate. He put emphasis on the permanent need for a divinely guided Imam. The Imam has infallibility (*'isma*) in all his acts and statements. In this respect, he allots a relatively higher rank to the Imams than the prophets. Since the prophets could be subject to God's critiques, they do not have to be infallible.⁵⁰ Thus, his concern for the theory of the Imamate and the doctrine of *badā'* is to be put in perspective in **T4**. With all this in mind, his comments in this passage can be seen as an attempt to present a more optimal solution to the tension the doctrine of *badā'* had produced between God's immutable knowledge and the Imam's ineffability. How could *badā'* be accepted without a corresponding change occurring in God's knowledge? Change in God's decision in response to fresh phenomena would be possible only if he does not foreknow not-yet-existing events. This interpretation perfectly allows for a rewarding elucidation of the failure of prophecies of the Imams. It is this backdrop against which his perspective of the nonexistent would be better understood.

al-Khayyāt puts into words the idea of nonbeing in various ways. In **T4**, He quotes—or perhaps paraphrases—Ibn al-Ḥakam's articulation of prior nonexistence (or *a parte ante*

⁴⁹ For a parallel point of view, see Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and falsification : the Kitāb al-qirā'āt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī, Critical Edition with an Introduction and Notes* (Leiden ; Boston : Brill, 2009), p. 257

⁵⁰ Wilfred Madelung, "Hishām b. al-Ḥakam", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 12 March 2024 http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2906

nonexistence) in reference to the incomplete verb *lam yazal*, which takes a nominative subject (i.e., God) and an accusative predicate (i.e., knowing) with the things as the latter's direct object, e.g., *lam yazal allāhu 'alīman bi al-ashyā'* (God knows things from eternity). But Ibn al-Ḥakam resorts to the same phrase in the negative form in order to express the contingency of God's knowledge. From al-Khayyāṭ's *al-Intiṣār* we learn that when expressing nonbeing early theologians further employ other meontological terms like *ma 'dūm* and *'adam*. Another instance from his work is the forth form of the verb from the same root, *i 'dām*, always as an expression of God's act of making nonexistent.⁵¹ Section 57 is particularly worth mentioning. Al-Khayyāṭ here brings other usages to attention over criticism of Ibn al-Rāwandī's allegations against the Mu'tazilite theologian 'Abbād b. Sulaymān. Ibn al-Rāwandī reports Ibn Sulaymān as asserting that existing things on earth have never been nonexistent in any way (*kullu mawjūdin 'alā zahr al-ard fa-lam yakun ma 'dūman bi-wajhin min al-wujūh*). The major reason why Ibn Sulaymān held this assertion, according to him, lies in his explanation of the contingent existent (*mawjūd* or *muhdath*) as "that which is not presently nonexistent, was not previously nonexistent, and will not be nonexistent forever (*li-anna al-mawjūd 'indahū laysa bi-ma 'dūmin wa lam yakun ma 'dūman wa lā yakūnu ma 'dūman abadan*)."⁵² This would then mean that things exist at all times, which doubtless goes against the doctrine of *tawḥīd*. Therefore, Ibn al-Rāwandī accuses him of proposing the eternity of bodies (*qidam al-ajsām*). What is of significance to our chapter here is that Ibn al-Rāwandī mentions three kinds of *ma 'dūm*: 1-) nonexistent before creation (*lam yakun ma 'dūman*); 2-) presently nonexistent (*laysa bi-ma 'dūmin*); and 3-) nonexistent after creation (*la yakūnu ma 'dūman abadan*). In al-Khayyāṭ's opinion, however, the accusations

⁵¹ Al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 24

⁵² Al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 69

against Ibn Sulaymān in this particular case are devoid of all truth. He states that what Ibn Salmān meant by the terms *mawjūd* and *muḥdath* is not as Ibn Rāwandī asserts, but *mā lam yakun fa-kāna* (that which was once nonexistent and later existed). Finally, when favoring the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of *tawlīd* (generation), al-Khayyāṭ introduces the concept of *ma‘dūm* not in the ordinary theological sense of the word, but to denote “the deceased.”⁵³

After a brief presentation of al-Khayyāṭ’s heterogeneity of expressions and words designating the idea of nonbeing, I will return to Ibn al-Ḥakam’s reference to the locution *lam yazal* when he denies the idea of the nonexistent as an object of divine knowledge, e.g., *lam yazal ‘āliman bi-al-ashyā’* (He knows things *ab aeterno*). In 9th century *Kalām* writings, *lam yazal* with God usually as the subject theologically designates “eternally/from eternity.”⁵⁴ The phrase goes back as far as the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 717–720), who is thought to have proposed the doctrine of predestination possibly to justify the wrong acts of the Umayyads.⁵⁵ In his apologetic and polemical treatise entitled *al-Radd ‘alā al-Qadariyya* (Refutation of the Qadarites), ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ascribed ignorance to a group of people who contend that man has the capability to determine his own actions, and hence, that God came to know things after creation (*wa laqad a‘zama billāhi al-jahl man za‘ama anna al-‘ilma kāna ba‘da al-ḥaqq*). In accordance with his political agenda, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz rather stresses that God knows things before creation (*bal lam yazal allāhu waḥdahu bi-kulli shay’in ‘alīman wa ‘alā*

⁵³ Al-Khayyāṭ presents the notion of *ma‘dūmīn* in the sense of the deceased in a context where he advocates the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of *tawlīd*.

⁵⁴ Richard Frank, “Lam Yazal as Formal Term in Muslim Theological Discourse,” *MIDEO* 22 (1995):243-270

⁵⁵ Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh : University Press, 1973), p. 85

kulli shay'in shahīdan qabla an yakhlūqa shay'an).⁵⁶ His addition of *qabla an yakhlūqa shay'an* is a good sign that 'Abd al-'Azīz employs the expression *lam yazal*, in its ordinary sense, as synonym for "has always been." Therefore, it is hard to say that *lam yazal* in this early period was used as a fully grown technical term. The term in the sense of *ab aeterno* began to circulate among the 9th century theologians.⁵⁷ This can be observed in 'Uthmān al-Dārimī's (894) *al-Radd 'alā al-Jahmiyya*, al-Khayyāt's *al-Intiṣār* and al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt*; it was often resorted to by *Mutakallimūn* of different backgrounds, such as Imamites, Mu'tazilites, Jahmites and Hanbalites.⁵⁸

Notwithstanding differences of context and detail, the statements of Ibn al-Ḥakam and the Qadarites are parallel in structure and content with the exception of the additional adverbial expression *qabla an yakhlūqa shay'an* (before creation) in the latter. Ibn al-Ḥakam might have been aware of the Qadarite formulation of human freedom mentioned above. Indeed, it is well-known that during his career he came into contact with such scholars like 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd ibn Bāb (d. 761) who, as a Mu'tazilite, used to inherit Qadarite views.⁵⁹ This could also be observed in his anti-predestinarian position. Besides his possible interest in the doctrine of *badā'*, the other

⁵⁶ Josef van Ess, *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie. Zwei antiqadaritische Traktate aus dem ersten Jahrhundert der Hira, Beirut Texts and Studies*, 14 (Beirut & Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), p. 46 (*Risāla 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz fī al-Radd 'alā al-Qadariyya*); for a general overview of the qadarites, see Steven C. Judd, "Qadariyya", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Devin J. Stewart. Consulted online on 02 September 2023 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_46302

⁵⁷ Richard Frank, "Lam Yazal as Formal Term in Muslim Theological Discourse," p. 249

⁵⁸ 'Uthmān b. Sa'īd al-Dārimī, *al-Radd 'alā al-Jahmiyya*, ed. Badr b. 'Abd Allāh al-Badr (Kuwait: Dār Ibn al-Athīr, 1995), pp. 21; 130, 155-156; Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, pp. 49-50; 80-93; Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn* I, ed. Ritter, pp. 37; 158-163; 221-222; 488-496;

⁵⁹ Alexander Hainy Khaleeli, "Hisham ibn al-Hakam: Arch-Heretic?" *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* Vol. III:3 (Summer 2010), p. 286

reason underlying his denial of divine foreknowledge may be tied to his tendency to protect human freedom and God's unity. Al-Ash'arī narrates Ibn al-Ḥakam as saying:

T5: al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, p. 37: *Qāla wa-law kāna lam yazal 'ālīman la-kānat al-ma'lūmātu lam tazal li-annahū lā yaṣihḥū 'ālimun illā bi-ma'lūmin mawjūin; qāla wa-law kāna 'ālīman bi-mā yaf'aluhu 'ibāduhu lam yaṣihḥū al-miḥnatu wa al-ikhtibāru.*

“He [Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam] said, ‘If he [God] were to know in eternity, objects of knowledge would also be eternal. For one can know objects of knowledge only after they truly exist. Moreover, had God known what his servants would do, trial and test would not be possible.’”⁶⁰

In this passage, Ibn al-Ḥakam deals with two problems that naturally stem from divine foreknowledge of nonexistent things: (a) One is the eternity of contingent things; and (b) the other predetermination. In the latter case, Ibn al-Ḥakam problematizes the eternity of God's knowledge as this would supposedly lead to the deterministic result that humans do not have responsibility and free will. A loss of human responsibility and freedom would in turn make meaningless the qur'ānic idea of life as a trial and test. The former issue can be formulated most succinctly in the question whether God's foreknowledge would entail the existence of its objects in eternity. Eternity was one of the central themes of medieval philosophy. As mentioned above, God's eternity was expressed by 9th century writers through reference to *lam yazal*. In presenting the idea of eternity (whether associated with God or things), they further resorted to such formal terms as *azal*, its substantive and adjective forms *azalī* and *azaliyya*, and *qidam* and its adjective form *qadīm*. The idea became more popular and enriched as the corpus of translations of Greek works was made within the circle of al-Kindī. Following the Greek philosophical line of thought as represented by Aristotle as well as Porphyry and subsequent Neoplatonists, Muslim *falāsifa*

⁶⁰ Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 37

especially subscribed to the view of the eternity of the world.⁶¹ Unlike them, philosophers like al-Kindī (d. 873) and 9th century *Mutakallimūn* rather went on to argue in favor of the idea that the cosmos has a beginning in time. Their position would come to mean that God alone is eternal, and all other beings are contingent and are not able to exist in eternity.⁶² From the very early period on, the definition of God as eternal was the distinctive way of expressing the Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*. Accordingly, theologians avoided ascribing this attribute to anything other than God. In this quote Ibn al-Ḥakam seems to have embraced the theological principle that knowledge would require that its objects known be eternally present together with him, which would be at odds with the doctrine of *tawhīd*. Al-Ash‘arī attributes this principle to the so-called eternalists (*azaliyya*), which will be discussed below. Ibn al-Ḥakam thus holds that God does not have knowledge of nonexistents and hence existing things are the only objects of divine knowledge and it is rather the existence of contingent beings that precedes and shapes God’s true knowledge.

Our sources inform that there is indeed a polemical atmosphere in which early 9th century Imamites and Mu‘tazilites engaged with the problem of the nonexistent with respect to divine knowledge. The doctrine of *badā’* is always associated with the latter. Ibn al-Rāwandī gave his testimony as to the existence of such an atmosphere. Being previously an adherent of the Mu‘tazilite school, he occasionally charged its leading thinkers with suffering from errors and

⁶¹ For the presentation of al-Farābī’s (d. 950) arguments in favor of the eternity of the world, see, for instance, Muhsin Mahdi, “Alfarabi against Philoponus,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26.4 (1967): 233-260; *Idem.*, The Arabic text of Alfarabi’s Against John the Grammarian. In: *Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in Honor of Aziz Suryal Atiya*, ed. S. A. Hanna (Brill, Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 268-284

⁶² For the study on early Muslim intellectuals’ assumptions against the eternity of the world, see Herbert A. Davidson, “John Philoponus as a source of Medieval Islamic and Jewish proofs of Creation,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2 (1969): 357-391; Peter Adamson, *al-Kindī* (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 74-106;

inconsistencies. As we learn from the fragments of his anti-Mu‘tazilite work, *Fādīḥa al-Mu‘tazila*, surviving in al-Khayyāt’s *al-Intiṣār*, he enthusiastically defended the theological ideas of the Imamites, those of Ibn Ḥakam in particular, against attacks by Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 841), Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. 845), and al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868). But, there is one case in which he interestingly departs from Ibn al-Ḥakam’s position on divine knowledge via criticism of the Mu‘tazilite Hishām b. ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 845), who he thinks lines up with what Ibn al-Ḥakam contends, namely that God does not know things eternally. Thus, he subjects al-Fuwaṭī to the same condemnation that the Mu‘tazilites put forward against Ibn al-Ḥakam.

On the side of the Mu‘tazilites, early in the 9th century, Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 845) occupied a central place in discussions of divine knowledge and nonbeing. He is one of the leading figures of the Basran Mu‘tazilites.⁶³ Al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī’s anecdote (d. 1101) relates that he was a fanatic proponent of the Mu‘tazilite doctrine as he went on Mu‘tazilite missionary journeys and he had a close relationship with the caliph al-Ma‘mūn (r. 814-833). Al-Fuwaṭī’s anthropological and political-theological perspective runs parallel, respectively, with that of Mu‘ammar ibn ‘Abbād (d. 830) and Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 842). His heritage in classical Mu‘tazilism is carried on and spread by his disciple ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864). Al-Khayyāt gives him a place in his response to Ibn al-Rāwandī’s criticism mentioned above. He finds fault with Ibn al-Rāwandī’s statement by proposing in advance that al-Fuwaṭī would consider it unbelief to ascribe lack of knowledge of future things to God. Al-Khayyāt makes difference between the two questions al-Fuwaṭī possibly dealt with: **(1)** Whether things are things

⁶³ For information about the biography of Hishām al-Fuwaṭī, see El Omari Racha, “al-Fuwaṭī, Hishām b. ‘Amr”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, eds. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Devin J. Stewart. Consulted online on 07 June 2023 <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1017/S0021871819000000> eia_COM_27219

before their creation (*al-asmā' al-ma'lūmāt hal hiya ashyā' qabla kawnihā*) and (2) Whether God knows in eternity (*hal huwa 'ālimun am laysa bi-'ālimin*). He supposes that al-Fuwaṭī would not actually deny the correlation in eternity between God's knowledge and its not-yet-existing, future objects. But his answer to the first question would be in the negative, as he might think that predicating that things are things in eternity would express their co-existence with God from eternity, which is again at variance with the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *tawḥīd*.⁶⁴

Concerning the second matter (2), al-Ash'arī supplies us with an entirely different account of al-Fuwaṭī. In contrast with al-Khayyāt, he reports that al-Fuwaṭī did not even allow for God's knowledge of future things. He writes:

T6: al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, p. 158: *fa-qāla hishām ibn 'amr al-fuwaṭī: lam yazal allāhu 'āliman qādiran; wa kāna idhā qīla lahu: lam yazal allāhu 'āliman bi- al-ashyā', qāla: lā aqūlu, "lam yazal 'āliman bi- al-ashyā'. Wa aqūlu: lam yazal 'āliman annahu wāḥidun lā thāniya lahu. Fa-idhā qultu: lam yazal 'āliman bi- al-ashyā', thabbattuhā lam tazal ma'a allāh 'azza wa jalla; wa idhā qīla lahu: a-fa-taqūlu inna allāha lam yazal 'āliman bi-an sa-takūna al-ashyā'? qāla: idhā qultu bi-an sa-takūna fa-hādihi ishāratun ilayhā wa-lā yajūzu an ushūra illā ilā mawjūdin. Wa kāna lā yusammā mā lam yakhlūqu allāhu wa lam yakun shay'an wa yusammāmā khalaqahu allāhu wa a'damahu shay'an wa huwa ma'dūmun.*

“Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī said: “God knows and has power in eternity [*absolutely*, that is, without any other thing being present with him].” When asked whether God knows things in eternity, he replied, “I do not state that he knows things in eternity, but that he knows from eternity only that he alone is one and there is no second god. For instance, if I were to say that God knows things in eternity, I would establish (*thabbattuhā*) their eternal co-existence with God.” When asked, “Do you then think that God of eternity knows *that* things will come into existence?” he replied, “If I were to say *an satakūna* (*that* they will exist), even this would indicate a “reference” (*ishāra*) to them. Indeed, it is only possible to refer to an existent thing (*mawjūd*). Anything that God has not yet created and has not come into existence cannot be called *shay'* (thing). But

⁶⁴ Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 49: “*Thumma qāla: wa kāna yaz'umu anna allāha lā ya'lamu al-ashyā'a qabla kawnihā wa yukhaṭṭa'u man qāla bi-dhālika. Wa yuqālu lahu: innaka awḥamta 'an hishām hādihā qawl innahu kāna yaqūlu: inna allāha ghayru 'ālimin thumma 'alima ḥasba mā kāna hishām ibn al-ḥakam yaqūluhu. Wa al-qawlu bi-dhālika kufrun 'inda al-hishām al-fuwaṭī...wa innamā khilāfu hishām al-fuwaṭī fī hādihā al-mawḍi' khilāfun fī al-asmā' al-ma'lūmāt: hal hiya ashyā' qabla kawnihā am laysat bi-ashyā'? Fa-ammā fī allāh jalla dhikruhu: hal huwa 'ālimun am laysa bi-'ālimin? Fa-lā. Wa huwa yaz'umu anna allāh lam yazal 'āliman bi-annahu sa-yakhlūqu al-dunyā thumma yufnihā thumma yu'īdu ahlāhā.*”

anything that God has created and then brought into nonexistence can be named *shay'* in spite of the fact that it is nonexistent (*ma 'dūm*).”⁶⁵

Al-Fuwāṭī here finds it problematic God’s foreknowledge of contingent beings, as this would designate an assertion of their eternal existence (*thabbatuhā lam tazal ma 'a allāh*, cf. *ithbātun annahā lam tazal*⁶⁶). Not only does God have no knowledge of things in eternity. But also, says al-Fuwaṭī, God cannot know *that* they will happen, that is, the idea of their coming into existence in the future.⁶⁷ Both would ruin the unity of God. Al-Fuwaṭī explains the underlying assumption by linking the act of knowing with the sensory concept of *ishāra*. In the classical period, the concept was employed to express “a gesture of the hand, a sign of the head, of the elbow, the eyes, the eyebrows etc.”⁶⁸ He argues that since pointing at future contingent things entails their eternal existence, they are to be excluded from divine knowledge. Our sources are not in agreement as to al-Fuwaṭī’s position. Unlike al-Ash‘arī, al-Khayyāṭ, as well as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), narrates that al-Fuwaṭī indeed argued in favor for God’s eternal knowledge of future things. Since doxographical and heresiographical narrative is so concise and interruptive that it does not provide a straightforward and comprehensive account of theologians’ opinions and ideas, it is hard to say what exactly al-Fuwaṭī said about this issue. In **T6**, al-Ash‘arī lastly states

⁶⁵ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn* I, ed. Ritter, p. 158

⁶⁶ *Idem.*, pp. 488-489

⁶⁷ Al-Ash‘arī’s report on al-Fuwaṭī’s denial of future contingents as objects of divine knowledge is clearly incompatible with Al-Khayyāṭ’s. The latter cites, or perhaps quotes, al-Fuwaṭī as saying, “God really knows from eternity that he will create the earth, annihilate it, and resurrect its inhabitants” (*wa huwa yazumu anna allāha lam yazal 'āliman bi-annahū sayakhluqu al-dunyā thumma yufnīhā thumma yu 'īdu ahlāhā...*) As will be discussed below, this is actually the position of the Mu‘tazilite school. See also *Idem.*, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 89

⁶⁸ Al-Jāhīz, Abū ‘Uthman ‘Amr ibn Baḥr al-Kinānī al-Baṣrī, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* (Beirut: Dār wa Maktaba al-Hilāl, 1423/2002), Vol. 1, p. 83: “*Fa-ammā al-ishāra fa-bi al-yad wa bi al-ra's wa bi al-'ayn wa bi al-ḥājib wa bi al-mankib.*”

that he does not deny altogether that God knows for all eternity. The only object of God's knowledge prior to creation, according to al-Fuwaṭī, is his own identity and his oneness. He even leaves no place for a second god to be known by him. By excluding the category of 'things' from the scope of God's eternal knowledge and thereby limiting it to his identity and his oneness, al-Fuwaṭī aims to stress the doctrine of *tawḥīd* and the unchanging character of his knowledge.

In T6, al-Fuwaṭī provides an account of how *shay'*, *mawjūd*, and *ma'dūm* relate to each other. Concerning their relationship, he offers a slightly different form of what Abū Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 913) proposes after he incorporated the linguistic account of *shay'* into the Basran Mu'tazilite theology. Not only does he not take the notion of *shay'* as having the same meaning as *mawjūd* (existent) as al-Ash'arites have done, because, according to him, thing can apply to *a parte post* nonexistent objects in addition to existents. But also, he does not treat *shay'* as a general category covering both what is and what is not as Abū 'Alī has done. He does not agree with the latter, because he does not include *a parte ante* nonexistents within the semantic scope of *shay'*, as they cannot be referred to (*ishāra*). His view of the relation between these three terms can be summarized as such: (1) existents are always things; (2) things are not always existents; the concept of thing can also be ascribed to post-creation nonexistents, but not pre-creational nonexistents. Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890) was another important Mu'tazilite figure who discusses the issue of divine knowledge with regard to metaphysical categories mentioned above. His Mu'tazilite education took place in Basra, where he studied under Ṣāliḥ Qubbā (d. 860). His master's authority was even reflected in his *nisba*.⁶⁹ Al-Ṣāliḥī's point of view is in very close agreement with that of al-Fuwaṭī, except that al-Ṣāliḥī equates *ma'lūm* with *maw'jūd* (*la*

⁶⁹ Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom, Vol. 4, p. 152

ma 'lūma illa mawjūdun), on the one hand, and *shay'* with *mawjūd* (*lā yusammī al-ashyā' a ashya' a illā idhā wujudat*), on the other; that is to say, he limits God's eternal knowledge to existents, thereby subtracting not only pre-creation but also pro-creation nonexistents from its scope.⁷⁰

There is one more anecdote in *Maqālāt* which seems to al-Ash'arī worth preserving. Therein, he argues that concerning his position on divine knowledge al-Fuwaṭī must have been inspired by a group of people entitled *al-Azaliyya* (eternalists). He writes:

T7: al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, p. 489: *Wa-hādhihi al-'illa allatī i 'talla bihā hishām fī al-'ilm akhadhahā 'an ba 'd al-azaliyya; li-anna ba 'd al-azaliyya yuthbitu qīdam al-ashyā' ma 'a bāri 'iha wa qālū: qawlunā lam yazal allāhu 'āliman bi-al-ashyā' yūjibu an takūna al-ashyā' u lam tazal; fa-li-dhālika qulnā bi-qīdamihā; fa-qāla al-fuwaṭī: lammā stihāla qīdamu l-ashyā' lam yajuz an yuqāla lam yazal 'āliman bihā...*

“As for the principle underlying his perspective of divine knowledge [namely that divine knowledge of “things” would designate an assertion of their existence from eternity], he [al-Fuwaṭī] borrowed it from some eternalists (*ba 'd al-azaliyya*). They established the existence of things in eternity with their creator. They said, “Our saying that God knows things from eternity would entail that they are things in eternity. Therefore, we asserted their eternity.” Al-Fuwaṭī rather said, “As the eternity of things is not acceptable, it would not possible to say that God knows them in eternity...”⁷¹

It is not exactly clear who al-Ash'arī had in mind when referring to eternalists. Other sources also do not provide elaborate details on this enigmatic group of people. All we have are a few

⁷⁰ Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p 158: “*Wa-kāna abū l-husayn al-ṣāliḥī yaqūlu inna allāha lam yazal 'āliman bi- al-ashyā' fī awqātihā wa lam yazal 'āliman annahā sa-takūnu fī awqātihā wa lam yazal 'āliman bi- al-ajsāmi fī awqātihā wa bi- al-makhlūqāti fī awqātihā; wa yaqūlu lā ma 'lūma illā mawjūdun wa lā yusammī al-ma 'dūmata ma 'lūmātin wa lā yusammī mā lam yakun maqdūran, wa lā yusammī al-ashyā' a ashya' a illā idhā wujudat wa lā yusammīhā ashya' a idhā 'udimat.*” “Abū l-Husayn al-Ṣāliḥī would say that God of eternity knows things at the time of their coming into existence, and that God knows in eternity that they will come to be at the time of their creation, and that God of eternity knows bodies and creatures at the time of their coming into being. He used to say that only an existing thing (*mawjūd*) can be an object known. He neither calls nonexistents (*ma 'dūmāt*) objects of knowledge (*mā 'lūmāt*), nor something that is not yet (*mā lam yakun*) an object of power (*maqdūr*), nor things things except only once they exist. Nor does he call things things after it is brought into nonexistence (*'udimat*).”

⁷¹ Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 489

brief anecdotes of later date. In a section of his *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al-Masā’il*, where he briefly lists several minor and obscure sects, the Zaydī writer al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī (d. 1101) reports this group as holding the belief that all creation was with God for all eternity; from the beginning he knew them like he saw them. He cites Abū Ḥādir (or Abū Ḥāṣir) al-Naṣībī as one of the representatives of the idea. In his *al-Faṣl*, Ibn Ḥazm also associates him with Abū al-Ṣabbāḥ al-Samarqandī, of whom we have no further knowledge. The idea of the eternity of things might be traced back to Christian doctrine of κόσμος νοητός (intelligible world). But, as van Ess has maintained, we cannot find convincing echoes of this doctrine in early Islamic theology.⁷² With this information in mind, the logic of al-Fuwaṭī’s approach would no longer remain shrouded in darkness. So-called eternalists equate the existent with the known object, thereby affirming the eternity of objects known as well as their co-existence with God. It is for the exact same principle that al-Fuwaṭī refuses to admit the eternity of divine knowledge. The acceptance of their framework would entail a multiplicity of eternal beings (*ta’addud al-qudamā’*), which he would never accept.

Aside from al-Fuwaṭī’s idea of God as a knower of his own essence and identity, the major bone of contention that distinguishes him from Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam consists in his view of divine attributes. Al-Khayyāt reports him as stating:

T8: al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, p. 50: *qawluhu: inna allāha lam yazal ‘āliman li-naḥsihi lā bi- ‘ilmīn siwāhu qadīm ‘alā mā qāla aṣḥab al-ṣifāt; wa lā bi- ‘ilmīn muḥdathīn ‘alā mā qālahu hishām ibn al-ḥakam wa aṣḥabuhu min mushabbihat al-rāfiḍa*

⁷² Al-Ḥākim al-Jishumī, *Sharḥ ‘Uyūn al-Masā’il*, Vol. 1 (2584a), fol. 47b, which reads, “*za’ama anna al-khalq kullahum lam yazal kānū ma’a allāhi wa kamā annahu lam yazal ya’lamuhum kadhāliha yubsiruhum..*” “He[Abū Ḥādir] claims that all creature was with God from the beginning. He sees them in eternity like he knows them.” See also Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl fī al-Mīlāl wa al-Ahwā’ wa al-Niḥāl*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣīr and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Umra, Vol. 5, p. 97: “*Inna al-khalqa lam yazālū ma’a allāh*”. Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society*, trans. Gwendolin Goldbloom, Vol. 2, p. 531; 631-632

“His [al-Fuwaṭī’s] position is that God eternally knows in himself, neither by virtue of an eternal knowledge other than himself as the proponents of attributes have maintained, nor by virtue of an originated knowledge, as Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam and his antropomorphist Rafidite fellows have asserted”⁷³.

In terms of the problem of attributes, al-Khayyāt compares and contrasts al-Fuwaṭī’s perspective with that of two Muslim sects, *Aṣḥab al-Ṣifāt* (the exponents of attributes) and the Imamites (*al-Rāfiḍa*) in the person of Ibn al-Ḥakam. Ibn al-Ḥakam, since he does not allow for God’s foreknowledge, proposes the contingency of divine attributes; God knows things only at the time of their existence. Al-Ash‘arī’s account of Ibn al-Ḥakam is slightly different from the one given in al-Khayyāt (T8). He reports that Ibn al-Ḥakam would declare divine knowledge neither eternal nor originated; neither is it eternal with regard to the immutable side of God nor originated with regard to changing objects of knowledge.⁷⁴ By *aṣḥabuhu min mushabbihat al-rāfiḍa*, (his antropomorphist and Rafidiate fellows) in T8, al-Khayyāt might have meant Ibn al-Ḥakam’s antropomorphic followers, e.g., Muḥammad ibn Khalīl al-Sakkāk, who is reported to have given details about an antropomorphic point of view of God in a book, as well as Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Manṣūr.⁷⁵ As for *Aṣḥāb al-Ṣifāt* (a group of people affirming attributes of God), they would assert a partly independent existence of eternal attributes within God’s being or

⁷³ Al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 50; for al-Ash‘arī’s account of Ibn al-Ḥakam, see Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 222. Al-Ash‘arī rather quotes Ibn al-Ḥakam as stating, “*annahū qāla inna al-‘ilma ṣifātun lillāhi wa laysa hiya huwa wa lā ghayruhu wa lā ba‘ḍuhu; wa annahu lā yajūzu an yuqāla lahu muḥdathun wa lā yuqālu lahu qadīmun, li-anna al-ṣifata lā tūṣafu ‘indahū.*” “...that knowledge is one of God’s attributes, which is neither himself nor other than himself nor his part, and that it is not possible to describe it as either originated or eternal, as an attribute cannot be qualified by another)

⁷⁴ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 222, which quotes Ibn al-Ḥakam as stating: “that knowledge is one of God’s attributes, which is neither himself nor other than himself nor his part, and that it is not possible to describe it as either originated or eternal, as an attribute cannot be qualified by another.”

⁷⁵ Abū l-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khoeī, *Mu‘jamu Rijāl al-Ḥadīth wa Tafṣīlu Ṭabaqāt al-Ruwāt* (Al-Najaf : Maṭba‘at al-ādāb, 1970-), v. 19, p. 300

essence.⁷⁶ Unlike these two groups, al-Fuwaṭī denies the reality of God’s attributes independently of his identity, thus holding that he knows *in himself*. To sum up, both al-Fuwaṭī and Ibn al-Ḥakam hold that God does not eternally know future things that have not yet existed. Nevertheless, the former still gives way to God’s knowledge of himself in eternity, which would not create any duality in the objects of divine knowledge. Perhaps the most major distinction between them lies in their perspective of attributes.

Hishām al-Fuwaṭī (d. 833) and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890) had a clear parallel with Ibn al-Ḥakam’s (d. 795) view of the createdness of God’s knowledge. But they do not represent the mainstream Mu‘tazilite tradition. In the following brief words al-Khayyāṭ summarizes their approach to the matter in question. He states:

T9: al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, Section 79, p. 90: *Wa al-mu‘tazila lammā qālū: inna allāha lam yazal ‘āliman bi al-ashyā’, lam yaz ‘umū anna al-ashyā’ ma ‘ahu lam tazal; innamā qālū: annahu lam yazal ‘āliman bi-anna al-ashyā’ a takūnu wa tuhdathu idhā awjada-hā wa aḥdathahā subḥānahu wa bi-ḥamdihi.*

“As for the Mu‘tazila, when they said, “God knows things from the beginning, they would not assert that things eternally exist with him. But rather, they would mean to say that he knows that things will exist and will be originated once he—Glory and praise be to him—creates and originates them.”⁷⁷

In fact, most of the Mu‘tazilites held God’s knowledge of things that will exist in the future.

What al-Khayyāṭ says in the above quoted passage goes along with al-Ash‘arī’s presentation.

⁷⁶ When broaching the Mu‘tazilite perspective of divine attributes, al-Ash‘arī parenthetically writes a few pages on the possible identity of *Ashāb al-Ṣiḥāb*. He presents Ibn al-Kullāb (d. 855), who is thought to have had a huge impact on the development of the Ash‘arite doctrine, as one of the leading theologians holding the doctrine of divine attributes. See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn* I, ed. Ritter, pp. 169-170; Al-Shahrastānī gives precise and detailed information on people who maintain eternal attributes of God. Among them he lists three subdivisions, namely Ash‘arites, Mushabbihā, and Karramites. See Al-Shahrastānī (Mukhtār), Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, ed. Cureton, pp. 64-79

⁷⁷ Al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Nader, p. 90

The latter gives far more detail about the Mu‘tazila’s position. In addition to al-Fuwaṭī and al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890), who problematizes the conception of divine knowledge of future things, al-Ash‘arī explores the opinions of other Mu‘tazili theologians, such as al-Fuwaṭī’s pupil ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864), al-Shaḥḥām (d. after 871) and Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915). He occasionally quotes anonymous reports from Basran and Baghdadian Mu‘tazilites through resort to the impersonal and indirect speech formula, e.g., *qāla qāi’lūn* and *qāla qā’ilūn min al-baghdādiyyīn*. Although different in wording and detail, they all have a common view.⁷⁸

‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 844) was one of the Basran Mu‘tazila, who deals with the problem of divine foreknowledge of future things as well. He was a pupil of al-Fuwaṭī. But with regard to the problem he diverges from his master, who does not allow anything other than God’s identity to be an object of divine knowledge. Ibn Sulaymān establishes the theological principle that anything that entails divine creation (*khalq*) is not within the boundaries of God’s eternal knowledge. God is of eternity independent of any transitory corporeal thing; even their intelligible reality cannot eternally exist with him as it would do harm to the unity of God. Divine foreknowledge would additionally violate human freedom and responsibility. He is quoted to have stated that God cannot know physical bodies, things that are made (*maf’ūlāt*), and things that are created (*makhlūqāt*), all requiring the existence of God’s creative act. But Ibn Sulaymān does not find an issue with God’s knowledge of simple entities (*ashyā’*), substances, accidents, acts, and creatures (*khalq*). He possibly construed them as *quidditas* or *essentia* in themselves in abstraction from their sensual and physical existence (cf. Plato’s ideas), which are

⁷⁸ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 160, 162-163

unconditioned by anything other than themselves, though their actuality is eventually grounded in God's knowledge. Most of the Mu'tazilites communicate this idea through using self-identical structures. By confirming, to some degree, the employment of these logico-syntactic structures, 'Abbād also seems to have pointed to divine knowledge of nonexistent essences. What lends further support to our reading is his neither-nor response when he was asked whether an existing thing is the same as its pre-existence essential reality that has not yet existed (*a taqūlu inna hādihā al-shay'a al-mawjūd huwa alladhī lam yakun mawjūdan. Qāla lā aqūlu dhālika. Wa idhā qīla lahu: a taqūlu innahū ghayruhu. Lā aqūlu dhālika*). Neither are physical things the same as their intelligible realities that have not existed in eternity, nor are they other than the latter.⁷⁹

Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 915) position is also worth mentioning here as he continues to discuss the nonexistent with regard to divine knowledge, though in a more complex way. He took a principal part in the formation of the Basran Mu'tazilite account of the nonexistent. Born in Khuzistan, he attended the Mu'tazilite Basran school led by Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf al-Shaḥḥām. His contribution lies not only in his further development of Mu'tazilite teachings, but also paving the way for new solutions. None of his works have survived.⁸⁰ All we know about him reaches us from heresiographical writings as well as the 10th-11th century works by Bahshamite authors, which occasionally repeat material gleaned from his no longer available treatises and polemical books (i.e., *al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt* and *Naqḍ al-Tāj 'alā ibn al-Rāwandī*). Abū 'Alī was well-known for introducing the theory of *ṣifat al-dhāt*, which his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 933) adopted and developed in accordance with the theory of *aḥwāl* (states). Both theories constituted

⁷⁹ *Idem.*, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 158-159

⁸⁰ For further information, see L. Gardet, "al-Djubbā'ī", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 12 March 2024 <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2101>

an essential part of the problem of the nonexistent since the beginning of the 10th century. Abū ‘Alī for sure affirms the view of God’s foreknowledge of nonexistent entities (*ashyā’*), substances, and accidents. In this respect, he allies his view with the general mainstream Mu‘tazilite doctrine.

In fact, Abū ‘Alī broadens and complicates the Mu‘tazilite view by incorporating into discussion of the nonexistent (1) a class of attributes which he calls *ṣifat al-dhāt* and (2) the concept of *shay’* (thing). They correspond to the first two of the six categories of nouns which he thinks can be predicated of things, and which were indeed the subject of heated dispute among the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites. The first category, what Frank calls the attribute of the essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*), are nouns by which things can be named *necessarily* and by themselves, e.g., “the black is black” and “the substance is substance.” The second category consists of nouns by which things can be called as they are capable of being mentioned and informed about, i.e., *shay’* (thing).⁸¹ Abū ‘Alī maintains that these first two kinds of nouns can exist prior to their referents

⁸¹ *Idem.*, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 160-162: “*Wa-kāna yuqassimu al-asmā’ ‘alā wujūhin [1] fa-mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-nafsihi wa kadhālika al-bayād wa kadhālika al-jawharu innamā summiya jawharan li-nafsihi; [2] wa-mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-annahu yumkinu an yudhkara wa yukhbara ‘anhu fa-huwa musamman bi-dhālika qabla kawnihi ka-al-qawl shay’un, fa-inna ahl al-lughā sammaw bi-al-qawl shay’un kulla ma amkanahum an yadhkarūhu wa yukhbirū ‘anhu, [3] wa-mā summiya bihi al-shay’ lil-tafriqa baynahu wa bayna ajnāsīn ukharu ka-al-qawl lawnun wa mā ashbaha dhālika fa-huwa musamman bi-dhālika qabla kawnihi; [4] wa mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-‘illatīn fa-wujūdat al-‘illatu qabla wujūdihi fa-wājibun an yusammā bi-dhālika qabla wujūdihi ka-al-qawl ma’ mūrūn bihi innamā qīla ma’ mūrūn li-wujūd al-amr bihi fa-wājibun an yusammā ma’ mūrūn bihi fī ḥāl wujūd al-amr wa-in kāna ghayra mawjūdin fī ḥāl wujūd al-amr; wa kadhālika mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-wujūd ‘illatīn yajūzu wujūduhā qablahu; [5] wa mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-ḥudūthihi wa li-annahu fī ‘lun fa-lā yajūzu an yusammā bi-dhālika qabla an yaḥdutha ka-al-qawl maf’ūlun wa muḥdathun; [6] wa mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-wujūd ‘illatīn fīhi fa-lā yajūzu an yusammā bihi qabla wujūd al-‘illa fīhi ka-al-qawl jismun wa ka-al-qawl mutaḥarrīkun wa mā ashbaha dhālika.*” The other four categories are as follows: (3) Nouns by which things can be called not *necessarily* but by virtue of the fact that they are distinct from other *genera*, for example, color, odor, and flavor; (4) Nouns by which things can be called on account of the agent extrinsic to them, such as *ma’ mūrūn bih* (the object of an order); (5) Nouns by which things can be named due to their origination in time and being acted upon, e.g., *maf’ūl* and *muḥdath*; (6) Nouns by which things can be called because of the existence of a cause intrinsic to them (*li-wujūd al-‘illa fīhi*), i.e., *muḥarrīk* (moving) being caused by a body. I already explored the first two categories in the main body of the paper. Al-Jubbā’ī’s third kind of nouns that can exist prior to their referents consists of those capable of being said of the nonexistent such as color and the like. It differs from the first category in that it may be predicated of the nonexistent not *necessarily* (*wujūb*) and *by its essence* (*linafsihi*). Perhaps he means to say that a black’s being black serves to designate the essential and most characteristic attribute of a thing, whereas color does not. The latter, for instance, distinguishes a thing from other classes of entities such as flavor and

(*musammā*’) and apart from them; in other words, they may be attributed to a thing even in the state of its nonexistence. In a way, by propounding the predicability of these nouns of nonexisting things, Abū ‘Alī declares that they are not wholly nonexistent in eternity; through God’s knowledge they have been made something (*shay*’), called by a noun, and given some sort of reality. Our doxographer al-Ash‘arī does not provide the broader setting of Abū ‘Alī’s statement. When we read al-Ash‘arī’s brief remarks in light of the Bahshamite works of the 10th-11th centuries, we understand that these categories are all related to the Mu‘tazilī doctrine of attributes. According to Abū ‘Alī, “[t]o know something,..to recognize it or understand it as having certain attributes, certain essential or accidental qualities or characteristics, which it does in fact have.”⁸² If God is accepted as capable of knowing things in eternity, this could be possible only through knowledge of them as being qualified by their most characteristic attributes. In other words, things must have attributes even in the state of nonexistence so that they could be known and named from eternity. He views *ṣifat al-dhāt* as the ground of the intelligibility of nonexistents. This category of attributes is essential to a thing; in other words, they are present both in its existence and nonexistence. They would indicate the beings of a thing in its total self-identity without any designation of duality, i.e., substance’s being substance (*kawn al-jawhar*

odor (*li-t-tafriqa baynahu wa bayna ajnāsīn ukhar*). It is obvious that the concept *jins* (pl. *ajnās*) here renders not “genus” as taken in the Aristotelian tradition, but simply “class,” “kind,” and “type.” The fourth class is composed of those nouns that are grounded in the action of an agent or any extrinsic cause, e.g., *ma’mūrun bih* (a thing that is commanded), and therefore, can exist prior to its referent (*musammā*). As for the fifth class, as exemplified by *muḥdath* (originated) and *maf’ūl* (that which is acted upon), since its referents do not exist except in time, it cannot eternally be predicated of them. The same is true for the sixth class as its referents are grounded in the existence of an intrinsic cause such as *muḥarrik* (moving) being caused by a body.

⁸² Richard MacDonough Frank, *Beings and their attributes : the teaching of the Basrian school of the Mu‘tazila in the classical period* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1978), p. 14

jawharan).⁸³ In sum, it has an undeterminable existence, though it is ultimately conditioned by divine knowledge.

Al-Ash‘arī further adds that Abū ‘Alī borrowed the notion of *shay’* (thing) from language experts, according to whom it designates anything about which information and predication can be made (*fa-inna ahl al-lugha sammaw bi-al-qawl shay’un kulla ma amkanahum an yadhkarūhu wa yukhbirū ‘anhu*). Thus, Al-Jubbā’ī asserts that possible nonexistents, though they have not yet existed, are nevertheless capable of being known, mentioned, and predicated of. In a way, he holds it as a general category covering not only what is, but also what is not. Attention should be paid to *ikhbār*, which is the verbal noun of *yukhbirū ‘anh* given in the definition. Being a logico-syntactic concept, it designates a relation between subject and predicate. This is worth consideration because the Mu‘tazilites’ perspective of the nonexistent is indeed linked with the doctrine of attributes, which they in general puts into words in the form of logical statements. And these statements are “statements about things (*ashyā’*), composed of a noun (*ism*, sc., a name) that signifies the thing that is known and a predicate (*khobar*) that indicates what is known about it.”⁸⁴ Our readings show that the use of *shay’* in early theological writings is more complex than it appears; it is employed sometimes as a subject, which indicates an entitative reality and is equivalent to *dhāt* (entity)⁸⁵, and sometimes as a predicate designating a predicative attribute. In the second case, it is always taken in the sense of an object known (*ma‘lūm*), and hence, that which may be mentioned and predicated of (*al-qawl shay’un simatun li-kulli ma‘lūmin wa li-*

⁸³ *Idem.*, *Beings and their attributes*, p. 53-58

⁸⁴ *Idem.*, *Beings and their attributes*, p. 14

⁸⁵ *Idem.*, “al-Ma‘dūm wal-mawjūd,” p. 204 (n. 85).

kulli mā amkana dhikruhu wa al-ikhbāru ‘anhu). From early on, *shay’* played a central role in Mu‘tazilite-Ash‘arite polemics over the problem of nonbeing and was debated in chapters under the titles like “Whether the nonexistent is a thing” (*hal al-ma ‘dūm shay’un am lā*).⁸⁶ As an ontological term it has also been linked with God in discussions over whether thingness can be predicated of God.⁸⁷ As to the usage of the concept as a subject, it was mainly expressed through employment of self-predicational sentences, e.g., “Entities are entities even in the state of nonexistence (*al-ashyā’ ashyā’ qabla kawnihā*), or through mediation of the passive verbs of *‘ilm* (know) and *tasmiya* (name), which both take a double accusative, in the form “S is known (as) S // S is named S”, e.g., “Entities are known as entities before creation (*al-ashyā’ tu ‘lamu ashyā’ qabla kawnihā / al-ashyā’ tusammā ashyā’ qabla kawnihā*).

Modern scholars like Pines and van den Bergh find the origin of the Mu‘tazilī account of *shay’* in the Stoic concept of *ti* (something).⁸⁸ The qur’ānic source of the notion is no less evident. As has been discussed in the introduction, no first-hand Stoic material has come down to us. Nor any doxography of the Stoic category of *ti* has been attested in gnomologia, doxographies and related works available to us.⁸⁹ The Mu‘tazilī school has recourse to two basic

⁸⁶ For a detailed discussion of early *Kalām* discussions of the concept, see also Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 145-160

⁸⁷ See al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 181-182

⁸⁸ Pinès, *Beiträge zur islamischen Atomenlehre*, p. 117; van den Bergh, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, Vol. 2, p. 4, 3.6

⁸⁹ Dimitri Gutas, “Pre-Plotinian Philosophy in Arabic (Other than Platonism and Aristotelianism): A Review of the Sources,” in Wolfgang Haase (ed.): *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1993), Vol. II 36.7, 4959-4963. Possibly inspired by van Ess, Wisnovsky refers to Arabic Alexander of Aphrodisias who takes the Greek *ti* as the highest concept that is predicated not merely of physical beings but also of the incorporeal. The link between *shay’* and *ti* seems to be weak. It is perhaps for this reason that van Ess does not take it seriously. See Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aḍudaddīn al-Īcī. Übersetzung und Kommentar des ersten Buches seiner Mawāqif* (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1966), p. 196 and Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s metaphysics in context*, p. 154.

arguments for their understanding of *shay'*, which the 11th century writer Ibn Mattawayh has summarized in his *al-Tadhkira*. On the grounds of linguistic evidence from the conventional use of *shay'*, they argue that if it were synonymous with *mawjūd* (existent) as some people (e.g., the Ash'arites) have claimed, expressions employed in daily language such as '*alimtu shay'an mawjūdan*' and '*alimtu shay'an ma'dūman*' would be senseless; these expressions would then mean, respectively, '*alimtu mawjūdān mawjūdan*' (I knew of an existing existent) and '*alimtu mawjūdan ma'dūman*' (I knew of a nonexistent existent). The first could carry the problem of a repetition of the same meaning through two synonyms (*la-iqtadā al-takrār*), thus entailing a semantic redundancy. As for the second, it is obviously liable to one word (*mawjūd*) being modified by its opposite (*ma'dūman*). More important than that, the Mu'tazilites adduce certain Qur'ānic verses which appear to support the use of *shay'* as a general category. For instance, Q 18:23-24, in which the Prophet is commanded not to say of anything (*shay'*), "Indeed, I shall do that tomorrow", confirms the employment of *shay'* for something that has not yet existed. The same thing is true for Q 16:40, which reads, "Our word unto a thing (*shay'*), when we will it, is only that we say to it: 'Be!', and it is." The verse also establishes the pre-creation reality of *shay'*.⁹⁰

Throughout this section I have explored how the Imamite political doctrine of *badā'* opened the way to inter-sectarian debates on divine knowledge as well as the Mu'tazilites' polemical reactions. As far as we understand from *hadiths* attributed to the Imams, the doctrine raised challenges and questions in the minds of the community members. The major question they dealt with is how to solve the tension between God's immutable knowledge and the Imam's

⁹⁰ Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira fī aḥkām al-jawāhir wa-al-a'rād*, ed. Daniel Gimaret, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2009), Vol.1, p. 23

infallibility (*'isma*). Since the second half of the 8th century Imāmī figures sought to find a reasonable solution to this tension. Ibn al-Ḥakam's solution lies in his rejection of the eternity of divine knowledge. The change of God's decision could be explained by the assumption that God indeed had no foreknowledge of nonexistents, which in turn allowed him to form the concept of the nonexistent. But Ibn al-Ḥakam resorts to anti-predestinarian and eternalist arguments in support of his assumption. If God knew future events, this would violate the qur'ānic principle of human freedom. If this were the case, his knowledge would also entail their eternity. All these complex perspectives and approaches led towards the formation and development of the nonexistent. What is common to all these perspectives is employment of the locution *lam yazal* as an indication of the idea of possible nonexistents.

1.4. Continuity and discontinuity: the Ash'arite position

The above mentioned wider process of cultural exchange in turn allowed Ash'arite writers to develop their own perspective of the nonexistent. In the post-inquisition period following the inversion of government policy, Mu'tazilī rationalism noticeably declined. In order to consolidate his power, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861) began to favor the traditionalist orthodoxy. Sunni scholars simultaneously tended to follow what Melchert has termed "semi-rationalism," a middle road between the traditionalism of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) and the rationalism of Mu'tazilism.⁹¹ Among them can be listed Ibn Kullāb (d. 854), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857), and al-Qalānisī (fl. c. 2nd half of the 9th century). They defended the doctrinal

⁹¹ Christopher Melchert, *Formation of the Sunni Schools* (Leiden ; New York : Brill, 1997), p. 69

teachings of the *Salaf* (traditionalists) through application of Basran *kalām* standpoint. As seen in the formula neither being nor nonbeing in their description of divine attributes, their perspective shows definite traces of earlier Imamite theologians like Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam and Sulaymān ibn Jarīr. Aside from all this, one characteristic element of their theological framework was frequent recourse to the qur’anic language as well as the syntactic and lexical structures of literary Arabic.⁹² After death of Ibn Kullāb a group of people entitled *al-Kullābiyya* sought to advocate and disseminate his theological views. However, as the geographer al-Maḡdisī (d. 990) has informed, they melted down into the Ash‘arite school.⁹³ Unfortunately, we have no knowledge of whether the Kullabites specifically dealt with the idea of nonbeing. Nor do we understand how exactly these three theologians contributed to the development of the Ash‘arite perspective. However, we at least know from available sources like al-Qalānisī’s *Kitāb al-Maḡālāt* that Ibn Kullāb introduces me/ontological concepts like *ma’dūm*, *mawjūd* and *shay’* with regard to divine attributes and says: “God’s attributes are neither existent nor nonexistent” (*al-ṣifāt laysat mawjūdatan wa lā ma’dūdatan*).⁹⁴

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 936) was born in Basra, one of the central regions of Mu‘tazilite teaching down to the 9th century. He was a famous pupil of Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915), a well-known Mu‘tazilite *Mutakallim* and head of the Basran Mu‘tazilite school. Sometime after he broke with his master over what he deemed to be an excessive emphasis on human

⁹² See Frank, *Beings and their attributes*, p. 10

⁹³ Harith Bin Ramli, “The Predecessors of Ash‘arism: Ibn Kullāb, al-Muḥāsibī and al-Qalānisī,” in ed. Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016]), pp. 215-224

⁹⁴ Ziad Bou Akl, *Une doxographie sunnite du IVe/Xe siècle Kitāb al-maḡālāt d’Abū al-‘Abbās al-Qalānisī* (Germany: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 17-18

reason and responsibility, he moved to Baghdad, where he spent the remaining years of his life.⁹⁵ My close analysis of his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn* also shows that he was pretty familiarized with not only Basran, but also with Baghdadian Mu‘tazilite school led by Abū al-Qāsim al-Ka‘bī al-Balkhī (d. 931). Following the semi-rationalist standpoint al-Ash‘arī sought to reconcile the major principles of the *Salaf* with the Mu‘tazilite perspective of speculative reasoning. Al-Ash‘arī produced more than 100 titles, only a few of which have survived. It seems impossible to reconstruct his perspective of nonbeing from his extant works (e.g., *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, *al-Ibāna* and *al-Luma’*). Therefore, we will largely rely on second-hand information from later sources, though some caution should always be taken regarding his original thought. Abū Bakr Ibn al-Fūrak’s (d. 1015) *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ash‘arī* provides a great deal of direct quotations from him. As it is evident from Ibn Fūrak’s treatment of the topic, the Ash‘arī formed and consolidated his opinion by engaging in the Imamite-Mu‘tazilite controversy. However, the primary target of his polemic was al-Mu‘tazilites. The vantage point facing us here is common to both al-Ash‘arī and his Mu‘tazilite foes; they both deal with the concept of nonbeing from the aspect of knowledge (*‘ilm*) and naming (*tasmiya*), namely whether things can be known and named before their creation. There are two distinctive features of al-Ash‘arī and his pre-Avicennan followers’ stance. First, they redefined the concept of *ma‘dūm* in such a way that it would designate absolute nonbeing. This goes along with their denial of the Mu‘tazilite theory of attributes and states. The same semantic transformation applies to *shay’*; they rejected the Mu‘tazilite understanding of the ontological term *shay’* as a general category covering not only existents but also nonexistent and treated it as equivalent of existence. Second, by incorporating

⁹⁵ For a detailed analysis of classical Ash‘arism, see Jan Thiele, “Between Cordoba and Nīsābūr: The Emergence and Consolidation of Ash‘arism (Fourth-Fifth/Tenth-Eleventh Century),” ed. Sabine Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016])

new ontological terms into their dialectical exchange they further expanded and complicated their discussion about the logico-syntactic link of *ma'dūm* with them. Thus, their change of the rules of language game and meanings of terms led towards the emergence of long-standing misunderstandings between themselves and the Mu'tazilites.

As a former Mu'tazilite and pupil of al-Jubbā'ī, al-Ash'arī reconstructs his position through refutation of Mu'tazilite doctrines. Here also, we find the same polemical tendency. Based on theological principles of his own, he first offers a semantic change of *ma'dūm* and *shay'*, two critical concepts that lie at the heart of almost all discussions of the nonexistent. Ibn Fūrak quotes him as saying:

T10: Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash'arī*, p. 252: *al-manfī lā yakūnu illā ma'dūman wa al-muthbatu lā yakūnu illā mawjūdān. Wa-inna qawl al-qā'il shay' ithbātun wa qawlahu lā shay'un nafyun. Fa-inna fī tasmiyatihī al-ma'dūma shay'an 'alā al-ḥaqīqa tanāquḍun (read tanāqudan) wa ijāba an yakūna shay'an lā shay'an wa dhalika muḥālun.*

“The nonexistent can only be that of which existence is negated (*manfī*), just as the existent can only be that of which existence is affirmed (*muthbat*). One's saying *shay'* is an assertion of existence (*ithbāt*) and his saying *lā-shay'* is a negation of existence (*nafy*). Therefore, in his calling the nonexistent as *shay'* is a contradiction and an assertion leading to the contrary conclusion that the nonexistent is at the same time a thing and no-thing, which is impossible.”⁹⁶

In this quote, Al-Ash'arī provides redefinition of the nonexistent, thereby ending up with the idea of unqualified nonbeing. He describes *ma'dūm* as *manfī*, that is, that of which existence is denied. Logically speaking, the kind of opposition between them is the opposition of contradiction (cf. Aristotle's *ὡς κατάφασις καὶ ἀπόφασις*). Following the Ash'arite perspective, the last prominent pre-Avicennan scholar Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) states,

⁹⁶ Ibn Fūrak, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī*, ed. Daniel Gimaret (Bayrūt : Dār al-Mashriq, 1987), p. 252

“Nonexistence... is an absolute negation and does not contain any existential attribute (al-‘dam...nafyun maḥḍun ghayru mustamirrin ‘alā ṣifatin min ṣifāt al-ithbāt).⁹⁷ Even though the paradigm shift took place after the infiltration of Avicenna’s philosophy into the Ash‘arite program after Abū al-Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), some scholars like Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1118) still continued to hold the same position (al-ma‘dūm...huwa al-muntafi min kulli wajhin).⁹⁸ This semantic change is crucial for al-Ash‘arī because the Mu‘tazilite view of ma‘dūm could compel one to admit the existence of some sort of entities in eternity. This is what he finds problematic with regard to the doctrine of tawḥīd. For, to him, their existence in eternity—even if it is conditioned by divine knowledge, would mean nothing other than their existence before themselves (li-anna ḥudūthahu in kāna nafsahu wa kāna qabla ḥudūthihi shay’an fu-huwa shay’un qabla nafsihi).⁹⁹

In order to further stress the idea of absolute nonbeing, *al-Ash‘arī follows the strategy of negating of nonexistents all concepts and phrases which designate an assertion of the actual existence of entities. He distinguishes concepts and phrases depending on whether they can be asserted and predicated of the nonexistent. There are several concepts by which it can be named, and which can be predicated of it. He states:*

T11: Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash‘arī*, p. 252: ...inna al-ma‘dūma alladhī kāna mawjūdan fa-‘udima wa alladhī lam yūjad qaṭṭu mushtarakān fī annahu yaṣihhu an yu‘lamā wa an yudhkarā wa yukhbarā ‘anhumā wa tadulla al-dalālata ‘alayhimā wa tata‘allaqa bi-himā qudrat al-qadīm; fa-yuqāla innahu ma‘lūmun wa madhkūrun wa mukhbarun ‘anhu wa madlūlun ‘alayh wa maqdūrun.

⁹⁷ al-Juwaynī, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn ‘Abd Allāh, *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, eds. Nashshār, ‘Alī Sāmī. ‘Awn, Fayṣal Budayr Mukhtār, Suhayr Muḥammad (al-Iskandarīyah: Munsha’āt al-Ma‘ārif, 1969), p. 259

⁹⁸ Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī al-Naysābūrī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn ‘Abd al-Hādī (al-Qāhira; al-Iskandariyya: Dār al-Islām, 1431/2010), Vol. 1, pp. 279-280

⁹⁹ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat*, ed. Gimaret, p. 254

“It holds true for both the nonexistent which was once existent and that which has never existed that they can be known, mentioned, predicated of, and referred to, and they can be a potential object of the Eternal’s power. Thus, it would be said of the nonexistent that the nonexistent can be known (*ma‘lūm*), mentioned (*madhkūr*), predicated of (*mukhbar ‘anh*), referred to (*madlūl ‘alayh*), and can be an object of the divine agent’s efficient causality (*maqḍūr*).”¹⁰⁰

The concepts he lists above are *ma‘lūm*, *madhkūr*, *mukhbar ‘anh* and *madlūl ‘alayh*, which are the constitutive elements of the Mu‘tazilite definition of *shay’*. We have already argued that by appealing to linguistic evidence, the Mu‘tazilī theologians would define *shay’* as “that which is capable of being known, mentioned, and informed about and predicated of.” Al-Ash‘arī in fact employs the concepts given in the definition for a somewhat distinct purpose. His intention when he states that the nonexistent may be known and mentioned is entirely different from what the Mu‘tazilites intend to say. The latter would claim that the act of knowing has the nonexistent’s essential reality as an object, thereby affirming some sort of shadowy existence of entities in eternity. If it is not entities themselves, what actually is the object of knowledge, mention and predication, which al-Ash‘arī is speaking about here?

Al-Ash‘arī was pretty aware of the broader theological context in which the problem of conception of future things emerged. If he would assert God’s conception of nonexistent objects, this would lead him to align himself with the standpoint of the so-called eternalists and majority of the Mu‘tazilites. In order to get rid of the objections to which this standpoint could be subject, the Imamite scholar Hishām Ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 795), as well as few Mu‘tazilite theologians like Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 845) and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890), rather clung to

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt*, ed. Gimaret, p. 252

the idea of God's inability to know them. Al-Ash'arī's solution is revealing. Ibn Fūrak reports him as claiming:

T12: Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash'arī*, p. 252: *Wa kāna yaqūlu inna sabīla ta'alluq al-'ilm bi al-ma'dūm bi-annahū ma'dūmun wa laysa bi-shay'in ka-nahw mā yata'allaqu bi annahu laysa bi-mawjūdin thumma yakūnu mā laysa bi-mawjūdin 'alā amrayn wa ḥukmayn: aḥaduhumā yaṣiḥḥu an yūjada wa al-thānī lā yaṣiḥḥu an yūjada. Fa-mā lā yaṣiḥḥu an yūjada 'alā amrayn, min-hu mā lā yaṣiḥḥu an yūjada fī ḥālin wa min-hu mā lā yaṣiḥḥu an yūjada fī kulli ḥālin. Wa-kullu dhālika yu'lamu 'alā mā huwa bihi. Wa laysa al-'ilmu bi al-ma'dūm 'indahū 'ilman bihi 'alā sharṭ al-wujūd bal huwa 'ilmun bihi annahu ma'dūmun. Fa-idhā kāna mimmā yūjadu lā yunkaru an yakūna 'ilman bihi annahu yūjadu; wa idhā kāna mimmā lā yujadu kāna 'ilman bihi annahu lā yūjadu.*

He used to say, “Knowing the nonexistent as nonexistent and not as a thing is equivalent to knowing it as what is not existent (*laysa bi-mawjūdin*). As for what is not existent, it may appear in two different ways and states: it can either be possible to exist or not possible to exist. The latter is of two kinds: (1) that which cannot exist at this moment; (2) that which cannot exist at any moment in time. However, each can be known as it is.” Thus, according to him, knowledge of the nonexistent is not conditioned upon its existence. It is indeed nothing other than knowledge of it as being nonexistent. If something exists, we do not deny that it can be known as being existent. But if it does not exist, it can only be known as being nonexistent.¹⁰¹

Al-Ash'arī seems to have held the halfway position between the above mentioned two perspectives. Neither would God know future things as they are, nor could he be shown to have no knowledge of them. He rather takes *only their nonexistence as the object of God's knowledge*. *He stresses the idea as such*, “Knowing the nonexistent as nonexistent and not as a thing is equivalent to knowing it as what is not existent (*laysa bi mawjūdin*)” Ibn Fūrak interprets his words as follows: “...knowledge of the nonexistent is not conditioned upon its existence. It is indeed nothing other than knowledge of it as being nonexistent.” Thus, what may be known, mentioned, made a subject of a predication, and referred to is not the essential reality of

¹⁰¹ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt*, ed. Gimaret, p. 252

nonexisting entities, but their nonexistence. When it comes to his idea of the non-existent's being an object of God's power (*maqḍūr*), he affirms it differently. God's power is associated with nonexisting things in their future form, whereas it is *actively* attached to them at the time of their existence.¹⁰² In *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* al-Juwaynī buttresses al-Ash'arī's position with the following statement “*wa ma 'nā ta'alluq al-'ilm bih al-'ilmu bi-intifā'ihī*” (what is meant by the non-existent's being an object of knowing is nothing other than knowledge of its nonexistence).¹⁰³ Concerning this point, al-Anṣārī expresses the same thing, though in a slightly different way.¹⁰⁴

Al-Ash'arī includes the concept of *shay'* within the category of nouns which designate an assertion of existence for entities. Therefore, he denies that it can be predicated of the non-existent. Ibn Fūrak narrates about his viewpoint as follows:

T13: Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash'arī*, p. 252: *Wa kāna ya'bā an yusammā bi-mā 'adā dhālika min al-asmā' wa al-awṣāf; wa khaṣṣatan idhā kanat asmā'an tufīdu al-ithbāta li al-dhawāt; wa huwa mithlu qawl al-qā'il shay'un. Fa-inna dhālika min a'amm asmā' al-ithbāt ka-mā anna qawl al-qā'il lā-shay' min a'amm alfāz al-nafy.*

“However, he would refuse to allow that the non-existent can be named by other nouns and attributes, especially when they are nouns that express an assertion of existence for entities, such as *shay'* (thing), for this is the most general noun designating an assertion of existence, just as *lā shay'* (no-thing) is the most general noun that indicates a negation of existence.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī*, ed. Gimaret, pp. 252-253: “...*wa kāna yaqūlu... qudrat al-qadīm ta'ālā tata'alluq bi al-ma'dūm an yūjida bihā wa hiya muta'alliqun bihā ḥudūthihā*” (...[al-Ash'arī] would say...the power of the eternal—Praised be he—is connected with the non-existent so that it will exist and it is attached to it at the time of its existence).

¹⁰³ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, eds. Nashshār, p. 124

¹⁰⁴ Al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn 'Abd al-Hādī, Vol. 1, p. 285: “...*anna al-'ilma kamā yata'alluq bi-thubūt al-shay' yata'alluq bi-intifāihī.*”

¹⁰⁵ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālat*, ed. Gimaret, p. 252

His analysis of *shay'* sides with that of Hishām Ibn al-Ḥakam, who treats it as a synonym of *mawjūd* (existent). His use of *lā-shay'* as the opposite concept of *shay'* is remarkable. *Lā-shay'*, a noun contracted from the negation *lā* and *shay'*, was also in circulation within the Kindi-circle and employed in formulations of temporal creation out of nothing, i.e., *ijādu shay'in min lā-shay'*. But in this specific context, al-Ash'arī uses it as an object of divine knowledge and not as an object of the divine act of creation. Thus, he takes the concepts of *shay'* and *lā-shay'* as equivalent to, respectively, *mawjūd* and *ma'dūm*. In respect of the interpretation of *shay'*, al-Ash'arī differs from the Mu'tazilites. In order to support his theological views, it is very common for him to resort to the eloquent use of language, especially the qur'anic language. In this case, too, al-Ash'arī provides several syntactic structures to show how his view of *shay'* as *mawjūd* fits in well with the conventional Arabic usage. He expresses his perspective of knowledge of the nonexistent through illustration of, and by comparison to, the following example sentence, '*alimtu lā-shay'* (I knew what is not a thing). To him, this sentence would be equal to saying '*alimtu lā-mawjūd* (I knew what is not existent). As for the example sentence, '*lam a'lam shay'an* (I did not know anything), where the negative particle is attached to the verb, it could designate negation of the knowledge that it can be known, a thing and existent rather than negation of existence. As Ibn al-Fūrak has reported, he also attests the meaning of *shay'* in reference to the Qur'ān. One example is Q 19:9, which reads "I did indeed create you before, when you were nonexistent." when interpreting other relevant verses, i.e., 16:40, 18:23, and 22:1, where nonexistent objects are named by the concept of *shay'*, he move away from a literal interpretation towards a figurative one (*tawassu'*). He states that what is actually meant by *shay'*

in these verses is not the existence of a thing, but its future form that is to be (*'alā ma'nā yusammā bi-ism al-ma'āl wa al-'āqiba*), even if it is present during the speaker's speech.¹⁰⁶

In addition to *shay'* and *mawjūd*, there are several other terms which al-Ash'arī refuses to allow to be asserted of the nonexistent, e.g., *'ayn* (individual reality), *jawhar* (substance), and *'araḍ* (accident). *'Ayn* is a general concept encompassing both substances and accidents (*al-a'yān min al-jawāhir wa al-a'rāḍ*). He views them within the category of originated things (*al-ashyā' al-muḥdatha*). In other words, it is only after they come into existence that they are *jawāhir* and *a'rāḍ* and hence are given these names. Especially at this point, his primary target was al-Mu'tazilites, who, as will be discussed in the following chapter, assert the essential reality of entities in eternity through employment of self-predicational statements in the form *S is S* (e.g., substances are substances in the state of nonexistence). Their self-predicational assertion, al-Ash'arī states, would bring them to what the eternalists have claimed, namely the eternity of things (*qidam al-a'yān*). Had they already been themselves before their creation (*kāna al-jawhar qabla wujūdihi jawharan wa al-'araḍ 'araḍan*), his argument continues, they would have been eternal, which would lead towards the inescapable conclusion that they are eternal and originated at the same time and hence they are not created by an agent.¹⁰⁷ Al-Ash'arī thus holds the idea that neither can the nonexistent itself be known nor it could be qualified as being a substance, accident, black or white, all designating an assertion of the existence of entities in eternity.

¹⁰⁶ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī*, ed. Gimaret, p. 253

¹⁰⁷ *Idem*, p. 253: “*Wa kāna yaqūlu inna man khālafanā fī hādihā al-bāb lazimahu qawl ahl al-dahr fī qidam al-a'yān min al-jawāhir wa al-a'rāḍ. Li-annahu idhā lam yakin fā'il al-jawhar fa'ala al-jawhara jawharan, wa kadhālika fā'il al-'araḍ lam yaf'al-hu 'araḍan, wa kāna al-jawharu qabla wujūdihi jawharan wa al-'araḍ 'araḍan, addā ilā an yakūna qadīman jawharan qadīman 'araḍan wa an lā yakūna jawharan bi-fā'ilin.*”

As it becomes clear from the above analysis, al-Ash‘arī makes explicit the polemical engagement of his narrative with the Mu‘tazilites, the Basrian school of al-Jubbā‘ī in particular, who have reconstructed their perspective of the nonexistent in polemic with the Imamite ideas of *badā’* and divine knowledge. Divine knowledge is indeed a central theme that also runs through all Ash‘arite theological debates in the classical period. After al-Ash‘arī three prominent figures played a crucial part in the elaboration of the idea of nonbeing. They are Abū Bakr Ibn Fūrak, Abū Iṣḥāq al-Isfarā‘īnī (d. 1020) and Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), the first two of whom played a preeminent role in the formation and development of the Ash‘arī perspective.

Throughout my discussion I often resorted to Ibn Fūrak’s *Mujarrad*, as he acts as an intercessor in the propagation of al-Ash‘arī’s ideas. As for Abū Iṣḥāq al-Isfarā‘īnī, his legal and theological writings apart from his *‘aqīda* are unfortunately no longer available. But, his opinions are often cited in later Ash‘arite works.¹⁰⁸ His major contribution specifically lies in his incorporation of the term *taqdīr* into the Ash‘arite understanding of nothing. al-Isfarā‘īnī might have borrowed this term from language experts. It can be traced back to Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 786). Levin defines *taqdīr* as “the imaginary utterance which the speaker intends as if he were saying it, when expressing a given literal utterance.” For instance, the Arabic language experts used to argue that when saying *zaydun fī al-dār* “Zayd is in the house, the speaker intends that it is as if he were expressing *zaydun istaqarra fī al-dār* “Zayd has been staying in the house.”¹⁰⁹ In spite of the fact that the expression *istaqarra* is absent in his speech, the speaker still gives some reality to it in his mind. When presenting his account, al-Isfarā‘īnī might have had

¹⁰⁸ Richard Frank compiled his ideas in an article. See Richard M. Frank, “Ustādh abū Iṣḥāq: an *‘aqīda*, together with selected fragments,” ed. R. M. Frank, *MIDEO* 19 (1989): 129-202

¹⁰⁹ Aryeh Levin, “The Theory of al-Taqdīr and its Terminology,” *JSAI* 21 (1997), pp. 142-143

this grammatical perspective in mind. Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1118) quotes him as saying, “the nonexistent is known only through positing an actual thing (*‘alā taqdīr shay’in thābitin*).¹¹⁰ Unlike the Mu‘tazilites, al-Ash‘arī denies that nonexistent things themselves can be objects of divine knowledge; he rather considers only their nonexistence to be capable of being known by God. By inserting the concept of *taqdīr* into the game, al-Isfarā‘īnī would allow that whether past, possible, or impossible, God could know the nonexistent itself only in abstraction and by positing it as real. Thus, conception of nonexistent things, e.g., Day of Judgment, would mean negating their actual being and conception of them as if they were real. The treatment of divine knowledge as a focus point is even the case for such Post-Avicennan writers like Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (d. 1118). Richard Frank has conducted a comprehensive study of al-Anṣārī’s *Ghunya* and *Sharḥ al-Irshād*. The main target of al-Anṣārī’s critique throughout was not the eternalists (*azaliyya*), but Jahm b. Safwān (d. 745). Even though it is hard to ascertain from extant sources, Ibn Ṣafwān is said to have held the claim that God’s knowledge takes place in time and its objects are temporally correlated to originated things.¹¹¹

Abū Maṣṣūr al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) could be shown as an exception to the long-standing line of the Ash‘arite theological tradition. Under the title “The Maker brought contingents things into existence out of nothing” (*Fī anna ṣāni‘ al-ḥawādith aḥdathahā lā min shay’in*), he presents the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as an integral and inseparable part of the problem of the nonexistent that has rather been treated with special focus on divine knowledge in almost all

¹¹⁰ Al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn ‘Abd al-Hādī, Vol. 1, p. 286: “*qāla al-ustādh abū ishāq wa ghayruhu: al-ma’dūm innamā yu‘lamu ‘alā taqdīr shay’in thābitin.*”; See also al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmīl fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, eds. Nashshār, p. 138

¹¹¹ Al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn ‘Abd al-Hādī, Vol. 1, pp. 279-287; 543-549. For an detailed analysis of the Ash‘arite account of the nonexistent, See Richard M. Frank, “The Non-existent and the Possible in Classical Ash‘arite Teaching,” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Études Orientales* 24 (2000):1-37

other Ash‘arite works. He argues that the Mu‘tazilis’ self-predicational statements in the form *S is S* (Entities are entities in the state of nonexistence) would be equal to saying the eternity of *materia prima* (*hayūlā qadīma*). This, in turn, contradicts the mainstream Islamic doctrine of creation from nothing (*khalq lā min shay’in*).¹¹² By bringing their arguments to their philosophical and theological implications, al-Baghdādī, in his *al-Farq bayn al-Firak*, even accused them of *kufṛ* (unbelief).¹¹³

1.5. Conclusion to the chapter

In this chapter, I suggested a different story than what modern authors have offered as to the origin of the theological line of thought that discusses the concept of nonbeing with regard to divine knowledge. In his commentary on Ibn al-Arabī’s (d. 1240) *Inshā’ al-Dawā’ir*, Nyberg traces the origin of the concept back to the Neoplatonic idea of *κόσμος νοητός* and the Christian doctrine of Logos. In both cases, he elucidates the conception of nonexistent essences in reference to ‘das Urbild dieser aus dem Nichts geschaffenen Welt’ (the archetype of this world created from nothing).¹¹⁴ This material is still worth consideration. But as van Ess has maintained, *κόσμος νοητός* is never referred to as nonexistent (Nichtseiend).¹¹⁵ On the other

¹¹² Al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, (Istānbul : Madrasat al-Ilāhīyāf bi-Dār al-Funūn al-Türkīyah, 1928), pp. 70-71

¹¹³ *Idem.*, *al-Farq bayn al-Firak*, ed. Muḥammad Badr, pp. 94-96; 163-165; 319-320;

¹¹⁴ H. S. Nyberg, *Kleinere Schriften des Ibn al-Arabī, nach Handschriften in Uppsala und Berlin zum ersten Mal hrsg. und mit Einleitung und Kommentar versehen von H. S. Nyberg* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1919), pp. 47-49

¹¹⁵ Josef van Ess, *Die Erkenntnislehre des ‘Aḥudaddīn al-Īcī*, p. 197; Wolfson also observes this problem. See *idem*, “The Kalam Problem of Nonexistence and Saadia's Second Theory of Creation,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series* 36/4 (Apr., 1946), p. 377

hand, the claim of foreign influence needs demonstrable links and documented investigation more than seeming parallels. In my study, I pinned down the possibility that our concept emerged as something driven by the internal dynamics of Islamic thought. The major challenge facing us is that earliest extant sources do not present us with a percipient explanation. But what is easily observed is that they all revolve around the major theme of divine knowledge. This is a good indicator of where to look for the roots of 9th century debates on divine knowledge with regard to the nonexistent. Early theologians, e.g., al-Dārimī, Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Khayyāṭ, and al-Ash‘arī, formulate the problem in the question ‘whether God *ab aeterno* knows things’. What they have in common is express the idea of the nonexistent through employment of the *lam-yazal* locution, though recourse is occasionally had to other meontological concepts like *ma ‘dūm* and *‘adam*.

Textual evidence shows that there are three observable lines of thought which seem to have been involved in the formation of the concept. As far as it becomes clear from al-Khayyāṭ’s *al-Intiṣār* and al-Ash‘arī’s *Maqālāt*, the Imam Jafar al-Ṣādiq’s disciple Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 795) played a pivotal part in the dissemination of the Imami doctrines in Basra and Baghdad, thereby provoking long-standing polemics among early Mu‘tazilites such as Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 845) and ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864). In his polemic with the Imami Ibn al-Rāwandī, al-Khayyāṭ devotes almost 15 successive sections to examination of such principal Imami doctrines like *badā’* and divine knowledge. His presentation runs parallel with the Imamite sources which supply a great deal of debates on divine knowledge with respect to political doctrine of *badā’*. Defined as an alteration in God’s foreknowledge of future events the doctrine of *badā’* already evoked the idea of nonbeing since the beginning. But Ibn al-Ḥakam was the first theologian who formulated the notion of the nonexistent with divine knowledge. He argued that God does not eternally know things. This would amount to proposing the

contingency of divine knowledge (*ḥudūth al-‘ilm*). Thus, his perspective of the nonexistent perfectly complies with other elements of his conceptual framework such as *badā’*, the doctrine of *‘isma* (the Imam’s immunity from sin and error), the contingency of divine knowledge (*ḥudūth al-‘ilm*), and the anthropomorphic view of God (*tajsīm*). We encounter two additional lines of reasoning in ibn al-Ḥakam’s arguments supporting his position. He explores the idea of divine knowledge of nonexistents with regard to the problem of human freedom. His emphasis on free will serves to support his Imami doctrines. Ibn al-Ḥakam perhaps puts forward this argument alongside the Qadarites (*qadariyya*) who represent the principle of free will from the last decade of the 7th century to the consolidation of the Mu‘tazilite school in the first quarter of the 9th century. They argue that the deeds of man are not foreknown by God as this would invalidate the qur’ānic principle of human responsibility. His knowledge has only the role of registering human acts; it does not have an effect on them.¹¹⁶ In his treatment of the nonexistent, Ibn al-Ḥakam further refers to the eternalists (*azaliyya*), according to whom divine knowledge entails the eternity of known objects. In order to escape the conclusion that their assumption would potentially make him subject to, he refuses to accept God’s knowledge of things *ab aeterno*. An anti-eternalist perspective also helps him strengthen his Imami position. As a result, our concept was formed as the corollary of such complex socio-cultural dynamics playing out at the time of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates between the last quarter of the 7th century and the first half of the 9th century. It is this backdrop against which both the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites developed their own perspective of the nonexistent. For instance, al-Ash‘arī, considering the so-called eternalist assumption, did not allow for God’s knowledge of things

¹¹⁶ Josef van Ess, “Qadariyya”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 11 March 2024
http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0409

themselves as this would designate their eternity. He rather held the nonexistence of things as the object of divine knowledge. Basran Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, brought to discussion of the nonexistent new perspectives and approaches like the concept of shay' and the theories of attributes (*ṣifāt*) and states (*aḥwāl*).

CHAPTER 2: Essence-existence distinction revisited: Discussions of the nonexistent and the theory of *aḥwāl*

2.1. Introduction

2.2. The Bahshamī view of *aḥwāl* (states): The dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*

2.3. Ash‘arī polemics: The identity of *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*

2.4. Avicenna’s Aristotelian reaction: Essence-existence distinction

2.5. Conclusion to the chapter

2.1. Introduction

In a section of his *Muḥaṣṣal Afkār al-Mutaqaddimīn wa al-Muta‘akhhirīn* (Compendium of the Ideas of Early and Later Theologians), where he specifically examines the ancient problem of the nonexistent, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) refers to the famous idea referred to as essence-existence distinction and usually attributed to Avicenna and writes,

T1a: *Muḥaṣṣal Afkār*, p. 59: “*Ammā al-falāsifa fa-qad (i)ttafaqū ‘alā anna al-mumkināt māhiyyātuhā ghayru wujūdātihi wa (i)ttafaqū ‘alā annahu yazjūzu ta‘arrī tilka al-māhiyyāt ‘an al-wujūd al-khārijī*”

“¹As for the philosophers, they agreed that the quiddities of the possible are distinct from their existence and that it is possible to set these quiddities apart from extramental existence.”

There is no doubt that al-Rāzī here points to Avicenna’s perspective of essence-existence distinction. In his *al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt* (Pointers and Reminders) on which he also wrote a commentary, Avicenna argues that what a thing is (cf. *to ti ên einai*) is distinct from the fact *that*

¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wal-muta‘akhhirīn min al-‘ulamā’ wal-ḥukamā’ wal-mutakallimīn*, ed. Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf Sa‘d (Cairo: al-Qāhirah : Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, [1978]), p. 59

it is (cf. *hoti estin*). One can conceive, for instance, the essential reality of blackness independently of whether it exists in individuals or in the minds. Thus, with regard to contingent beings, he interpreted existence as an extrinsic, but not intrinsic, to essence (*Va-in ma'na-ye hasti mar in da maghule rā dhātī nist va māhiyyat nist*).² If we return to al-Rāzī, he, a few pages back, discusses the central problem lying in the long-lasting Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite controversy over the notion of the nonexistent and makes the interesting remark that follows,

T1b: *Muḥaṣṣal Afkār*, p. 55: *Maḥall al-khilāf annahum za'amū anna wujūd al-sawād zā'idun 'alā kawnihi sawādan; thumma za'amū khuluww tilka al-māhiyya 'an ṣifat al-wujūd.*

“The major point of disagreement results from their contention that the existence of black is additional to its being black and that that essence is devoid of the attribute of existence.”³

In this passage, he intriguingly ties the problem of the nonexistent to the famous distinction between essence and existence. He cites several Mu'tazilites including Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d. 915) and his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 933), Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 1025), Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī (d. 1068) and Ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076), all of whom belong to the Basran school. He then quotes them as stating that nonexistent possibles are essences (*dhawāt, a'yān, ḥaqā'iq*) before existence and that God's role in creation lies not in his making them

² Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Dānishnāma-'i 'Alā'ī*, ed. M. Mo'in (Tehran, 1952), p. 38: “The sense of existence is not intrinsic to these ten categories, nor is it to be taken as their inner reality”. See also *idem, al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt*, ed. Mujtabā al-Zāri'ī (Qum: Bustān-ī Kitāb Qum, 2002), pp. 47-48

³ al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār*, ed. Sa'd, p.55

themselves but bringing them into existence.⁴ Al-Rāzī thus establishes a noticeable point of interaction between Avicenna and the theological tradition of Islam.

Along the same lines with al-Rāzī, post-Avicennian Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites discuss essence-existence distinction mostly in a chapter of their works on the problem of whether the nonexistent is a thing (*hal al-ma‘dūm shay’un*), or they combine these two problems.⁵ The central issue in the debate revolves around whether existence is an additional quality to nonexistent essences. Thereby, theologians hold the relevant distinction as though it was an essential part of early Ash‘arī-Mu‘tazilī debates on meontology. Based on their approach to the issue of *ma‘dūm-shay’*, theologians have crystallized their own position. Ash‘arites, who traditionally deny the thingness of *ma‘dūm*, have identified essence and existence. But this is not true for the Mu‘tazilites; since they take *ma‘dūm* as synonym for *shay’* and propose the doctrine of *dhawāt* in nonexistence, they have distinguished between them. The critical question facing us here is whether the statements of post-Avicennian theologians were impaired by a form of anachronism, which is what Jolivet and other modern writers have implied.⁶ This may indeed be the case as our writers might have changed and presented these inter-sectarian debates in light of Avicenna’s ready-to-use distinction supposedly unknown in pre-Avicennian *Kalām*. Or should

⁴ al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār* ed. Sa‘d, p. 59: “...anna al-ma‘dūmāt al-mumkinata qabla dukhūlihā fī al-wujūd dhawātun wa a’yānun wa ḥaqā’iqu wa anna ta’tḥīra al-fā’il laysa fī ja’lihā dhawātin bal fī ja’l tilka al-dhawāt mawjūdatan...”

⁵ See, for instance, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Iqdām fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, ed. Alfred Guillaume (Baghdād: Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1964), pp. 131-170; al-Rāzī, *Muḥaṣṣal afkār* ed. Sa‘d, p.55-60; Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Malāḥimī al-Khwārazmī, *Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad fī ‘Uṣul al-Dīn* (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2012), pp. 361-381 (esp.374-379)

⁶ Jean Jolivet, “Aux origines de l’ontologie d’Ibn Sina,” in *Études sur Avicenne*, Ed. Jean Jolivet and Roshdi Rashed (Paris : Belles Lettres, 1984), p. 18; Fedor Benevich, “The Classical Ash‘arī Theory of Aḥwāl: Juwaynī and his Opponents,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27:2 (2016), p. 140; *Idem*, “The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153): Aḥwāl and Universals,” in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. Abdelkader Al Ghouz (Göttingen, Germany: Bonn University Press, 2018), p. 329

their remarks be taken as evidence that the distinction in question was familiar to early theologians already before Avicenna entered the historic scene and exerted deep and lasting impressions on the theological tradition?

Essence-existence distinction constitutes a fundamental dimension of Avicenna's philosophy. Recent scholarship has highlighted his preeminent place in the history of metaphysics with special regard to it. His perspective even left a far-reaching imprint not only on post-Avicennian philosophy in the Islamic world but also on later Latin philosophy, particularly on that of Thomas Aquinas. Today, the origin of essence-existence distinction is one of hot topics of debate in Avicennian studies. A considerable body of research has focused on the topic. Some scholars find its origin in the earlier history of philosophy. It has been noted that Avicenna might have been influenced by Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus through Graeco-Arabicum translations.⁷ In the course of the last forty years, however, special attention has been devoted to a possible link between Avicenna and early Islamic theology. Jean Jolivet held that 9th and 10th century theological debates over the relation between the terms *shay'* and *mawjūd* were likely to have been his point of departure in introducing the idea of the distinction between essence and

⁷ In *Posterior Analytics* 2.1, 89b23-25, where he provides his own perspective of inquiry, Aristotle makes distinction between the two programmatic questions, namely the question of existence (*εἰ ἔστι*) and the question of essence (*τί ἐστίν*).⁷ Plotinus is also occasionally cited as a possible source, who draws close to an evident distinction between essence and existence in various passages of his *Enneads*, e.g., VI.8.17.24-25, "Then, he [the One] neither has his being (*to einai*) nor his being what he is (*to hopoios estin einai*) from another" (οὐδὲ ἄρα ἐξ ἄλλου ἔχει οὔτε τὸ εἶναι οὔτε τὸ ὁποῖός ἐστιν εἶναι). M. J. Creswell, "Essence and Existence in Plato and Aristotle," *Theoria* 37 (1971): 91-113; For the claim on Avicenna's use of the Arabic translations of the *Posterior Analytics*, see also Riccardo Strobino, "Avicenna's Use of the Arabic Translations of the *Posterior Analytics* and the Ancient Commentary Tradition," *Oriens* 40.2 (2012):355-389. Pierre Hadot suggests finding traces of essence-existence distinction in Boethius' analysis of *esse* and *id quod est* (respectively undetermined pure being and determined and limited being), as well as in the late Neoplatonist distinction between *to einai* and *to on* (respectively absolute and determinate being), which is found in the *Commentary on the Parmenides* (ascribed to Porphyry) and in M. Victorinus, or between *huparxis* and *ousia* (respectively pre-existence and substance as the determinate subject) attributed to Proclus, Damascius and Victorinus. See also Kevin Corrigan, "Essence and Existence in the *Enneads*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 105-129

existence. His argument has been supported and expanded by Robert Wisnovsky. Several other writers seem to support this position by tracing post-classical theological accounts of essence-existence distinction back to Avicenna.

We indeed owe to Jolivet for his intelligent observation of the possibility that these theological controversies might have influenced Avicenna's view of essence-existence distinction. He was right when he claimed that one could discern what he calls "structures essentielles" in al-Ash'arī's (d. 936) *al-Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, which is our earliest extant work to give some details about them. However, the main weakness of his argument is that he did not engage enough in fundamental issues playing out in these discussions against the backdrop of which one could better contextualize the idea of essence-existence distinction. One reason for this is that he focused more on conceptual analysis but did not attach enough attention to the broader context of al-Ash'arī's concise remarks. In fact, the idea would not rightly be appreciated without reading his remarks against the background of doctrinal approaches and perspectives which I will note might have set the stage for its formation. On the other hand, his study is mostly confined to an examination of al-Ash'arī's understanding. I propose that it is because al-Ash'arī's comments are contextless and brief that we have to rely more on sources of later date, especially 10th-11th century Bahshamī writings. This is a necessity because, as I will show below, we can already see a fledgling form of essence-existence distinction in their works. In what follows, I will argue that the syntactic and conceptual formulae of 9th-10th century inter-sectarian polemics which seem to have paved the way for Avicenna's view of essence-existence distinction are nothing but the residues of the Mu'tazilī-Ash'arī controversies on divine knowledge, the ontological status of the nonexistent, and the theory of attributes (*ṣifāt*) and states (*aḥwāl*). I will also suggest a possible scenario according to which essence-existence distinction was already

known to classical theologians and Avicenna only played a role in helping post-classical theologians to enrich and complicate their arguments for their own position on the relevant distinction. To this end, I will particularly focus on available Bahshamī writings by Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 1025), Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī (d. 1068) and Ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076), Ash‘arī works by Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015) and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), and finally, two fragments chez Avicenna (Chapter 5, Book I of *Ilāhiyyāt* of *Kitāb al-Shifā’* and *Ilāhiyyāt* of *Dānesh Nāma-i ‘Alā’ī*).

2.2. The Bahshamī view of *aḥwāl* (states): The dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*

During the period of the late 8th to the first half 10th century of the Abbasid caliphate, Muslim theologians developed a new line of thought that treats the idea of the nonexistent with respect to divine knowledge. Their starting point was exegetical; they held that the presentation of nonexistent essences as objects of divine knowledge in such qur’ānic verses as 22:1 and 36:82 suggests that God of eternity knows them. But, since they approached the verses with different concerns and backgrounds, they interpreted the topic in various ways. The Basran Mu‘tazilite Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī’s (d. 933) theory of *aḥwāl=ṣifāt* (states=attributes) demarcates a watershed in the Muslim understanding of the nonexistent. This theory indeed provided an important basis on which one could rationalize the qur’ānic doctrine that God knows nonexistent essences in eternity. From Abū Hashim’s discussion of various typologies of attributes emerged the dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence) and *ṣifat al-wujūd* (the attribute of existence), the former of which he posited as the ground of the intelligibility of nonexistents and the latter of which he viewed as an additional quality to *ṣifat al-dhāt* I think it is this dialectic

which in turn paved the way for Avicenna's famous essence-existence distinction. In this section, I will first present the Bahshamite theory of *aḥwāl* and the classification of attributes. Then, on the basis of works by followers of Abū Hāshim (known as Bahshamites) from the 10th to early 11th centuries, I will discuss how the ontological dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd* arose from their attempts to classify attributes depending on whether their actuality is conditional upon the agent's power.

The problem of the nonexistent is an important building block of the Mu'tazilite theory of *aḥwāl*. Therefore, it would be fitting to provide a general background of debates around the problem until Abū Hāshim arrives on the scene. As I have discussed in the first chapter, the concept of nonbeing proceeded from the Imāmī debates of the second half of the 8th century on the doctrine of *badā'* (change of God's decision on the ground of new knowledge). After their future prophecies were proved false, early Imami figures proposed that something had intervened, which compelled him to change his mind (*badā' lahu*). Would this mean any change in God's essence? Imāmī theologians sought to resolve the tension between God's immutable knowledge and the infallibility of the Imams. Hiṣham ibn al-Ḥakam's (d. 795) unique solution steered discussions forward and paved the way for the formation of the idea of the nonexistent. By giving more priority and authority to the side of the Imams, he argued that God knows not-yet-existing things not *ab aeterno* but only at the time of their existence. At times, this question of political origin evolved into a theological one. Late 8th-9th century Imāmī-Mutazilī figures began to deal with the question whether God of eternity knows things. As our sources have informed, there is another line of thought which played an important role in meontological discussions of this period. Al-Ash'arī reports that a group of people called *al-azaliyya* (eternalists) brought up a metaphysical principle for discussion, that divine knowledge would

entail the existence of known objects in eternity. In polemic with these traditions, Mu‘tazilites were divided into three basic camps. Among them there are those Mu‘tazilites like Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d. 840/849) and Abū Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ (d. 913) who proposed that God has foreknowledge of not yet existing things. The second camp, e.g., Hishām ibn ‘Amr al-Fuwaṭī (d. before 845) and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890), delimited God’s knowledge to post-creation realities. The third, i.e., ‘Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864), held a middle position by narrowing the boundaries of divine knowledge; God of eternity knows essential realities like entities, substances and accidents, but this is not the case for things which would entail a divine act of creation like *maf‘ūlāt* (things that are made) and *makhlūqāt* (things that are created).⁸

Starting from the last quarter of the 9th century the Mu‘tazilite Basran team known as the two masters (*al-shaykān*), Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915) and Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī (d. 933) introduced new orientations and refinements into meontological debates. They were pretty aware of the theological issues and objections of their time. They took the nonexistent neither as being beyond the boundaries of God’s knowledge (e.g., Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam and some Mu‘tazilites) nor an eternal reality that would coexist with him (so-called eternalists). In order to rationalize the qur’ānic tenet that God has knowledge of nonexistents, and they have some sort of essential reality, Abū ‘Alī borrowed the concept of *shay’* from Arab linguists, who indicates a general category encompassing not only what is but also what is not. Abū ‘Alī defined it as anything of which predication may be made and which may be known and mentioned about.⁹ He thus

⁸ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30), pp. 158-163; 488-490; al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, ed. Albert N. Nader (Beirut: al-Matba‘at al-Kathūlikiyyah, 1957), p. 90

⁹ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, p. 161: “*wa-mā summiya bihi al-shay’ li-annahu yumkinu an yudhkara wa yukhbara ‘anhu fa-huwa musamman bi-dhālika qabla kawnihi ka-al-qawl shay’un, fa-inna ahl al-lugha sammaw bi-al-qawl shay’un kulla ma amkanahum an yadhkarūhu wa yukhbirū ‘anhu.*”

regarded the possible nonexistent as something (*shay'*) in the sense that it may be made to exist and has a real correlate to God's power; therefore, it may be known *ab aeterno* and is that of which predication may be made and may be mentioned about. Basran Mu'tazilites often associated the nonexistent with the concept of *dhāt* as well in the sense that it is possible that it may be qualified by an attribute through which it is distinct from others.¹⁰ His son Abu Hāshim continued where his father left off by developing the Basran Mu'tazilite perspective in a new, far more complicated way. The major contribution lies in his incorporation of the theory of *aḥwāl* into the understanding of the nonexistent. Through development of the theory, it seems to me, he was planning to provide a plausible explanation for the understanding of the nature of God's foreknowledge.

Here it will be convenient to give a preliminary sketch of the theory of states (*aḥwāl*).¹¹ Modern studies argued that the theory was borne out of Abū Hāshim's tendency to resolve the theological conundrum presented by the interpretation of the statement 'God is knowing' (*allāhu 'ālimun*). Before him, the statement was interpreted in two ways. Ibn Kullāb (d. 855) and his followers construed it as designating (I) that God is knowing through a knowledge that is neither

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Asadābādī, *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-al-'adl* ([Cairo]: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa-al-Irshād al-Qawmī, al-Mu'assasah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil-Ta'līf wa-al-Tarjamah wa-al-Ṭibā'ah wa-al-Nashr, [196-?-]), vol. 5, p. 252-253:

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the Bahshamite doctrine of *aḥwāl*, see Harry. A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 167-234; Richard Frank, *Beings and their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu'tazila in the Classical Period* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1978); *Idem*, "Al-Ma'dūm wal-Mawjūd. The Non-Existent, the Existent and the Possible in the Teaching of Abū Hāshim and his Followers," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales* 14 (1980): 185–210; *Idem*, "Hāl," In E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New ed. Supplement, Fasc. 5–6 (1982):343–8; A. Alami, *L'ontologie modale: étude de la théorie des modes d'Abū Hāshim al-Ġubbā'ī* (Paris: Vrin, 2001); Robert Wisnovsky, "Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic West (Mašriq): A Sketch," in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, eds. Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bartolacci (Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 35-40; Jan Thiele, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933) Theory of 'States' (Aḥwāl) and its Adaption by Ash'arite Theologians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016]), pp. 364-383

identical to him nor other than him (*Allāhu ‘ālimun bi-‘ilmin lā huwa wa lā ghayruhu*). He thus explained the statement in such a way that confirms knowledge of God. Their exposition was subject to criticism when they further held eternity (*qidam*) to be the most characteristic divine attribute and predicated not only of God himself but also his attributes. Therefore, the Mu‘tazilites charged them with asserting a multiplicity of eternal beings (*ta‘addud al-qudamā*). Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 840), on the other hand, took the same statement as meaning (II) that God is knowing through a knowledge that is himself (*Allāhu ‘ālimun bi-‘ilmin huwa dhātuhu*). With this formula he is said to have resolved the dilemma produced by Ḍirār b. ‘Amr’s (d. 815) apophatic exegesis of all the Qur’ān’s positive characteristics of God (e.g., God is not unknowing and not powerless). In order to avoid the problem that Ibn al-Kullāb was susceptible to, Abū al-Hudhayl further posited the identity of attributes with God’s self. Abū al-Hudhayl’s perspective in turn provoked intra-sectarian controversy since it is unable to account for the difference between such predications as knowing and powerful. Abū al-Hudhayl’s disciple al-Nazzām’s (d. 835/845) phrase *li-nafsihi* (by virtue of himself) brought a groundbreaking perspective to bear on the issue of predications. His solution lies in his reformulation of the statement that God is knowing by virtue of himself (*Allāhu ‘ālimun bi-nafsihi/li-nafsihi*). The predication of any descriptive term of God would then designate what he is in himself without denoting the presence in him of any entitative reality like knowledge. Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī embraced al-Nazzām’s *li-nafsihi* locution. He employed it whenever he wished to refer to attributes that describe things as what they are in themselves. By applying it not only to God but also all other beings, Abū ‘Alī would be able to broaden and develop the Basran Mu‘tazilite theory of attributes. Whereas the statement ‘God is eternal’ (*Allāh qadīm*) refers to that by which he is called by virtue of himself, our saying ‘The

substance is a substance' indicates what a substance fundamentally is. This is what 10th-11th century Bahshamī writers label as *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence).¹²

Abū 'Alī's son Abū Hāshim's (d. 933) theory of states (*aḥwāl*) marks a very important turning point in the Basran Mu'tazilite evolution of the doctrine of attributes. As has been maintained by modern studies, his motivation for developing the theory was particularly shaped by the concern that Abū 'Alī's interpretation (e.g., God is knowing or powerful by virtue of himself) would lead towards the problem of collapsing all descriptive predications into God's self. In other words, according to this interpretation, the semantic content of all the qualities mentioned in the Qur'ān would be reduced to his essence, and thereby, there would be no distinction in meaning, for instance, between 'knowing' and 'powerful'. The second question that Abū 'Alī brought to the Mu'tazilite *Kalām* lies in his view that a descriptive quality (i.e., knowing or living) does not point to any extramental reality; it is just *wasf* (an act of attributing). Reified as a linguistic entity, it would then designate no ontological reality but a meaning that is understood in the mind.¹³ As a solution to these two problems, Abū Hāshim had recourse to the notion of *ḥāl*. As Frank has asserted, he was allegedly inspired by the grammatical notion of *ḥāl* (state, circumstance), which is used in the form of an adverbial accusative to depict either the subject or object of the verb in the state of being such and such. He further integrated the Kufan account of the copula verb *kāna* (cf. *einai*) into his formulation so as to express the *is* that is assumed in the predication of qualities of the subject.¹⁴ The followers of Abū Hāshim

¹² See especially Frank, *Beings and their attributes*, pp. 11-13; Wisnovsky, "Essence and Existence...", pp. 35-36; Thiele, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933) Theory of 'States' (Aḥwāl)," pp. 365-369

¹³ Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, pp. 11-27; Wisnovsky, "Essence and Existence...", in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, eds. Hasse and Bartolacci, p. 36

¹⁴ Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, pp. 20-23; R. Frank enthusiastically argues that Abū Hāshim borrowed the notion of *ḥāl* from Arab grammarians. But he makes no direct citation from Mu'tazilites's own works. It seems to

(Bahshamites) indeed articulated the theory of *ḥāl* in the syntactic form *kawn-S P-an*, e.g., *kawnuhu ‘alīman* and *kawn al-jawhar jawharan*. Abū Hāshim argued that *ḥāl* is an ontological category additional to substances and accidents, and he retained a metaphysically nonexistent yet real status for it; it is neither existent nor nonexistent.¹⁵ By taking divine qualities (e.g., *kawnuhu ‘alīman*) as *aḥwāl*, he would be able to circumvent the collapse of divine attributes into his self because, according to him, they all imply distinct manners or states of divine being. Whereas, in the case of Abū ‘Alī’s interpretation of *kawnuhu ‘alīman*, the predicate *‘alīman* is taken to convey what God is in himself, Abū Hāshim rather contended that it would signify his manner of being or circumstance, which is additional to himself and is semantically distinguished from, say, his being powerful (*kawnuhu qādiran*). Secondly, Abū Hāshim was able to escape the problem produced by his father that would compel one to view descriptive predications as linguistic phenomena without possessing any ontological content. Thus, his *ṣifāt=aḥwāl* differ from his father’s *ṣifāt=awṣāf* in that the former have some sort of ontological reality, while the latter do not. As a result, by suggesting the concept of *ḥāl*, Abū Hāshim went beyond the conceptual borders fenced in by the limitations of ontological categories, e.g., existent vs. nonexistent, substances vs. accidents. He introduced a new ontological category which is neither existent nor

me his argument is based on Gardet’s encyclopedic article on *ḥāl*, where he cites Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *Muḥaṣṣal afkār al-mutaqaddimīn wal-muta’akhhirīn min al-‘ulamā’ wal-ḥukamā’ wal-mutakallimīn*, ed. Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf Sa’d (Cairo: al-Qāhirah : Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, [1978]), p. 38. But Al-Rāzī also does not link the notion with the grammatical tradition. Even the way the idea of *ḥāl* is stated does not support Frank’s claim. In theological works it is put into words in various ways, sometimes in the verbal *kāna* construction and sometimes in a nominal sentence mediated by the pronoun *huwa* or without any mediation. In the first case, Frank’s point would be considered as persuasive. But it is not, considering other forms of expressing the idea of *ḥāl*.

¹⁵ Frank, “Ḥāl,” In Bosworth et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*

nonexistent; even if states have no real ontological entity, neither can it be said that they are nonexistent.¹⁶

There is in fact another tendency in our sources which explains the formation of the doctrine of *aḥwāl* in respect to the problem of God's knowledge of nonexistents. The coherence of earlier and later texts despite their different contexts might tempt one to think that in introducing the doctrine, Abū Hāshim may have rather been motivated by a desire to provide a foundation for the exploration of how nonexistents relate to God's knowledge.¹⁷ When reporting the Mu'tazilī position, the doxographer al-Ash'arī deals with several theologians' formulation of meontology in the form of self-predicational structures (e.g., substance is substance in the state of nonexistence).¹⁸ Since he does not give the wider setting of these discussions, these syntactic structures at first sight seem like pure nonsense. Reading al-Ash'arī's ambiguous remarks against the backdrop of 10th-11th century Bahshamite writers' elaborations will surely reveal how the Mu'tazilite idea of nonbeing evolved into discussion of *ṣifāt=aḥwāl*. We learn from these writers that these structures indeed show the way Basran Mu'tazilites express their own account of *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence). They additionally discuss how Abū Hāshim adopted and reworked these sentences to match the doctrine of *aḥwāl*. Abū Rashīd, for instance, elaborates extensively on *ṣifat al-dhāt* under the title *fī anna al-jawhara jawharun fī al-'adam* (On the topic that substance is substance even in the state prior to existence). He argues that *ṣifat al-dhāt*, since it is not grounded in anything else, is even prior to existence. This is the case

¹⁶ Thiele, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933) Theory of 'States' (Aḥwāl)," pp. 367-369

¹⁷ Thiele pays attention to the link between two topics but does not establish a causal relation between them. See Thiele, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933) Theory of 'States' (Aḥwāl)..." pp. 371

¹⁸ al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 159.5-159.13; 160.12-160.14; 495.12-496.2; 518.12-518.15

because even the nonexistent is given to God's knowledge as specifically being qualified by its attribute of the essence.¹⁹ Ibn Mattawayh also expatiates on the topic in the first few sections of his *Tadhkira*.²⁰ Their testimony was also confirmed by Ash'arī works, specifically al-Juwaynī's *al-Shāmil*, al-Anṣārī's *Ghunya* and al-Shahrastānī's *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*. They all combine the theory of *aḥwāl* with debates on the nonexistent.²¹

The close link between the issues of knowledge of *ma'dūm* and *aḥwāl* could apparently be seen in the Bahshamites' arguments in support of the reality of *aḥwāl* (= *ṣifāt*). Early Mu'tazilites except for Hishām al-Fuwaṭī (d. 845) and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890) held onto the qur'ānic doctrine that God has the nonexistent as an object of knowledge. But, as far as our sources are concerned, they did not go into the detailed analysis of the doctrine. The theory of *aḥwāl* indeed allowed Bahshamites to provide the basis on which they could argue that God of eternity knows nonexistent objects. For this purpose, they developed their own account of the epistemological elements of metaphysics. They explored how the epistemic components of similarity (*tamāthul*) and difference (*ikhṭilāf*) lay the foundation for the claim that *aḥwāl* are metaphysically real. Abū Rashīd writes:

T2: *Al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf bayn al-Baṣriyyīn wa l-Baghdādiyyīn*, p. 34:17-21: *Wa-mimmā yadullu 'alā dhālika anna al-jawhara innamā yatamayyazu mimmā laysa bi-jawharin, bi-kawnihi jawharan wa bi-taḥayyuzihi. Wa qad 'arafnā anna al-jawāhira 'inn al-wujūd mushtarakatun fī al-taḥayyuz. Wa-idhā lam takun mawjūdatan, fa-hiya mushtarakatun fī kawnihā jawāhira, wa in-lam tashtarik fī al-taḥayyuz. Wa-ma'lūmun*

¹⁹ Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī, *Masā'il al-Khilāf bayn al-Baṣriyyīn wa l-Baghdādiyyīn*, ed. Ma'n Ziyāda and Riḍwān al-Sayyid (Beirut: Ma'had al-anmā' al-'arabī, 1979), pp. 37-47

²⁰ Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira fī aḥkām al-jawāhir wa-al-a'rāq*, ed. Daniel Gimaret, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2009), Vol.1, pp. 13-14; 21-24; 27

²¹ 'Abd al-Mālik b. 'Abdullaāh al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil fī Ūṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. 'A. S. al-Nashshār (Alexandria : Munshu'at al-Ma'ārif, 1969), pp. 124-139; Abū al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī al-Naysābūrī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥasanayn 'Abd al-Hādī (al-Qāhira; al-Iskandariyya: Dār al-Islām, 1431/2010), Vol. 1, pp. 279-287 ; al-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat al-Iqdām*, ed. Guillaume, pp. 131-170

annahā idhā wujudat yajibu taḥayyuzuhā wa idhā kāna kadhālika wajaba al-qaḍā bi-tamāthulihā, li-anna al-ṣifat allatī bihā tatamayyazu al-dhāt ‘an mukhālifihā, bihā tawāfiqū mā yushārikuhā fihā.

“One proof in favor of the similarity of substances is what follows, namely, that the substance is distinct from what is other than itself only through its being specifically qualified by [the attributes/states of] being a substance and being space-occupying. We have already learned that the substances participate in [the attribute/state of] space-occupation when they exist. If they are nonexistent, they participate in [the attribute/state of] being a substance, though not in space-occupation. It is well-known that if they exist, they must have space-occupation. What necessarily follows from this, then, is that they are similar to one another. For, by the exact attribute by which the essence/thing-itself (dhāt) is distinct from what is other than itself, it is similar to those essences/thing-themselves that participate with it in the exact same attribute.”²²

In this excerpt, Abū Rashīd’s primary motive is theological.²³ He makes these remarks in a section entitled *Mas’ala fī tamāthul al-jawāhir* (On the Similarity of Substances), where he

²² Abū Rashīd, *Masā’il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and al-Sayyid, p. 34.17-21. In the following passage, he provides a theological argument in favor of the Bahshamite viewpoint that the substance has an essential reality even prior to its existence:

Idem, p. 45: “*Dalīlun ‘ākhar wa-huwa anna allāha ta’ālā idhā arāda khalq al-jawhar fa-lā budda min an yaqṣida ilā tjad-i mā ‘ālima min ḥālihi annahu yajibu an yataḥayyaza ‘ind al-wujūd; wa lā yakūnu hākadhā illā wa yatamayyazu ‘indahū ‘an ghayrihi, wa lā yajūzu an yatamayyaza min ghayrihi illā an yakhtaṣṣa bi-ṣifatin.*”

Another proof for our position is this, namely that when God the most high wills to create the substance, he must intend to bring into existence what he knows of its state that it will have space-occupation in existence. This would not be the case if it is not distinguishable for him from other things. Yet it can be distinguished only if it is qualified by an attribute peculiar to it.

In order for God to create the substance, Abū Rashīd thinks, there has to be a distinct essential reality in nonexistence, which would correspond to it as soon as he conceives of it that it would have space occupation during its existence.

²³ See, for instance, Ibn Mattawayh’s following statement:

Abū Rashīd, *Masā’il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and al-Sayyid, p.21.15-16: *Law lam-tatamayyaz li-(a)llāhi ta’ālā fī ḥāl ‘adamihā, ḥattā ya’lama anna hādhā mim mā idhā wujida taḥayyaza wa laysa kadhālika al-‘ākharu, lama ṣaḥḥa min-hu al-qaṣdu ilā tjadihā wa lā ilā i’ādatihā thāniyan. Wa-lā yathbutu al-tamayyuzu illā ‘ind al-ikhtisāṣ bi-ṣifatin.*

“If nonexistent essences were not distinct from one another in God’s knowledge so that he would know that this substance, when it exists, will occupy space and that the other thing is different from it, it would be actually possible

reconstructs the idea of *aḥwāl* within a wider setting of the theory of atomism. He points out that without prior knowledge of entities God would not be capable of bringing them into existence. Similarities and differences between entities grant us an epistemological foundation from which to determine *aḥwāl* as an ontological category additional to them that is neither existent nor nonexistent. It is because they are qualified by these *aḥwāl* that they look similar or different (*anna alladhī yu'aththiru fī al-tamāthul huwa al-ṣifat al-dhātiyya aw al-muqtadātu 'an ṣifat al-dhāt*)²⁴, and not the other way around. That is, it is not on account of the principles of similarity and difference that they are similar to one another. Accordingly, Bahshamites posited *aḥwāl* as the metaphysical ground of the similarity and difference of entities through which they are capable of being known. Thus, this theory enabled them to elucidate divine knowledge of essential realities *ab aeterno*. This could be possible only through their being particularly qualified by an attribute. By the attribute, Abū Haṣhim specifically means the two most characteristic features of the substance: **a-**) its being a substance (*kawnuhu jawharan*) and **b-**) its being space-occupying (*kawnuhu mutaḥayyizan*), which will be dealt with now.

A preliminary analysis of Abū Hāshim's classification of *aḥwāl=ṣifāt* would enable readers to make more sense of the wider setting of debates given in the passages on which my argument will rely. Bahshamites classify types of attributes on the basis of their ontological grounds, which is also supported by Ash'arites' remarks. Below is Frank's list of the categories of *aḥwāl*: **1-**) the attribute of the essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*); **2-**) the essential attributes entailed by the attribute of the essence (*al-ṣifāt al-dhātiyya or ṣifātun muqtadātun/mujābatun 'an ṣifa al-dhāt*);

for him neither to turn towards its creation or bring it into existence again. Therefore, the substance could be distinguished from another only through its being specifically qualified by an attribute."

²⁴ Abū Rashīd, *Masā'il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and al-Sayyid, p. 36; See also Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, p. 59, "*lā yaqa'u al-tamāthul wa lā al-ikhtilāf illā bi-ṣifāt al-dhawāt wa al-muqtadā 'anhā.*"

3-) attributes determined by the agent (*al-ṣifāt bi- al-fā‘il*); 4-) accidental attributes or attributes grounded in the presence of an accident (*ṣifāt ma‘nawiyya, li-‘illa or li-ma‘nā*); 5-) attributes that are grounded neither in a thing’s essence nor in an entitative cause (*ṣifāt lā li al-nafs wa lā li-‘illa*).²⁵ I will focus on the first three categories as they lay at the center of my argument, and will often be appealed to in what follows. The ontological status of the first category (*ṣifat al-dhāt*) in particular constitutes a major bone of contention in 10th-11th century Ash‘arī-Basran Mu‘tazilī controversy.

The first category is *ṣifat al-dhāt* which Frank labels the attribute of the essence. It is expressed through resort to self-predicational sentences, i.e., the substance is a substance. The Mu‘tazilite term for *ṣifat al-dhāt* is the curious phrase *kawnuhu jawharan*—literally, its being a substance. *Ṣifat al-dhāt* describes what the substance essentially is and distinguishes it from other objects that are not substances, e.g., black. The subject is predicated of itself in such a way that no duality is implied. Asserting that the substance is a substance in the state of nonexistence would then express that it possesses a distinct essential reality of some kind even in nonexistence that is similar to what is similar (*tamāthul*) and different from what is different (*ikhtilāf*). Bahshamites posit *ṣifat al-dhāt* as the ground of the intelligibility of nonexistents. Put differently, they could be known, predicated of, and mentioned about through being specifically qualified by it. In this respect, it is not conditional upon the actuality of existence. Therefore, they could discontinue to be qualified by the attribute of the essence not by being nonexistent but only by ceasing to be themselves. Insofar as nonexistent objects are possible on the part of the agent (e.g., God) that they be made to exist, this attribute has a metaphysically nonexistent yet real

²⁵ Ibn Mattawayh lists four attributes of the substance. See Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, pp. 13 and 18

status even in nonexistence. This is the distinctive feature of the Bahshamite view of *ṣifat al-dhāt* which earned the anger of the Ash‘arīs, who, since they subscribed to the concept of absolute nonbeing, stipulated the existence of entities for them to be qualified by any attribute.²⁶

Notwithstanding a different cultural context, the linguistic form of this category reminds us of Aristotle’s first and fourth senses of the phrase *kath’ hauto* (in virtue of itself) in *Metaphysics* 1022a-26-27. The examples Aristotle gives for them are “Callias is Callias *kath’ hauto*” (ὁ Καλλίας καθ’ αὐτὸν Καλλίας) and “man is man *kath’ hauto*” (καθ’ αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπος ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἐστίν), both of which are put into words through employment of self-predicational structures. *Kath’ hauto* in the first is employed to separate essential predications from other types of predications, and it designates the essence of a thing. In the second the phrase specifies a class of predicates that refer to an independent being which has no cause other than itself (ἔτι οὐ μὴ ἐστίν ἄλλο αἴτιον).²⁷ The Basran Mu‘tazilite concept of *ṣifa al-dhāt*, as formulated in the shape of *S is S*, indeed combines these two characteristics. *Ṣifat al-dhāt* signifies the what it is to be, that is, the most characteristic feature of an entity, whose loss would affect its identity (*bi-*

²⁶ As it becomes clear from al-Ash‘arī’s reports, the essential content of which is verified by Mu‘tazilite and Ash‘arite works of later date, the same self-predicational statements also figure in the perspectives of Abū Hāshim’s father Abū ‘Alī, the ex-Mutazilī al-Rāwandī (d. 910) and even some Baghdadian Mu‘tazilites (*qā’ilūn min al-baghdādiyyīn*). Our sources give no more details about the latter two positions. Therefore, we do not know whether they too supported the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Bahshamī writings provide a fair amount of information about the meaning of these syntactic structures. Therefore, as pointed out above, al-Ash‘arī’s concise and contextless remarks would make better sense only when they are read against the backdrop of these writings. Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār’s *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa* is our earliest source that attributes a defense of the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* to Abū ‘Alī. See ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1965), p. 199; His disciple Abū Rashīd confirms his testimony in arguing that Abū ‘Alī and his son Abū Hāshim are of the opinion that the substance is a substance even in the state of nonexistence (*i’lam anna alladhī yadhabu ilayh al-shaykhān abū ‘alī wa abū hāshim anna al-jawhara yakūnu jawharan fī ḥāl ‘adamīhi*). He then seeks to discuss in some detail their opinion on *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Abū Rashīd, *Masā’il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and al-Sayyid, pp. 37-47. Ibn Mattawayh as well engages in discussions over *ṣifat al-dhāt*. In most regards, his remarks align with that of Abū Rashīd. See Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, pp. 13-14; 21-24; 27

²⁷ Deborah K. Modrak, *Aristotle’s Theory of Language and Meaning* (Cambridge, U.K; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 154

ayyi shay'in 'ullila fasada) and which distinguishes it from others. It is for this reason that it is not grounded in any other entity. There is not anything other than itself which would cause it to become an entity (*thumma laysa hā hunā shay'un yumkin al-ishāratu ilayh, fa-yuqāla inna hādhihi al-ṣifata mu'allalatun bihi*).²⁸ For the reasons stated above, I find it quite plausible that Frank translates *ṣifat al-dhāt* as the attribute of the essence.

The second category of attributes is what Frank terms essential attributes. They are taken by the Mu'tazilite proponents of *aḥwāl* as expressing those attributes that are entailed by the attribute of the essence (*al-ṣifāt al-dhātiyya* or *ṣifātun muqtadātun/mujābatun 'an ṣifa al-dhāt*). This is like a substance's occupying space (*kawnuhu mutahayyizan*) that is entailed by its being a substance (*kawnuhu jawharan*) when it comes into existence. It does not express the perfect fullness of the being of the subject as *ṣifat al-dhāt* does; it is rather entailed by the latter. In fact, qualifying the substance as a substance would indicate that it is space-occupying when it exists. This category fundamentally differs from *ṣifat al-dhāt* in that it is conditional upon the existence of the being of the subject, whereas the subject is qualified by *ṣifat al-dhāt* even when

²⁸ Abū Rashīd, *Fī al-Tawḥīd: Dīwan al-Uṣūl li- Abi Rashīd Sa'īd b. Muḥammad al-Nīsābūrī [Ziyādāt al-Sharḥ]*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Hādī Abū Riḍā (Cairo, 1969), p. 276:

“Fa-in kānat maqṣūratan 'alā al-dhāt wajaba an tu'allala bi-hā, li-annā lā- nurīdu bi- qawlinā inna hādhihi al-ṣifa lil-dhāt wa- inna-hā mu'allalatun bi-hā akthara min anna-hā maqṣūratun 'alayhā. Fa- in lam takun maqṣūratan 'alayhā wajaba an tu'allala bi-gayrihā. Thumma laysa hā hunā shay'un yumkinu al-ishāratu ilayh, fa- yuqāla inna hādhihi al-ṣifa mu'allalatun bihi. Li-annahā bi-ayyi shay'in 'ullilat fasadat; fa-yajibu an tu'allala bi al-dhāt.” (where read *fa-innahā bi-ayyi shay'in 'ullilat fasadat* for *fa-innahā bi-ayyi shay'in 'ullila fasada*)

“If [*ṣifat al-dhāt*] is restricted to a thing-itself (*dhāt*), it must be grounded in that thing-itself because, when we say that this attribute belongs to a thing-itself and it is grounded in that thing-itself, we mean no more than that [*ṣifat al-dhāt*] is restricted to that thing-itself. If it were not grounded in that thing-itself, it would then be necessary that *ṣifat al-dhāt* is grounded in anything other than it. There is nothing outside this thing-itself which could be referred to, and in which it would be said *ṣifat al-dhāt* is grounded. For, whenever it is grounded in anything else, it will suffer affection.”

it is nonexistent. **The third category** consists of those attributes that are grounded in the act of the autonomous agent (*bi al-fā'il*) who causes the existence of entities in accordance with his intention and motivation. It is sometimes called the attribute of existence (*ṣifat al-wujūd*).

What is obviously seen in the writings of 10th-11th century Bahshamites is that they frequently drew an ontological distinction between the attribute of the essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*) and the attribute of existence (*ṣifat al-wujūd/kawnuhu mawjūdan*), with the former corresponding to its essential reality in nonexistence and the latter corresponding to its existence. The earliest textual evidence for the use of this distinction comes from the head of the Bahshamite school Qāḍī Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 1025), who turned towards Abū Hāshim's doctrines and teachings against his master Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Baṣrī (d. 980). He states:

T3: *Al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, p. 107: “*Fa- al-aṣlu fīhi anna al-ṣifata innama tatamayyazu 'an ghayrihā bi-wajh istiḥqāqihā; fa-idhā kānat iḥdāhuma mustaḥiqqatan 'alā ṭarīqatin wa wajhin, tatamayyazu 'an gayrihā bi-dhālika (read bi-hā), fa- 'alā hādihā yastaḥiqqu al-sawādu kawnahu sawādan wa kawnahu mawjūdan; thumma yazharu al-fāslu baynahumā bi-an-naj'ala kawnahu sawādan li-al-nafsi ve kawnahu mawjūdan bi-al-fā'il...*”

The ground of the distinctiveness of attributes from one another lies in the way in which they belong to an entity to have them. If, for instance, an attribute belongs to black in a certain manner by which it is distinct from others, it is in this manner that it is entitled to having [the attribute of] the black's being black (*kawnahu sawādan*) and its being existent (*kawnahu mawjūdan*). So then, distinctiveness between them would become actual by ascribing the attribute of the black's being black to its identity (*li-al-nafsi*) and the attribute of its being existent to its agent.”²⁹

'Abd al-Jabbār seeks to determine a more general principle of distinguishing attributes from one another. He divides them depending on whether they are subject to the agent's free choice. The conceivable division would be between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and all others. The black's being black

²⁹ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, ed. S. 'Azmī (Cairo: Dār al-Maṣriyya lil-ta'līf wa al-'Adl, n.d), p. 107

(*kawnuhu jawharan*) is equal to saying its *ṣifāt al-dhāt*, and it expresses its most characteristic attribute (*akhaṣṣ awṣāfihi*). This attribute's essential feature lies in its being restricted to the black and being unconditioned by anything else (*wa min ḥukm hādhihi al-ṣifa an takūna maqṣūratan 'alā al-dhāt ghayr mashrūtatin bi-amrin siwāhā*). This is actually what they mean by their statement that it is grounded in itself (*wa-annahā mu'allalatun bihā*). But the actuality of the remaining attributes which are assertable of it depends on existence that is given to it by the agent. In this case, it would not be wrong to state that *ṣifat al-dhāt* is prior to existence.³⁰ They thereby take existence as a supplemental quality to *ṣifat al-dhāt* which is defined as what a thing essentially is.

Occasionally, the Bahshamīs' arguments have a more overtly theological tone in their treatment of the distinction. The major reason for this literary shift may be related to the attitude and position they have taken against their challenging debaters as well as their tendency to explain, from their own point of view, the theological notions of *khalq* and *iḥdāth*. This can be observed in Ibn Mattawayh's following remarks. His imagery debater brings the Basran Mu'tazilite notion of creation for discussion. He writes:

T4: *Kitāb al-Tadhkira fī Aḥkām al-Jawāhir wa al-A'rāḍ*, p. 24.8-11:

Wa-rubbamā shanna 'a mushanni'un fa-qāla: in kāna jawharan wa 'araḍan fī al-'adam, lam yaṣiḥḥa waṣf allāh ta'ālā bi-annahū khalaqa al-jawāhir wa al-a'rāḍa.

Fa-in qāla: fa-kawnuhu jawharan wa kawnuhu mawjūdan sawā'un. Fa-idhā athbattumūhu jawharan fī al-'adam, fa-qad athbattumūhu mawjūdan fī al-'adam. Qīla lahu: inna ṣifat al-jins ghayru ṣifat al-wujūd bi-mā maḍā tafṣīluhu".

Many a time some people defamed us and said, "If the substance is a substance and the accident is an accident in the state of nonexistence, it would not be possible to qualify God as the creator of substances and accidents."...

³⁰ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, ed. 'Azmī, p. 61; Frank, *Beings and their Attributes*, pp. 53-54

If someone asks, “The substance’s being a substance (*kawnuhu jawharan*) and its being existent (*kawnuhu mawjūdan*) are one and the same thing, because when you assert that it is a substance in nonexistence, you indeed affirm that it is existent in nonexistence,” it may replied to him, “As has been elaborated above, the generic attribute (*ṣifat al-jins*) precisely has a different meaning than the attribute of existence.”³¹

Ibn Mattawayh is confronted with the repeated objection that a rival of the Bahshamīs levelled against the doctrine of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. If they gave a metaphysically real yet nonexistent rank to *ṣifat al-dhāt*, he criticized them for removing it from the sphere of God’s power (*qudra*). In these passages, Ibn Mattawayh perhaps had in mind critiques of Ash‘arites or followers of the Baghdadian Mu‘tazilite Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī.³² The major question his imaginary debater puts forward here is that if, according to the Qur’ānic teaching, God brings everything into existence, should *ṣifat al-dhāt* not be included in this everything? He thus sees the Bahshamī perception of *ṣifat al-dhāt* as a threat to the idea of God as the creator of all things. In response, Ibn Mattawayh explains God’s unique role in terms of creation (*khalq/iḥdāth*); it is God who bestows existence on all beings (*li-anna al-khalq wa al-iḥdāth huwa al-ijād wa allahū ta‘ālā huwa alladhī ḥaṣṣala lahu ṣifat al-wujūd*). But *ṣifat al-dhāt*, since it does not have a quality of existence, is not in need of divine power for the actuality of its reality.³³ He somewhat defines creation as conferral of existence upon essences that already have distinct qualities. What led them towards holding this perspective in fact lies in the Bahshamī notion that without prior knowledge of nonexistent essences with their distinctive attributes God’s creation would not be possible. They thereby

³¹ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, p. 24.8-11

³² See, e.g., Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Malāḥimī al-Khwārazmī, *Kitāb al-Mu‘tamad fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Tehran: Miras-e Maktoob, 2012), p. 374-5; Ibn Fūrak, Abī Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abī al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī*, ed. Daniel Gimaret (Bayrūt : Dār al-Mashriq, 1987), p. 254; al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmīl*, ed. al-Nashshār, pp. 126-130.

³³ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, p. 24

reserved essential realities outside the boundaries of divine creative act. Therefore, they argued that predicating that the substance is a substance has a different meaning than asserting that it exists. Existence is an additional quality to what a thing fundamentally is. Ibn Mattawayh here substitute *ṣīfat al-jins* (generic attribute) in place of *ṣīfat al-dhāt*, which is one of the commonly used terms in Bahshamite writings. But he does not use the concept of *jins* in the Aristotelian sense of *genos*. It is likely that he regards it as a synonym for kind or class of a being (cf. Aristotle's *eidōs*).³⁴

As I have already discussed, Bahshamites take *ṣīfat al-dhāt* as being actualized independently of divine power. By so claiming, they indeed create an ontological arena of some sort in which the intervention of even his act does not take place. One question that needs to be evaluated is why they exclude any control of *ṣīfat al-dhāt* by God's autonomous power. Abū Rashīd treats this issue through an answer to his interlocutor's question:

T5: *Al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf bayna al-Baṣriyyīn wa al-Baghdādiyyīn*, p. 39: *Fa-in-qīla: wa-lima qultum anna al-jawhara law kāna bi al-fā'il, la-ṣaḥḥa minhu an yūjidahu wa lā yaj'alahu jawharan?*

Qīla lahu: li-annahu lā budda min an yakūna li-ḥālihi ta'thīrun fī kawnihi jawharan fa-lā budda min an yakūna dhālika tābi'an li-ikhtiyārihi. Fa-in ja'alahu jawharan kāna kadhālika, wa in-lam yaj'alhu jawharan lam yakun jawharan.

If someone asks, why did you say that if the substance were a substance on account of its agent, he would indeed bring it into existence but might not wish to make it a substance?

It may be replied: If this were the case, the agent's state of being powerful (i.e., *kawnuhu qādiran*) would precisely have a determinative effect on the substance's being a substance. It must then be subject to his choice (*ikhtiyār*). Therefore, if he wishes to make the substance a substance, so it will be. If he does not wish to make it a substance, it will not be so.³⁵

³⁴ Frank, *Beings and their Attributes* (1978), pp.72-73

³⁵ Abū Rashīd, *Masā'il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and Riḍwān, p. 39

Bahshamites holds an absolute and irreducible status for *ṣifat al-dhāt*; it has no cause (*ma'nā*) other than itself. Therefore, it is not even subject to the agent's autonomous power. Abū Rashīd here states this idea in different words. He argues that if the substance's *ṣifat al-dhāt* were determined by an exterior cause, its essential reality which makes it be that which it is and thus renders it distinct from others would be undermined because the agent may not wish to make the substance what it fundamentally is.³⁶ In his *Mughnī*, 'Abd al-Jabbār expresses the ontological reality of *ṣifat al-dhāt* by the concept of *wujūb*. He proposes that it is necessary, which means that it is manifest in all cases, even in the state of nonexistence, and that no state of the agent's act (i.e., *kawnuhu qādiran*) could be correlated to it.³⁷ Thus, he grants some sort of independent reality to *ṣifat al-dhāt*.

In fact, Bahshamīs retain the same ontological status for the second kind of attributes or what Frank calls essential attributes, e.g., space-occupation. Similarly, they place the actuality of essential attributes outside the domain of God's efficient act. They argued that their actuality is grounded (*mūjabatun/muqtaḍātun*) in *ṣifat al-dhāt* when the qualified object exists. Asserting that the substance is a substance indeed designates that it is space-occupying. Accordingly, Bahshamites include essential attributes within the same group as *wājibāt* (necessary attributes). Like *ṣifat al-dhāt*, these attributes are necessarily actual in all cases (even during nonexistence), and they are not among the products of the agent's power.³⁸ They have reason to think that way. Ibn Mattawayh supplies us with the same justification on the same lines seen above. He argues

³⁶ Abū Rashīd, *Fī al-Tawḥīd [Ziyādāt al-Sharḥ]*, ed. Abū Riḍā, p. 276

³⁷ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Mughnī*, ed.?, vol. 8, p. 270: "*fa-ammā mā yajibu ḥuṣūluhu 'alayh 'alā kulli ḥālin fa-lā yu'aththiru fīhi ḥāl al-fi'l*"

³⁸ 'Abd al-Jabbār, *al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, ed. 'Azmī, p. 353: "*Fa-ammā mā kāna min al-ṣifāt wa al-aḥkām mim mā yu'addu fī al-wājibāt ka-naḥw ṣifāt al-dhawāt wa al-muqtaḍā 'anhā...*"

that if the substance's space-occupation were made by an agent, he would bring it into existence and may not wish to render it space-occupying but rather black, or may even wish to combine two contradictory things like black and white in one and the same substratum. This is the true meaning of the agent (*ḥaqīqat al-fā'il*).³⁹ Bahshamites recognize the agent's free choice as a determinative factor in the actuality of any entity to which it is related. Therefore, they think that it must only be tied to the domain of originated existence (*ḥuduth*) but not to the sphere of essential realities. Otherwise, the objects that are qualified by essential attributes would lose their identity. Despite all this, they stress that the actuality of essential attributes is conditional upon existence (*bi-sharṭ al-wujūd*).⁴⁰ It is for this reason that this category did not stand in the center of inter-sectarian controversies.

T3-T5 precisely witness the apparent distinction between what an entity essentially is and the fact that it *is* by distinguishing *ṣifat al-dhāt* from *ṣifat al-wujūd*. Whereas the latter is subject to God's creative act, the former, since it is ungrounded in anything, is prior to existence, for which reason it is not a product of divine power. As a matter of fact, the Bahshamīs' growing polemical encounters with opponents of *aḥwāl* (i.e., Ash'arites) drove them to make the distinction sharper. At times, they broadened and enriched the discussion that had been a long time in the making. In his *al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf*, Abū Rashīd rephrases the distinction through resort to the concept of *zā'idatan*, which is one of the most widely circulated key terms in post-Avicennian debates. He begins his argument by responding to the objections his interlocutor raised about the ontological status of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. His second objection is as follows:

³⁹ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, p. 27

⁴⁰ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, pp. 26-27

T6: *Al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf bayna al-Baṣriyyīn wa al-Baghdādiyyīn*, p. 45: *annahu lā ṣifata lil-jawhar bi-wujūdihi zā'idatan 'alā kawnihi jawharan. Fa-idhā qīla innahu jawharun fī kulli ḥālin fa-kaanahu qīla innahu mawjūdun fī kulli ḥālin*

“When the substance exists, it would not have an attribute additional to the attribute of its being a substance. For, when one asserts that it is a substance at all times (*fī kulli ḥālin*), it is as if he asserts that it is existent all the time.”⁴¹

Again, the interlocutor was perhaps an Ash‘arite or a follower of Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī who typically rejects the thingness of the *ma'dūm* as well as the theory of *aḥwāl*. He supposes that stating that the substance is a substance in all cases has no meaning other than that it exists at all times, which would designate the existence of things *ab aeterno*. Therefore, it would be hard to hold the substance’s existence as a supplemental quality to its attribute of the essence, which indicates what it fundamentally is. Abū Rashīd disagrees, since he grants an independent status to *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Therefore, he insists on the official Mu‘tazilite position that the attribute of existence that is brought into being by an agent is additional (*zā'idatun*) to that of the essence which is not theologically possible of being brought about by him.⁴²

2.3. Ash‘arī polemics: The identity of *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*

⁴¹ Abū Rashīd, *Masā'il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and Riḍwān, pp. 45

⁴² Abū Rashīd, *Masā'il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and Riḍwān, p. 46:

Al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf bayna al-Baṣriyyīn wa al-Baghdādiyyīn, p. 46: “*Fa-ammā mā dhakarahu thāniyan fa-khaṭa'un 'aẓīmun, li-anna lil-jawhar-i bi-wujūdihi ṣifatan zā'idatan 'alā kawnihi jawharan. Yubayyinu dhālka annā qad dallalnā 'alā anna kawnahu jawharan lā yajūzu an yakūna bi-al-fā'il. Wa-qad thabata anna wujūdahu bi-al-fā'il, wa muḥālun an takūna l-ṣifatu l-ḥaṣilatu bi-al-fā'il hiya al-ṣifata llatī lā yajūzu an taḥṣula bi-al-fā'il.*”

“As for his second objection mentioned above, it is a grave error. For, the substance, after it exists, has an attribute additional to [the attribute of] its being a substance. This evidently points to what we have previously demonstrated, namely that its being a substance cannot be determined by an autonomous power of the agent. So, this is doubtless the case only for its existence. Therefore, it is not possible that the attribute which is brought into being by the agent (e.g., existence) is the same as the one which is not possible of being brought about.”

The former leading Mu‘tazilite al-Ash‘arī (d. 936) refused to accept the doctrine that the divine act of knowing has the nonexistent *dhawāt* as an object. As I have mentioned in the first chapter, he possibly thought that this would cause him to take side with the eternalists (al-Azaliyya) who asserted the eternity of things because knowledge of *dhawāt* would entail their actual existence. On the other hand, he might not wish to align himself with such theologians like Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam, Hishām al-Fuwaṭī and Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī who, for variegated reasons, refuted the doctrine. He somewhat attempted a middle position by holding that neither would God have knowledge of things as they are in themselves, nor would it be possible that he is incapable of knowing them in eternity, since this would conflict with the qur’ānic teaching (e.g., Q 2:29; 3:29). He then argued that what is capable of being known, mentioned, informed about, and predicated of is not entities but their nonexistence (*intifā’*). He thereby gave no way to God’s knowledge of nonexistent objects themselves but only their nonexistence.⁴³ As Ibn Fūrak has informed, al-Ash‘arī accordingly made a point of avoiding predicating of them the category of nouns which he thought designate an assertion of existence. As a result, he strictly negated of the nonexistent not only ontological categories like *mawjūd* and *ḥādith*, but also those like *thābit*, *shay’*, *nafs*, and *dhāt* which he took as synonyms for existence. Thus, the *mawjūd=ḥādith=thābit=shay’=dhāt=nafs* formula. One final remark that needs to be made here is that in classical Ash‘arī writings, the concepts of *dhāt* and *nafs* are usually employed in polemic with the Mu‘tazilite notion of *ṣifat al-dhāt/ṣifat al-nafs* (e.g., *kawnuhu jawharan*), and

⁴³ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt*, ed. Gimaret, p. 252; al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 124; al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Ḥasanayn, Vol. 1, pp. 279-280

they primarily designate not the qualified object's "self" as some authors have suggested,⁴⁴ but rather its identity or its self-identity or the thing-itself (R. Frank). Therefore, it would be felicitous to read their criticism by having in mind the Basran Mu'tazilite implications of terms. This is especially true when engaging in their reactions to the theory of *aḥwāl*.

Since the 10th century, almost all Ash'arī writers felt compelled to deal with the problem of the ontological status of *aḥwāl*, and they impeached the Bahshamīs for retaining a metaphysically nonexistent yet real status for them. They particularly targeted *ṣifat al-dhāt* as it is said to have an ontological reality even in nonexistence. Sticking to our popular example, the concept of the substance being a substance, from their own perspective, would designate its existence in eternity, which they consider to be inconsistent with the unity of God. Besides, this concept led these writers to evaluate God's causal relation to it. They asked how it could be possible to accept the positive reality of nonexistent entities, let alone their qualification by attributes. Classical Ash'arīs who disapproved of the Mu'tazilī understanding of *ṣifat al-dhāt* (either formulated by Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī or his son Abū Hāshim) are divided into two groups depending on their approach to the status of *aḥwāl*. Theologians like Abū Bakr Ibn Fūrak (d. 1015) and Abū Ishāq al-isfarā'īnī (d. 10127) are reported to be opponents of *aḥwāl*. But Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī admit the idea with some fundamental revisions and modifications.⁴⁵ As it becomes clear from Ibn al-

⁴⁴ Benevich, "The Classical Ash'arī Theory of Aḥwāl," p. 140; *Idem*, "The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. Al Ghouz, p. 329

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the Ash'arī position on *aḥwāl*, see *Idem*, "Ḥāl," In Bosworth (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Thiele, "Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī's (d. 321/933) Theory of 'States' ...," pp. 377-382; Benevich, "The Classical Ash'arī Theory of Aḥwāl..," p. 140; *Idem*, *The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī...*, pp. 327-356

Fūrak's citations, al-Ash'arī also critically engages in the debate.⁴⁶ His *Maqālāt* precisely witnesses his awareness of Abū 'Alī's conception of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. But it is hard to know if he also had in mind Abū Hāshim as the target of his criticism. As seen above, Abū Hāshim reworked and developed the attribute of the essence in light of his view of *aḥwāl*, thereby describing it as a theological category that is neither existent nor nonexistent. No matter whom al-Ash'arī has as a target here, his criticism may equally apply to both Abū 'Alī and Abū Hāshim. The arguments he puts forward play a crucial role in the development of later Ash'arī approaches. As a proponent of *aḥwāl*, al-Juwaynī is another important figure who devoted much space to the criticism of the Mu'tazilite account of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. In what follows, I will thereby focus on the ideas of al-Ash'arī and al-Juwaynī.

Al-Ash'arī puts forward a relation of identity between what it is to be a thing and its existence. In fact, he does not dismiss the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. But he offers an alternative account. He instead advocates a theological formulation that equates the self-identity of a thing with existence. His strategy is to empty beings and their *ṣifat al-nafs/dhāt* out of the eternal arena and take them to the post-creation sphere where he thinks they deserve. Ibn Fūrak writes,

T7a: *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash'arī*, p. 254: *Wa-kāna yaqūlu inna man khālafanā fī hādhā al-bāb lazimahu qawlu ahl al-dahr fī qidam al-a'yān min al-jawāhir wa al-a'rāḍ, li-annahū idhā lam yakun fā'ilu l-jawhar fa'ala al-jawhar jawharan, wa kadhālika fā'ilu l-'araḍ lam yaf'alhu 'araḍan, wa kāna al-jawharu qabla wujūdihi jawharan wa al-'araḍu 'araḍan, addā ilā an yakūna qadīman jawharan qadīman 'araḍan wa an lā yakūna jawharan bi-fā'ilin. Wa idhā lam yakun ḥudūthu l-jawhar siwāhu bal huwa nafsu l-jawhar, fa-yaqtadī dhālika anna alladhī kāna bi al-fā'il huwa alladhī lam yakun bi al-fā'il. Wa hādhā muḥālun.*

⁴⁶ In his *al-Masā'il fī al-Khilāf*, where he discusses the theory of *aḥwāl*, Abū Rashīd evidently attributes the notion of *ṣifat al-dhāt* to Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī. See Abū Rashīd, *Masā'il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and Riḍwān, p.37

T7b: *Wa kāna yaqūlu inna dhālika yu'addī aydan ilā an yakūna al-shay'u qabla nafsihi, li-anna ḥudūthahu in kāna nafsahu wa kāna qabla ḥudūthihi shay'an fa-huwa shay'un qabla nafsihi. Wa-dhālika muḥalun.*

T7c: *Wa-kāna yaqūlu...-annahu li-nafsihi kāna jawharan fa-idhā wujudat nafsuhu wajaba an yakūna jawharan wa- tanāqaḍa an yakūna lā- jawharan wa nafsuhu al-muqtaḍiyatu li-kawnihi mawjūdatun..."*

T7a: He [al-Ash'arī] would say, "Whoever opposes us concerning this issue would be compelled to accept the opinion of the eternalists (*ahl al-dahr*) on the eternity of entities (*a 'yān*) whether substance or accident. For, if the creator does not make substance a substance and accident an accident, and if they are already a substance and an accident before their existence, this would lead to the conclusion that the substance and accident are eternal (*qadīm*) and that the substance does not exist by an agent. Given that the originated existence of the substance (*ḥudūth al-jawhar*) is not anything other than itself but indeed identical with itself (*nafs al-jawhar*), it would also follow from their assertion that what is assumed to exist by an agent [e.g., the substance's itself] would come into being without an agent, which is impossible."

T7b: He further used to say, "This would also compel them to acknowledge that a thing was even before itself (*an yakūn al-shay qabla nafsihi*). For, considering that the originated existence of a thing (*ḥudūthuhu*) is nothing other than itself (*nafsuhu*), if it were a thing before its existence, it would be a thing before itself. This is impossible."

T7c: He used to say, "...it is by virtue of itself that [the substance] is a substance. When the substance's identity exists, it must be a substance and therefore it would be contradictory that it is a *non*-substance (something other than a substance) while there exists its identity that entails its being a substance."⁴⁷

Ibn Fūrak does not give the broader context of al-Ash'arī's critical remarks on the Basran Mu'tazilites. But it is quite clear that al-Ash'arī here blames them for their notion of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. The phenomenon of self-predication is a good indication that this is the case. The major fault he finds with the Basran Mu'tazilite understanding of *ṣifat al-dhāt* lies in their assertion that the substance is *per se* (*li-nafsihi*) a substance even before creation. He is in fact surrounded by some limitations of categories which his immediate polemical atmosphere hands down to him. This can be seen when al-Ash'arī levels accusations against his foes in accordance with the

⁴⁷ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt* ed. Gimaret, p. 254

metaphysical principle of so-called eternalists, which delimits God's eternal knowledge to existents. This principle seems to have driven him to reject the view of nonexistent essences as objects of divine knowledge, instead making their nonexistence (*intifā'*) as the only object known. Thereby, he refuses to accept the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *dhawāt* in nonexistence, let alone their characterization by positive predicates. It is for the same reason that he construes the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* in nonexistence as signifying their existence independently of God's causality.

In the above fragments, al-Ash'arī makes some critical assumptions. In **T7a**, he identifies the qualified object's identity (*nafsuhu*) and its existence (*ḥudūthu*); the existence of a substance is nothing other than itself (*ḥudūth al-jawhar=nafs al-jawhar*). On this assumption he rejects the Mu'tazilite conception of *dhāt/nafs* in nonexistence and was able to secure God's efficient causality. Second, the substance's *nafs* entails that it is *per se* a substance (*-nafsuhu al-muqtaḍiyatu li-kawnihi jawharan*). Put differently, its *ṣifat al-dhāt* is not grounded in any other entity. This is a clear expression of approval of the Basran Mu'tazilite notion of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. But, thirdly, he asserts that the actuality of all positive attributes is conditional upon the existence of the qualified object (...*awṣāf al-ithbāt li- al-dhawāt allatī yata'allaqu nafyuhā bi- intifā' al-dhawāt*).⁴⁸ Thereby, he disapproves of their account of *ṣifat al-dhāt* in nonexistence, instead proposing its actuality after creation. He finally argues in **T7a** that predicating that the substance is a substance in nonexistence is equivalent to saying that it exists before itself (*inna dhālika yu'addī ayḍan ilā an yakūna al-shay' qabla nafsihi*). He thus equates its *ṣifat al-dhāt* (*kawnuhu jawharan*) with its quality of existence (*kawn*). Here, al-Ash'arī establishes a noticeable relation

⁴⁸ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt* ed. Gimaret, p. 254:22-23

of equality between *ḥudūth al-jawhar* and *nafs al-jawhar*, between *nafs al-jawhar* and *kawnuhu jawharan* (*ṣifat al-dhāt*), and between *kawn al-jawhar* (its existence) and *kawnuhu jawharan*. Thus, *ḥudūth al-jawhar / kawn al-jawhar = nafs al-jawhar = kawnuhu jawharan* (*ṣifat al-dhāt*). Whereas the Basran Mu‘tazilites accept the reality of *ṣifat al-dhāt* of even nonexistent beings and view existence as an additional quality to their meontological essences, al-Ash‘arī refuses to predicate any positive reality of them in nonexistence. He rather equates their attribute of the essence with their quality of existence, thereby disregarding the latter as additional to the former. Al-Ash‘arī thus diverges from them in that even *ṣifat al-dhāt* depends on God’s power for its actuality.

Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) is an important Ash‘arite figure who deals with the Mu‘tazilī perspective of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. In his criticism he closely follows in Ash‘arī’s footsteps. Like him, al-Juwaynī also argues that the true reality of the qualified object is existence, and existence is not a quality additional to its essential reality in nonexistence. But surprisingly enough, he puts forward his critical arguments through adoption of *aḥwāl*. In this respect, al-Juwaynī diverges from other Ash‘arīs who reject the theory by holding them as merely verbal (*alfāz*). He thus declares the ontological reality of *aḥwāl* alongside substances and accidents. As far as we understand from his justifications, he seeks to find an epistemological foundation from which to be able to better know the world around us. This is what Benevich calls ‘*ontological pragmatism*’.⁴⁹ Al-Juwaynī in fact reworks and refines the idea of *aḥwāl* to match the traditional Ash‘arī teaching of the nonexistent, according to which *mā‘dūm* is an absolute negative (*muntafīn min kulli wajhin*) and therefore can be neither *shay’* nor *dhāt* nor

⁴⁹ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, pp. 312-337; 635-642;

‘*ayn*.⁵⁰ He offers a refinement of the ontological quality of the qualified object and hence stipulates its existence so as to be qualified by any attribute. Whereas the Bahshamites asserted the actuality of *ṣifat al-dhāt* even in the state of nonexistence, al-Jubbā’ī denies any positive characteristics of nonexisting entities. Furthermore, he argues that although not entities (*ashyā’*), *aḥwāl* themselves are nevertheless metaphysically real (*thābita*) through their dependence on existing entities, which is unlike Bahshamites who grant a neither-nonexistent-not-existent rank to them. A brief mention of his classification of *aḥwāl* will be sufficient. It is his Ash‘arī position on the nonexistent that understandably drove him to make the Bahshamī distinction between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and essential attributes (Categories 1 and 2) disappear. So then, predicating that the *existing* substance is a substance would necessarily entail that it is space-occupying. The first two Bahshamī categories together thereby constitute al-Juwaynī’s first class of *aḥwāl*, which he calls ungrounded (*ghayr mu‘allal*) or essential attribute (*ṣifat al-nafs*, *ṣifat al-dhāt*, *ṣifa nafsiyya*), e.g., its being a substance, its being space-occupying and its being a thing. The second class consists of a category of attributes that affirms the existence of an entitative cause (*ma‘nā* or *‘illa*) subsisting in the qualified being, e.g., (being knowledgeable) *kawnuhu ‘āliman* and *kawnuhu qādiran*.⁵¹

In a section of his *al-Shāmil* on the concept of *shay’*, al-Juwaynī charges the Bahshamites with putting forward the claim that it is not in the power of God to make *ṣifat al-dhāt* in

⁵⁰ Ibn Fūrak, , *Mujarrad Maqālāt*, ed. Gimaret, p. 252; al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 124; al-Anṣārī, *al-Ghunya fī al-Kalām*, ed. Ḥasanayn, Vol. 1, pp. 279-280

⁵¹ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, pp. 129-130; 165-166; 307-308; 629-646; See also Frank, “Ḥāl,” In Bosworth, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam.*; Benevich, “The Classical Ash‘arī Theory of Aḥwāl..,” p. 137; Thiele, “Abū Ḥāshim al-Jubbā’ī’s (d. 321/933) Theory of ‘States’,” p. 380

nonexistence.⁵² This is the major point of discussion on nonbeing that for centuries continued between the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites. He challenges their position by asking them rhetorically, “Could you assert that the originated existent’s being an originated being, the substance’s being a substance, and the accident’s being an accident are among the products of God’s power or would you deny it?” “They could not affirm that it is by his power of efficient causality that the thing is a thing,” responds he himself.⁵³ From their contention that *aḥwāl* are metaphysically real yet nonexistent, it would follow

T8: *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, p.127: ...*anna al-dhāt fī kawnihā dhātan gahyru maqdūrin. Fa-idhā kharaja al-dhāt wa al-ḥāl ‘an kawnihima maqdūrayn, fa-qad intafā athar al-qudra. Wa- alladhī yūḍihū dhālika anna al-maqdūra minnā yuf‘alu wa al-dhāt fī kawnihā dhātan lā tuf‘alu.*

“that the thing-itself in its being what it is in itself is not a product of power. If *dhāt* (the thing-itself) and *ḥāl* ceased to be objects of God’s power, the effect of his power would disappear. The reason why we think this way is that that to which our power is correlated is in fact an object of power, but, [their] *dhāt* in its total identity with itself is not an object of power.”

Al-Juwaynī’s word choice in this passage suggests that the term *dhāt* placed in apposition to *ḥāl* does not simply designate ‘self’ or ‘entity’ but *ṣifat al-dhāt* in the Bahshamite sense of the word.⁵⁴ Al-Juwaynī clarifies this meaning through resort to the complement *fī kawnihā dhātan* (in being what it is in itself). In T7, Al-Ash‘arī also employs *nafs* in order to express Abū ‘Alī’s

⁵² al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, pp. 124: 7-11; 126:5-127:12

⁵³ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 126: “A-taz ‘umūna anna kawna al-ḥādith shay’an wa- kawnuhu jawharan aw ‘araḍan min athar al-qudra aw ta’būna dhālika? Wa- lā sabīla lahum ilā an yaqūlū: inna kawnuhu shay’an min athar al-qudra. Idh qad kāna shay’an ‘alā aṣlihim fī al-‘adam.”

⁵⁴ Benevich, “The Classical Ash‘arī Theory of Aḥwāl,” p. 140; *Idem*, The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī,” in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. Al Ghouz, p. 329; *Idem*, “The Essence-Existence Distinction: Four Elements of the Post-Avicennian Metaphysical Dispute (11–13th Centuries),” *Oriens* 45(2017), p. 232

account of *ṣifat al-nafs* or *ṣifat al-dhāt*, though without any implication of *aḥwāl*. In pre-Avicennian Mu‘tazilī-Ash‘arī writings both *dhāt* and *nafs* usually carry a connotation of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. In this respect, Frank’s ‘thing-itself’ would better reflect the meaning in this context. As mentioned above, Bahshamī Mu‘tazilites argue that if an entity’s *ṣifat al-dhāt* were effected by an efficient cause, its essential reality that renders it what it essentially is and makes it distinct from others would not be restricted to itself and therefore would be affected. For this reason, they exclude it from the boundaries of God’s power. They accordingly define God’s act of creation (*ījād* and *khalq*) as bestowal of existence upon essences that already have their distinctive features in nonexistence. Al-Juwaynī disagrees, following al-Ash‘arī, since he does not want any positive quality to be actual in nonexistence together with God.

As we have already discussed, al-Ash‘arī takes the quality of existence as equivalent of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Thereby, he neither admits the idea of *dhawāt* in nonexistence; nor does he support the actuality of *ṣifat al-dhāt ab aeterno*. All positive qualities are ontologically dependent on existent entities whether substances or accidents. Therefore, he refuses to accept the Mu‘tazilite claim that existence is an additional quality to what a thing essentially is. Despite admitting *aḥwāl*, al-Juwaynī discusses along the same lines. He states,

T9: *al-Shāmil fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, pp-129-130: “*Fa-innahum yaqūlūn: kāna al-ḥādith nafsan qabla ḥudūthihi. Wa-hādhā fī al-taḥqīq yarji ‘ilā qawl al-qā’il: kāna al-shay qabla nafsihi. Wa-hādhā jahālatun ya’bāhā kullu muḥaṣṣilin. Fa-in qīla: lima ankartum kawna al-wujūd ḥalan ‘alā qawlikum bi-ithbāt al-aḥwāl? Qulnā: ithbātuhu ḥalan yabṭulu ‘alā al-madhhabayn. Ammā buṭlanuhu ‘alā madhhabina, fa-li-anna ḥaqīqat al-dhāt al-wujūd, wa laysa al-wujūd ma’nan zā’idan ‘alā al-dhāt. Wa-ammā wajhu buṭlanihi ‘alā aṣlikum, fa-li-anna al-ḥāl yanqasimu ‘indakum: fa-min al-aḥwāl mā huwa ṣifāt al-nafs wa lays al-wujūd minhā. Wa-min al-aḥwāl mā huwa ṣifāt al-nafs wa laysa al-wujūd minhā. Wa-min al-aḥwāl mā huwa yu’allalu bi-al-’illa wa laysa al-wujūd minhā aydan, wa-lā yutaṣawwaru ‘ind abī ḥāshim ḥālun khārijun ‘an ḥādhayn al-qabīlayn.*”

They say that the originated existent (*ḥādith*) was itself (*nafs*) even before its existence. This would be equal to saying, “A thing exists before itself. This is indeed the product of ignorance that every wise person would deny. If one asks, “Why do you deny that

existence is a state (*ḥāl*) although you admit the reality of *ahwāl*? We reply, “The assertion that it is a state is false according to the two positions. From our point of view, it is false because the true reality of the thing-itself is existence, and existence is not an entity additional to the thing-itself. It is false based on your principles because, to you, there are two classes of states: 1-) the attributes of the essence (*ṣifāt al-nafs*), which do not include existence as an attribute; 2-) the attributes that are grounded in a cause, which does not include it either.⁵⁵

Al-Juwaynī rephrases the Bahshamī idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* in nonexistence by predicating the term *nafs* of *ḥādith* (the originated existent). Rather than establishing a relation of equation between the same subject and predicate (e.g., the substance is a substance), he simply states that the originated thing is *nafs* (*itself*) before its existence. He points out that in this case predicating an entity of itself would indicate the absurdity of an existence before existence. We observed the similar usage of *nafs* in **T8**, where he puts *ḥāl* in apposition to its synonymous word *dhāt* and modifies the latter by employing the complement *fī kawnihā dhātan*. Here in **T9**, al-Juwaynī reexamines the Bahshamite perspective of *ṣifat al-wujūd* from their own perspective of *āhwāl*. In other words, he discusses whether the attribute of existence is a quality (*ḥāl*) additional to *ṣifat al-dhāt*. As explored above, The Bahshamites campaign for the idea of *dhawāt* in nonexistence and thus view *ṣifat al-dhāt* as the ground of their intelligibility. They suppose that we can even comprehend nonexistent objects as being specifically qualified by an attribute that makes them what they are and distinguished them from others. Bahshamīs thus take their existence that is contingent upon God’s power as an additional quality to their *ṣifat al-dhāt* or themselves. Their perspective of the nonexistent, indeed, did led them towards this position, thereby failing to regard existence as *ṣifat al-dhāt*.⁵⁶ As a staunch proponent of *āhwāl*, al-Juwaynī would be

⁵⁵ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, pp. 129-130

⁵⁶ See also al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 309: *idh al-‘adam yattaṣifu indahim bi-kawnihi nafsan ma‘a intifā‘ wasf al-ḥudūth. Fa ṣaddahum dhālika ‘an ja‘l al-ḥudūth min ṣifat al-nafs.*

expected to argue in the same manner. But he diverges from them as he denies any positive quality of the nonexistent (*muntafin min kulli wajhin*). In parallel with al-Ash‘arī, he rather claims that existence is an attribute of the essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*) that is the most characteristic feature of *dhawāt*, and its actuality is dependent on *existing* entities.⁵⁷ Whereby, the substance’s quality of existence and its *ṣifat al-dhāt* are united in its identity.⁵⁸ The self-identity of the substance means nothing other than that it exists, a position which goes against the Basran Mu‘tazilite standpoint.

In other part of his *al-Shāmil*, al-Juwaynī explains why he does not see existence as *ḥāl* (state) that is neither existent nor nonexistent. He defines *ḥāl* as any attribute that is not preceded by nonexistence and ignorance of which would not present any obstacle to knowledge of the qualified object (*kullu wasfin lā yarji ‘u ilā nafyin wa lā yatanāqaḍu al- ‘ilmu bi- wujūd al-mawṣūf ma ‘a al-jahli bih*). Whereas being space-occupying, for instance, is a state because it meets the two conditions, originated existence (*ḥudūth*) is not a *ḥāl* since it proceeds from nonexistence. The last part of his statement in **T9** seems to contradict his remarks in a section of *al-Shāmil* entitled *al-Qawl fī al-Aḥwāl* (On Aḥwāl). While in **T9** he attributes only two categories of attributes (=states) to Bahshamites, he adds two more categories in the abovementioned section. The third category he lists is composed of those attributes that are effected by the agent. He regards existence (*ḥudūth*) as one of them.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 165: *ammā ḥudūthuhu wa wujūduhu fa-rāji ‘āni ilā nafsihi wa laysā ṣifatayn zā‘idatayn wa- in athbatnā al-aḥwāl*

⁵⁸ He lists a bunch of predications to designate the attributes that are directly ascribed to entities themselves (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*), such as being space-occupying, being a thing, being a thing-itself including being a substance and existence. See al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 308

⁵⁹ al-Juwaynī, *al-Shāmil*, ed. al-Nashshār, p. 309

2.4. Avicenna's Aristotelian reaction: Essence-existence distinction

When it comes to essence-existence distinction, Avicenna has long been the first name that comes to mind in modern studies on Islamic intellectual history. The topic was one of the more heated debates in the post-Avicennian period of Islamic theology. Muslim theologians like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Shahrastānī mostly associate it with the problem of the nonexistent. Let me remind you again of my comments on al-Rāzī in the introduction. Al-Rāzī argues that the major disagreement on the nonexistent revolves around the Mu'tazilite-Ash'arī controversy over whether the existence of black (*wujūd al-sawād*) is additional to its *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence), which he puts into words through resort to self-predicational sentences, e.g., *kawnuhu sawādan*. By rephrasing the latter as *māhiyya* (essence), he formulates the question in another way: whether essence can be freed from the attribute of existence (*ṣifat al-wujūd*). He thus expresses the relevant distinction without mentioning Avicenna's name. Contemporary authors implied that such remarks of theologians indicate a kind of anachronism.⁶⁰ The crucial question that confronts us is whether it is Avicenna that introduced essence-existence distinction into later theological discussions, or it was present already before he arrived on the scene. Throughout the previous two sections, I have explored how the dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd* was played out in 10th-11th century Bahshamite-Ash'arī debates on the notions of the nonexistent and *aḥwāl*. One could indeed see the nascent form of essence-existence distinction in these debates. In this section, I will discuss how Avicenna adopts and develops the distinction by modifying it in accordance with his Aristotelian ontology.

⁶⁰ Jolivet, "Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sina," p. 18; Benevich, "The Classical Ash'arī Theory of Aḥwāl", p. 140; *Idem*, *The Metaphysics of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī*, p. 329

As some recent studies have maintained, the debt Avicenna owes to 9th-10th century Ash‘arī-Mu‘tazilite discussions is straightforward.⁶¹ One can indeed find an expression of essence-existence distinction in *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 where Avicenna deeply engages in such theological issues as the concepts of *shay’* and *ikhbār/khabar* (predication), the *ma‘dūm-shay’* doctrine, and the relations between meontological and ontological categories (e.g., *shay’*, *mawjūd/wujūd*, *muthbat*, *muḥassal*, *ḥāṣil*). In *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5, he evidently distinguishes the essential reality (*ḥaqīqa*) by which an entity is what it is from its existence. He writes,

T10: *al-Ilāhiyyāt min al-Shifā’*, p.31.5-11:

T10a: *Fa-inna li-kulli amrin ḥaqīqatan huwa bihā mā huwa. Fa-li l-muthallath ḥaqīqatu annahu muthallath wa-li l-bayād ḥaqīqatu annahu bayāḍun.*

T10b: *Wa-dhālika huwa alladhī rubbamā sammaynāhu al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ, wa lam nurid bihi ma ‘nā al-wujūd al-ithbātī, fa-inna lafz al-wujūd yudallu bihi ayḍan ‘alā ma ‘āniya kathīratin, minhā al-ḥaqīqa allatī ‘alayhā al-shay’, fa-kannahu mā ‘alayh yakūnu al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ li al-shay’... innahu min al-bayyin anna li-kulli shay’in ḥaqīqatan khāṣṣan hiya māhiyyatuhu,*

T10c: *wa ma ‘lūmun anna ḥaqīqata kulli shay’in al-khāṣṣata bihi ghayru al-wujūd alladhī yurādifu al-ithbāta.*

T10a: Each thing has an inner reality (*ḥaqīqā*) by which it is what it is. Thus, the triangle has an inner reality by which it is a triangle, and white has an essential reality by which it is white.

T10b: It is that which we can maybe call “specific existence” (*al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ*), by which we do not mean affirmative existence (*al-wujūd al-ithbātī*). For the word “existence” (*wujūd*) indicates many meanings, one of which is the inner reality (*ḥaqīqa*) by which a thing (*shay’*) is what it essentially is. Thereby, [the inner reality] which a thing has is, so to speak, its specific existence...It is obvious that everything has an inner reality specific to it, which we call its quiddity (*māhiyya*).

T10c: We in fact know that the essential reality specific to each thing is something other than the existence that is synonymous with affirmation (*ithbāt*).⁶²

⁶¹ Jolivet, “Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sina,” p. 17-24 (esp.) ; Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's metaphysics in context* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 145-160

⁶² Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā’ / Ilāhiyyāt* (1), eds. G. Anawātī and S. Zāyid, revised and introduced by Ibrāhīm Madkour (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘Āmma li-Shu’ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyya, 1960), p. 31.5-11

Let's unpack our quote. In **T10a**, Avicenna employs *ḥāqīqa* and *māhiyya* interchangeably to express the idea of essence or quiddity. In the *Madkhal* of his *Shifā'*, he further includes *dhāt* as a synonym for them, by stating: "Each thing has a quiddity (*māhiyya*) by which it is what it fundamentally is, namely its inner reality (*ḥāqīqa*), that is, its essence (*dhāt*)" (*Inna li-kulli shay'in māhiyyatan huwa bihā mā huwa wa hiya ḥāqīqatuhu bal hiya dhātuhu*).⁶³ **T10b** defines essence as equivalent of *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ* (*esse proprium*), in other words, existence of some sort (*wujūdan mā*) that is specific to a certain set of things and is distinct from other sets of things. Thereby, the self-identity of triangle (*annahu muthallath*) would be equal to indicating its most specific feature that renders it what it is. In **T10c**, Avicenna provides a clear expression of essence-existence distinction. He argues that the inner reality specific to each thing is different from existence that he takes as synonymous with affirmative existence (*al-wujūd al-ithbātī*). Thereby, he has offered two different modes of existence, mental (*wujūd khāṣṣ*; *wujūd mā*) and extramental existence (e.g., *wujūd al-ithbātī*, *muthbat*, *muḥaṣṣal*, *mawjūd*).

It is possible to see traces of the Mu'tazilite concepts and perspectives at every corner of Avicenna's analysis. His definition of essence assumes the following two basic features: (I) Its semantic content only corresponds to an actual reality, and therefore, the impossible (*al-ma'dūm al-muṭlaq*) has no essential form in existence; (II) it designates the most specific characteristic that makes an entity what it essentially is and renders it distinct from others (31.18-

32.1:...*tudmiru fī nafsika annahu shay'un ākharu makhṣūsun mukhālīfun li-dhālika al-dhay' al-*

⁶³ Avicenna, *The Healing, Logic: Isagoge: a new edition, English translation and commentary of the Kitāb al-Madḥal of Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā'*, trans. Silvia Di Vincenzo (Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter, 2021), P. 58 (Translation is mine)

ākhar).⁶⁴ Hence, *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ*. In the first stage, Avicenna semantically associates *shay'* (which can be known and predicated of) with the concept of essence (=ideas in the mind that refer to some external reality=the possible nonexistent) over the Mu'tazilite *ma 'dūm-shay'* formula. The semantic association of *ma 'dūm* with ideas (=essence) can be visible in the Mu'tazilite definition of the *ma 'dūm* as *al-ma 'lūm alladhī laysa bi-mawjūdīn* (the known that is nonexistent) or *al-ma 'lūm alladhī laysat lahu ṣifat al-wujūd* (the known that has no attribute of existence).⁶⁵ As long as it is correlated to God's power and therefore made possible of being (*tābit al-jawāz*), the nonexistent can properly be said to be an object of knowledge. The scope of *ma 'dūm* thus subsumes not only entities that have not yet existed but also concepts in the mind which point to an external reality. When it comes to the impossible and purely imaginary objects of thought (e.g., phoenix), they cannot be said to be included in the Mu'tazilite *ma 'dūm*.⁶⁶ Here, Avicenna might seem to utilize Basran Mu'tazilites' theological speculations on the *ma 'dūm-shay'* formula. They predicate that *ma 'dūm* is a *shay'* in the sense that it is capable of being known and predicated of, and posit *ṣifat al-dhāt* as the ground of its intelligibility, which is its most characteristic feature that makes it be what it is. Likewise, Avicenna argues (*Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 31.18-32.1, 32.12 and 34.1-3) that predication (*ikhbār* or *khavar*) may be made of objects of thought that are realized in the mind even if they are now nonexistent in external entities, and that in this regard they have an essential characteristic that is specific to them. As a result,

⁶⁴ "...you reserve in your mind that [the reality of A] is something specific and distinguishable from that other thing [the reality of B]."

⁶⁵ See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, ed. 'Uthmān p. 176; *Idem, al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, ed. 'Azmī, p.356

⁶⁶ Richard Frank, "Al-Ma'dūm wal-Mawjūd," p. 208

whereas Mu‘tazilites focus on the theological relation between *shay’* and *ma‘dūm*, he, with an Aristotelian tendency, rather shows interest in its logical-metaphysical implication.

However, Avicenna diverges from them in terms of his insistence on the existential import of *shay’*, which is the first feature of his account of essence mentioned above. To this end, he offers a logical argument. In *Ilāhiyyat* 1.5 30.11-19, he levels the charge of tautology against their definition of the term *shay’* as “that of which it is possible of being predicated (*inna al-shay’ huwa mā/alladhī yaṣiḥḥu al-khabar ‘anh*). “What” (*mā*) or “that which” (*alladhī*) given in the definition has the same meaning as *al-shay’*. He contends that in this case the definition would not give new information about what is not known (*ghayr muḥīd*). This is like saying that *ḥaqīqatu kadhā ḥaqīqatu kadhā*. Predicating that the inner reality of such a thing is the inner reality of such a thing would in fact be tautological and useless. The same holds true for the sentence “The essential reality of such a thing is a thing” (*ḥaqīqatu kadhā shay’un*); predicating that X is a thing would thus not impart knowledge of what is not known. Unless “existent” is conjoined (*iqtirān*) with it, *shay’* will never convey any semantic content (*Ilāhiyyat* 1.5 31.11-32.5). Thereby, he regards existence as always concomitant with thing (*mutalāzimāni*). In a way, all he does is imbue the Mu‘tazilite *shay’* with the import of existence so that he would be able to confine the concept of essence to possible existents. One important implication of this assumption would be that the impossible cannot be a proper object of thought.

Albeit sometimes in a convoluted way, Avicenna here supplies us with a clear expression of the distinction between essence and existence, the former of which is put into words by *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ* and the second by *al-wujūd al-ithbātī*. He argues that one could at least conceptually distinguish them in the mind (*Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 31.2). His modification of *wujūd* by *khāṣṣ* in his definition of essence indeed reminds us of Bahshamites’ depiction of *ṣifat al-dhāt* as

akhaṣṣ ṣifātihi, which similarly signifies an entity's most characteristic qualification proper to it.

In *Dāneshnāma*, Avicenna incorporates essence-existence distinction into his metaphysical system of categories. Here also, we see traces and residues of Bahshamite debates on the distinction between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*. He writes:

T11: *Dānesh-Nāme-e 'Alā'ī, Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Mo'in, pp. 36-37: *Mardmāni ke ishān-rā didār-e bārīk nist pendārānd ke lafz-e hasti barin chiz beshterāk-e esm oftad chonān-ke har dah chiz rā yek nām bud, ma'na-ye ān nām yeki nabud, va in na dorost ast. zirā-ke agar chonin budī goftār mā jowhar rā ke hast ān budī ke jowhari jowhari (read "jowhari jowhari" instead of "jowhar ast"). va-ma 'na-ye hasti 'i jowhar joz ma 'na-ye jowhari nabudī va ham-chonan hast ke bar kayfiyyat oftadī ma 'nayesh joz kayfiyyati (read "kayfiyyati" instead of "kayfiyyat") nabudī. Pas agar kasi gofti: kayfiyyati hast, chonan budī ke kofti kayfiyyati kayfiyyati. va chon-ke gofti: jowhar hast, chonan budī ke gofti: jowhari jowhari.*

T11: People who have no keen insight think that the concept "*hasti*" (existence) is predicated equivocally (*beshterāk-e esm*) of these ten categories, so that there would only be a single name for all of them and that its meaning would not be univocal (*yeki*). This is incorrect because if it were so, when we assert that the substance *is* (*jowhar ast*), it would amount to saying, "The substance is a substance" (*jowhari jowhari*). In this case, the substance's existence would have no meaning other than substantiality (*jowhari*). Likewise, the word '*is*', when asserted of quality, would mean nothing other than qualityness (*kayfiyyati*). Thus, if one asserts that the quality *is* (*kayfiyyati hast*), that would be like asserting that the quality is a quality (*kayfiyyati kayfiyyati*), just as, when they predicate that the substance *is* (*jowhari ast*), it would be equal to predicating that that the substance is a substance (*jowhari jowhari*).⁶⁷

Avicenna discusses the relationship of the term *hasti* (=wujūd) with ten categories (i.e., substance, quantity, quality). He holds that being is a univocal term, not an equivocal one as his dialectical opponent has proposed. If it were equivocal when predicated of ten categories, it

⁶⁷ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Dāneshnāma*-i 'Alā'ī, ed. Mo'in, pp. 36-37

مردمانی که ایشانرا دیدار باریک نیست پندارند که لفظ هستی برین ده چیز باشتراک اسم افتد چنانکه هر ده چیز را یک نام بود؛ و معنی آن نام یکی نبود؛ و این نه درست است؛ زیرا که اگر چنین بودی؛ گفتار ما جوهر را که هست آن بودی که <جوهر است> و معنی هستی جوهر جز معنی جوهری نبود و همچنان هست که بر کیفیت افتادی معنیش جز کیفیت نبود. پس اگر کسی گفتی: کیفیتی هست، چنان بودی که گفتی: کیفیتی کیفیتی. و چونکه گفتی: جوهری هست، چنان بودی که گفتی: جوهری جوهری

would have ten distinct senses.⁶⁸ For instance, asserting that the substance *is* would have the same meaning as asserting that the substance is a substance, that is, its essence. This would amount to affirming the identity of existence and essence. Avicenna gives us as examples “substance” and “quality”, the former of which represents a parallel with the Bahshamīs who often resort to it in their discussions of *aḥwāl*. To such extent, his statement, without consideration of its broader context, could be seen as sort of a paraphrase of their view that the self-identity of substance is distinct from its existence. Accordingly, he still keeps the self-predicational structure of the concept of *ṣifat al-dhāt*, which is a unique way of expressing what an entity essentially is, e.g., *jowhari jowhari* and *kayfiyyati kayfiyyati*. But Avicenna adopts, reworks, and shapes anew and in particular ways the Bahshamite framework to match his metaphysical system on the basis of Aristotle’s *Categories*. He refuses to accept *hasti* as one of the ten categories. In this respect, his *hasti* is not equivalent of Aristotle’s οὐσία. By linking being with categories, he differs from Aristotle.⁶⁹

His upcoming argument will precisely draw him closer to the Mu‘tazilite position. “The sense of existence,” his argument continues, “is not intrinsic to these ten categories, nor is it to be taken as their inner reality (*māhiyyat*). It is for this reason that one could not say that something made humanity into a substance or blackness into a color, but one could say that it made them into existents (*mawjūd kard*).” Again, this passage would make better sense when read against the backdrop of Bahshamī debates over the dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*, the

⁶⁸ For an analysis of the passage with regard to Aristotle’s *Categories*, See Parviz Morewedge, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sīnā); a critical translation-commentary and analysis of the fundamental arguments in Avicenna’s Metaphysica in the Dānish nāma-i ‘alā’ī (The book of scientific knowledge)* (London ; New York : Routledge, 2016), pp. 117-120 and Thomas Gaskill, “Ibn Sina’s Ontology in his Danishnama ‘Ala’ī,” (Ph. D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1992), pp. 238-245

⁶⁹ Morewedg, *The Metaphysica of Avicenna (ibn Sīnā)*, p. 118

former of which they did not see as a product of God’s power. Therefore, they held creation as conferral of existence upon nonexistent essences. Avicenna concludes his remarks saying, “Therefore, each of these ten categories has an essence which does not proceed from an existing entity. For example, four is four, or it is a number with the character that it exists...Existence (*inniyyat*) is one thing, and essence (*māhiyyat*) is another. The existence of these [categories] is distinguished from essence because existence is not an essential idea, and as such is an accidental idea.”⁷⁰ Bahsamīs’ *ṣifat al-dāt* is similarly actual at all times even when the qualified object is nonexistent.

Another theme that echoes the Bahshamite perspective is the argument he puts forward for the existence of God. He develops his proof as a dimension of essence-existence distinction. The essential feature of his god is that he is one in his essence and does not become multiple.⁷¹ In order to show his pure oneness, he argues that his essence is identical with his existence. Avicenna is famous for holding an ontological distinction between the existing being that is necessary in virtue of itself (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihī*) and the existing beings that are contingent in virtue of themselves and that have a cause (*al-mumkin al-wujūd bi-dhātihī la-hu ‘illatun*).⁷² He thus associates *wājib al-wujūd* (the Necessary Existent) with the idea of having no

⁷⁰ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Dānishnāma-’i ‘Alā’ī*, ed. Mo’in, p. 38: “*Va-in ma’na-ye hasti mar in da maghule rā dhātī nist va māhiyyat nist. Va-az-in ghabl rā na-shāyad goftan ke chizi mardom rā jowhar kard va siyāhi rā lown kard, Va shāyad goftan ke mowjud kard*”

⁷¹ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā / Ilāhiyyāt* (2), eds. Muḥammad Y. Mūsā, Sulaymān Dunyā and Sa’id Zāyed, revised and introduced by Ibrāhīm Madkour (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-‘Āmma li-Shu’ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyya, 1960), 344.3-4: *na’ni bi-qawlinā innahu waḥdāniyyun al-dhāt lā-yatakaththaru annahu kadhālika fī dhātihī*

⁷² Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā / Ilāhiyyāt* (2), eds. Mūsā, Dunyā and Zāyed, p. 37.11

cause. Avicenna explains the meaning of this idea in reference to the watertight identity of essence and existence in him. He writes:

T12: *Dānesh-Nāme-e 'Alā'ī, Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Mo'in, pp.76-77: *ānche peydā varā māhiyyat joz inniyyat ast na wājeb al-wajūd. Va- peydā shod east ke har che varā māhiyyat joz inniyyat bud, inniyyat varā ma'na-ye 'arazī bud, va- peydā shod east ke har che varā ma'na-ye 'arazī bud varā 'ellat bud yā dhāt-e ān chiz ke vey 'eraz andar vist yā chiz-e digar"*

Anything whose quiddity is other than existence is not the Necessary Existent. It has become evident that existence is an accidental quality (ma'na-ye 'arazī) for them. It has equally become clear that there is a cause for something that has an accidental quality..”⁷³

This is a clear expression of the identity of essence and existence in the Necessary Existent. He is not of a nature that entails either composition (*Ilāhiyyāt* 8.4 345.6-346-8) or multiplicity (*Dāneshnāma*, Section 21). Therefore, essence and existence are one and the same thing in him. Everything else comes about through a cause because essence must be juxtaposed with existence in them so as to exist. In *Ilāhiyyāt* 8.4, where he characterizes God's existence by necessity, Avicenna states, he “has no quiddity other than its being the necessary existent.”⁷⁴

Avicenna's identity of essence and existence in God appears to be a vestige of the Bahshamite unity of God's *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence) and *kawnuhu mawjūdan* (his existence). In the previous section, we focused more on the theory of *aḥwāl=ṣifāt* with regard to contingent beings, and we discussed that in Bahshamī writings, *aḥwāl* are divided into the two basic sets of attributes based on whether they are grounded in the agent's power. Hence, the formula that existence is an additional quality to the attribute of the essence. Bahshamites

⁷³ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Dāneshnāma-i 'Alā'ī*, ed. Mo'in, p. 76-77

⁷⁴ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā / Ilāhiyyāt* (2), eds. Mūsā, Duniyā and Zāyed, pp. 346.11-12: “...*fa-lā māhiyyata li-wājib al-wajūd ghayr annahu wājib al-wajūd, wa- hādhihi hiya al-inniyya.*”

apply the theory of *aḥwāl* to divine reality as well. God has two basic attributes: *ṣifat al-dhāt* and essential attributes (Category 2). They describe the eternal's being eternal (*kawnuhu qadīman*) as his most characteristic feature, that is, his *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Their god is necessary of being in himself (*wajaba al-wujūd lahu min ghayr 'illatin*). Since he is not caused, his existence is grounded in his identity (*anna al-wujūd innamā yarji' ilā dhātihi matā lam yaḥsul bi al-fā'īl*). They list four essential attributes one of which is *kawnuhu mawjūdan* (the attribute of existence). God is existent by virtue of himself or the way it is itself (*li-dhātihi/li-mā huwa 'alayhi fī dhātihi*). They thus argue that his being eternal is identical with his existence (*kawnuhu qadīman huwa nafs al-wujūd*). As a result, whereas Bahshamite authors regard the existence of contingent beings as an additional quality to their attribute of the essence, they take God's existence as being identical with his attribute of the essence.⁷⁵

In this section, I have sought to attract attention to the possible points of contact between Avicenna and the Bahshamites. Avicenna's distinction is remarkably parallel to the Bahshamite distinction between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*. Notwithstanding their different contexts, *ṣifat al-dhāt* perfectly fits well with Avicennian definition of *ḥaqīqa* as *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ* (specific existence). They both designate the most characteristic feature of an entity, which makes it be what it fundamentally is and renders it distinct from others. One fundamental difference is that Avicenna appears to replace the theological *ṣifa* with *wujūd* of a more ontological character, as he might wish to adapt his perspective to Aristotle's ontology. Additionally, when discussing the existential import of *shay'* taken as the predicate in the

⁷⁵ See 'Abd al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, ed. 'Uthmān, p. 182.12-15; *Idem, al-Muḥīṭ bi-al-Taklīf*, ed. 'Azmī, p. 61; *Idem, al-Mughnī*, ed.?, Vol. 4, 250-251; vol. 11, pp. 432-433; Abū Rashīd, *Fī al-Tawḥīd [Ziyādāt al-Sharḥ]*, ed. Abū Riḍā (Cairo, 1969), 459-460; Frank, "Al-Ma'dūm wal-Mawjūd," pp. 197-198

Mu‘tazilite *ma‘dūm-shay*’ formula, he stresses that the semantic scope of essence should be limited to contingent beings to the exclusion of the impossible (*al-ma‘dūm al-muṭlaq*).⁷⁶ However, his discussion of categories on the basis of essence-existence distinction seems to be discontinuous with respect to Aristotle who did not treat “being” in relation to categories. Furthermore, Avicenna’s assumption of the identity of divine essence and existence similarly has a meaningful correlation with the Bahshamite union of *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd* in God.

Recent studies have maintained that 9th-10th century theological debates over *shay*’ and *mawjūd* provided a fundamental basis for Avicenna’s development of the distinction. Both Jolivet and Wisnovsky attempted to make a conceptual analysis of Avicenna’s remarks with special focus on al-Ash‘arī’s doxographical notes. I agree with them that without taking into consideration these debates, Avicenna’s perspective would not properly be understood. But despite textual evidence, they overlooked the possible role of the Abū Hāshim’s theory of *aḥwāl* on his reconstruction of essence-existence distinction, which I have emphasized throughout. In *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 34.11-14, he briefly speaks of the Mu‘tazilite concept of *ḥāl* as an ontological category which is neither existent nor nonexistent. This is a crucial excerpt because it evidently shows his awareness of Mu‘tazilite discussions of later period introduced by Bahshamites.⁷⁷ As first Ash‘arī scholars (al-Bāqillānī and Ibn Fūrak) have testified, the theory was widely in circulation among 10th century theologians. The earliest Mu‘tazilite works that intensely elaborated upon the topic were penned by such 10th-11th century Bahshamites as Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 1025), Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī (d. 1068), and Ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076).

⁷⁶ See Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā / Ilāhiyyāt* (1), eds. Anawātī and S. Zāyid, p. 32.12-33.18

⁷⁷ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Kitāb al-Shifā / Ilāhiyyāt* (1), eds. Anawātī and S. Zāyid, p. 34.11-14

As Frank has asserted, ‘Abd al-Jabbār already completed his magnum opus *al-Mughnī* when Avicenna was ten years old. There is no information that either he or his disciple Abū Rashid reports that they disagree with their master Abū Hāshim about any theological issues.⁷⁸

Regarding our topic, I also found Ibn Mattawayh’s perspective consistent with their remarks.

Well then, an examination of the potential link between Avicenna and Bahshamīs in light of these works would not bring us face to face with an issue of anachronism. Even a panoramic engagement with these works might tempt one to conclude that Bahshamī debates on the dialectic of *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd*, as well as the Ash‘arīs’ polemical reactions to the ontological status of *ṣifat al-dhāt*, are an obvious context for us to expound on Avicenna’s essence-existence distinction. Finally, Fragment T9 where al-Juwaynī present his position on the identity of *ṣifat al-dhāt* with *ṣifat al-wujūd* is an important testimony for a period in which essence-existence distinction began to spread among intellectuals. In their new publication, Adamson and Benevich view his conflict with the Basran Mu‘tazilites as “another dispute that had been waged in the *kalām* tradition.”⁷⁹ They imply that post-classical theologians’ treatment of essence-existence distinction alongside the theory of *aḥwāl* is anachronistic. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, we have essence-existence distinction in debates on the theory of *aḥwāl* in some nascent form.

2.5. Conclusion to the chapter

⁷⁸ Frank, “Al-Ma‘dūm wal-Mawjūd, p. 188

⁷⁹ Peter Adamson and Fedor Benevich, *The Heirs of Avicenna: Philosophy in the Islamic East, 12-13th Centuries* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2023), pp. 68-69

In this chapter, I primarily sought to explore the long-standing debates between Basran Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites over the dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence) and *ṣifat al-wujūd* (the attribute of existence). According to early Mu‘tazilites, since an entity is eternally known to God, its intelligible being suggests that it has an essential reality in eternity. As an expression of this reality, late 9th century Mu‘tazilites in Basra brought up the linguistic concept of *shay’*, which Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī defines as anything that can be informed about and predicated of (*kull mā amkanakum an yadkurūhu wa- yakbirū ‘anhu*). They thus held it to be a broader ontological category subsuming not only what is but also what is not. Abū Hāshim’s theory of *aḥwāl* marks a key turning point in Islamic theology after which the dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd* began to disseminate, which I have explored in some detail in the first two sections. The Bahshamites laid the foundation for the intelligibility of nonexistent objects through reference to the notion of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Put into words through use of self-predicational structures (e.g., *S is S*), *ṣifat al-dhāt* designates the most specific feature (*akhaṣṣ awṣāfihi*) of entities which makes them what they essentially are and render them distinct from others. They thus interpreted creation as bestowal of existence upon nonexistent essences, thus regarding existence or originated existence (*wujūduhu/ḥudūthuhu*) as an additional quality to its self-identity (*kawnuhu jawharan*; if you wish, its essence). Contrary to them, the Ash‘arites, since they refused to assert any positive qualification of the nonexistent, established a relation of identity between existence (*kawn/wujūd/*) and essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*). All they did is pour out beings and their *ṣifat al-naḥs/dhāt* out of the eternal realm and bring them to the post-creation sphere where they belong to. As it becomes clear from his remarks in *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 and *Dānishnāma-i ‘Alā’ī*, Avicenna engages in all these discussions. But, as Jolivet has rightly stated, “Certes elle en transpose le contenu dans le registre particulier à la philosophie, elle l’associe à la

pensée d'Aristote, et même réduite à ses thèses principales elle ne recouvre exactement aucune des doctrines qu'on a vues ; mais elle en est tributaire jusque dans le détail du vocabulaire, de la problématique, et des analyses.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Jolivet, “Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sina,” p. 17-24

CHAPTER 3: The concept of nonbeing in the 9-11th centuries: Debates over whether self-predication indicates essence or existence

3.1. Introduction

3.2. Discussions of the Arabic copula in modern studies

3.3. The function of *kawn* (to be) in self-predicational sentences: The dialectic between essence and existence

3.4. Conclusion to the chapter

3.1. Introduction

According to al-Ash‘arī’s (d. 936) *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, an indispensable doxographical source for the doctrines of the 9th century Abbasid *Mutakallimūn*, one of the issues about the notion of nonbeing that sparked the debates among the 9th century Muslim theologians, especially between the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites, is whether the (eternal) *a parte ante* identification of entities into entities proved to true or false. His report has been confirmed by a great deal of doxographical and theological works. How should one handle those perplexing statements—such as “Substance is substance even in the state of nonexistence (*al-jawhar jawharun fī l-‘adam*),—where substance is predicated essentially of itself? The phenomenon we face here is predicating a subject of itself in the logical form of *S is S*. Are these self-predicational statements to be seen as involving some sort of category error or misidentification? Or should we not attribute any significant meaning to these statements? In fact, modern scholars have not attached any importance to these self-predicational sentences. There is no doubt that these sentences cannot be

easily disregarded as mere *lapsus linguae* on the part of numerous writers¹ because they reflect the way the Basran Mu‘tazilites express the doctrine of *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence).²

A brief summary of the controversy over the doctrine will suffice here. With regard to the problem of divine attributes, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915), following al-Nazzām (d.845), argues that asserting that God is eternal (*Allāh qadīm*) designates the reality of God by virtue of itself (*li-nafsihi*). He applies the same locution “*li-nafsihi*” to contingent beings in maintaining that the substance is substance by virtue of itself. This statement likewise expresses what the substance essentially is (or if you wish, its essence). Abū ‘Alī further adopted and reworked the doctrine to elucidate the knowledgeability of nonexistents by God. Our sources attribute the same formulation not only to Abū ‘Alī but also to some Baghdādī Mu‘tazilites (*qā’ilūn min al-baghdādiyyīn*) whose names he left unmentioned.³ Abū ‘Alī’s son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’ī (d. 933) embraced the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* to match his theory of *aḥwāl* (states). This attribute would then indicate an ontological category that is neither existent nor nonexistent. Abū Hāshim,

¹ See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul, 1929-30), pp. 158,1-163,8; 518,12-518,15; Abū Maṣū‘ūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir b. Tāhir al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq bayn al-fīraq*, ed. Muḥammad Badr (Miṣr [Egypt]: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘ārif, 1328 [1910]), pp. 106; 157-159; Abū Rashīd al-Nīsābūrī, *Masā’il al-khilāf bayn al-baṣriyyīn wa l-baghdādiyyīn*, ed. Ma‘n Ziyāda and Riḍwān al-Sayyid (Beirut: Ma‘had al-anmā’ al-‘arabī, 1979), pp. 37-47; Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira fī aḥkām al-jawāhir wa-al-a‘rāq*, ed. Daniel Gimaret, 2 vols. (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2009), Vol.1, pp. 13-14; 21-22; 24; Abū al-Faṭḥ Ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal: Book of religious and philosophical sects*, ed. William Cureton (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1923), v.1, p. 53; Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Makkī, Wālid Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Nihāyat al-marām fī dirāyat al-kalām*, ed. A. Shihadeh (Tehrān : Freie Universität Berlin and Mirāth-i Maktūb, 2013), p. 13-14 (Fol. a7-b7); Idem., *Nihāyat al-marām fī dirāyat al-kalām*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Muḥammad ‘Alī (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 2017), p. 23; ‘Alī ibn Abī ‘Alī Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī, *Kashf al-tamwīhāt fī sharh al-Rāzī ‘alā al-ishārāt wa l-tanbīhāt lil-ra’īs Ibn Sīnā*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Bayrut : Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2013), p. 58-59

² I will discuss the theological-ontological dimensions of these sentences in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I will only briefly refer to them when the occasion arises.

³ See Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Ritter, pp. 158,1-163,8; 518,12-518,15

since he argues that *ṣifat al-dhāt* is unconditioned by anything else and only grounded in the qualified object, propose that it becomes actual even in the state of nonexistence. In sum, *ṣifat al-dhāt*, according to Abū ‘Alī, Abū Hāshim and their followers, describes what an entity fundamentally is and distinguishes it from other objects. Unlike them, Ash‘arites and Baghdadian Mu‘tazilites, since they refuse to assert any positive qualification of the nonexistent, disprove of the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. For, they asserted that this would designate its exclusion from the boundaries of God’s autonomous power and therefore they viewed its actuality in nonexistence as incompatible with the unity of God. They rather allowed for the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* only on condition that an entity exists.

In this chapter, I argue that these two opposing camps adjust the conventional Arabic language to match their vantage point into which they have been assimilated, to the point that one and the same syntactical structure where the subject and predicate are exactly alike means two very different things depending on their theological positions. Basran Mu‘tazilites construe the self-identity of things (*kawnuhu jawharan*) as an assertion of some sort of essence. On the other hand, Ash‘arites and some Mu‘tazilites interpret the same phenomenon as an assertion of existence, for which reason they regard these so-called predications as false (*fāsida*). I accordingly suggest that these syntactic structures can be analyzed on the basis of the two major senses of the copula “to be” (e.g., *kāna*, *inna*, *huwa*)—(1) copulative/predicative/identity and (2) existential. Indeed, 9th century scholars very rarely learned languages other than their mother tongue.⁴ By contrast, it is our privilege to live in a multilinguistic setting which gives us more

⁴ Sylvain Auroux [et al.], *History of the language sciences : an international handbook on the evolution of the study of language from the beginnings to the present. Volume 1 = Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaften : ein internationales Handbuch zur Entwicklung der Sprachforschung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart. 1. Teilband = Histoire des sciences du langage : manuel international sur l'évolution de l'étude du langage des origines à nos jours. Tome 1* (Berlin ; New York : Walter de Gruyter, 2000), p. 300.

benefits and puts us in a more advantageous position than these scholars, thereby enabling us to better recognize the obscurity of their expressions. For this purpose, I will depend on al-Ash‘arī’s doxographical work *Maqālāt*, Ibn al-Fūrak’s (d. 1015) and *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ash‘arī*, and ibn Mattawayh’s (d. 1076) *al-Tadhkira fī Aḥkām al-Jawāhir wa al-A‘rāḍ*, I will also revisit Avicenna’s *Dāneshnāme-i ‘Alā’ī* in order to show how this linguistic structure conforms to his essence-existence distinction.

3.2. Discussions of the Arabic copula in modern studies

As will be shown below, Mutakallimūn’s conflicting approaches to *ṣifat al-dhāt* expressed in the form of the *S is S* are marked by their differing interpretations of the copulative verb *kawn* (to be) either as indicating identity/essence or existence. This observation drives us to analyze the linguistic phenomenon of the copula in the Arabic language. The Arabic copula does not have a long history in modern scholarship. In the field of Indo-European studies, however, many important research works have appeared throughout the 19th-20th centuries, which attempted to do an analysis of ‘to be’.⁵ I will specifically content myself here with providing a very rough sketch of issues and challenges, through which we could be reminded of the logico-grammatical dimensions of self-predicational sentences with respect to the nonexistent. I believe that this

⁵ For a very general overview of discussions over the verb ‘to be’, see, e.g., Richard S. Bluck, *Plato’s Sophist: A Commentary*, edited with extensive introduction by Gordon C. Neal (Manchester [Eng.] : University Press, 1975), pp. 9-21; Leila Haaparanta, *Frege’s Doctrine of Being* (Helsinki: Societas Philosophica Fennica: distributed Akateeminen Kirjakauppa, 1985), pp. 47-53; Blake E. Hestir, *Plato on the metaphysical foundation of meaning and truth* (Cambridge, United Kingdom : Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 136-139; Mary Louise Gill, *Philosophos: Plato’s Missing Dialogue* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 173-176; Barbara Cassin, “ESTI [ἔστι], EINAI [εἶναι],” *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, trans. ed. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 312-313

outline will also enable us to position debates about the Arabic copula in the wider context of historical-comparative linguistic studies on ‘to be’. Especially classic studies on *einai* (‘to be’) are of great importance to us on account of the influence the Greek language exerted on the development of the Arabic copula after numerous Greek works were translated into Arabic in the 8th-10th centuries.

Today, it is generally accepted that there is a punctilious distinction between the complete use of “*is*,” in which no complement is needed (“*S is*”; cf. Ar. *kāna ishāq*), and its incomplete use, which requires an addition of any complement to be completed (“*S is P*”; cf. Ar. *kāna ishāqu karīman*).⁶ In the first half of the 20th century classicists exclusively subscribed to what Kahn refers to as “the traditional theory,” proposing that early ancient philosophers distinguish the two major senses of *einai*: **1-** “predication or copula” (under which linguists usually subsume the sense of “identity”), and **2-** “existence. They concede that a syntactic distinction between the complete and incomplete uses of “*is*” entails a semantic distinction. Therefore, they maintain that in its complete use (i.e., *S esti*) “*is*” could perhaps be rendered into English as “exists” (existential), or “is true/is the case/is a fact that...” (veridical)—a usage that comes up specifically when the statement takes a sentence or state of affairs as its syntactic subject, whereas its incomplete use (e.g., *S esti P*) plays a variety of roles like [1] predicative/copulative (“is such and such”), [2] identity (“is the same as”), and [3] locative/paralocative (“is somewhere”; “is in a state”).⁷

⁶But Kahn finds this terminological distinction misleading. He takes both Plato and Aristotle as holding that “*to be* is always to be something or other.” Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Post-Socratic Dialogue: The Return to the Philosophy of Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.96

⁷ Charles H. Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” *Foundations of Language* 2:3 (1966):245-265, at p. 247

John Stuart Mill (1843) was the first author to gain fame for distinguishing the “*is*” of predication from the “*is*” of existence, He argued that the metaphysics of being overlooked the double meaning of the verb.⁸ Possibly influenced by Mill’s ideas, Frege (1892) and Russell (1903) reformulated the distinction between the different senses of “*is*”, a formulation that will later win renown under the name of the Frege-Russell ambiguity thesis.⁹ According to this thesis, verbs for being are ambiguous between predication, existence, identity, and subsumption (class-inclusion).¹⁰

The application of the Frege-Russell ambiguity to ancient Greek philosophers stirred controversy among 20th century scholars. In order to reject the ambiguity thesis, these scholars referred to the famous rule by Gottfried Hermann (1801) that drew a distinction between the two senses of *estin*: 1-) the one is copulative expressed through an enclitic accent as in ἐστί and 2-) the other existential expressed through the orthodone accent as in ἔστυ.¹¹ They buttressed their

⁸ John Stuart Mill, *A system of logic, ratiocinative and inductive : being a connected view of the principles of evidence and the methods of scientific investigation* (London ; New York : Longmans, Green, 1930), p. 50

⁹ See, e.g., Gottlob Frege, “Über Begriff und Gegenstand,” *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie* 16 (1892): 192-205, at 193-194. Frege’s presentation of the ambiguity thesis on the meanings of “*is*” is not systematic; he rather treats it here and there throughout his writings (especially, his two articles ‘Dialog mit Pünger über Existenz’ and ‘Über Begriff und Gegenstand’, and *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*). Also, he engages in the problem by dealing with the difference between predication, on the one hand, and existence, identity, and class-inclusion, on the other. see Haaparanta, *Frege’s Doctrine of Being*, p. 54. Bernard Russell, *The principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge, University press, 1903), p. 64 n. †.

¹⁰ The “*is*” of identity is put into expression by the identity mark $a=b$, the *is* of predication by $P(x)$ (P is a predicate on x), the *is* of existence by the existential quantifier $\exists x: P(x)$ (meaning there is at least one x such that $P(x)$ is true), and the *is* of subsumption by a general conditional of the form $(\forall x) (x \in S \supset x \in P)$. Jaakko Hintikka, “On the Different Identities of Identity: A historical and Critical Essay,” in *Language, Meaning, Interpretation*, ed. Guttorm Fløistad (Dordrecht ; London : Kluwer Academic, 2004), p. 117 (117-139); *Idem.*, “Existence and Predication from Aristotle to Frege,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73:2 (2006): 359-377, at p. 360; Also, see Haaparanta, *Frege’s Doctrine of Being*, p. 52

¹¹ Gottfried Hermann, *De emendanda ratione Graecae grammaticae*. Pars 1. (Lipsiae : Apud Gerhardum Fleischerum, 1801), p. 84-85; Hintikka (1999), in various places, offers an explanation for the source of the ambiguity theory with reference to the Hermann rule. See Jaakko Hintikka, “On Aristotle’s Notion of Existence,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 52:4 (1999): 779-805, at p. 784

position through a close reading of selected passages in the *Sophist* (i.e., 156a3-256b5 and 256c4-256d10). They finally concluded that ancient philosophers like Parmenides and Plato were indeed aware of the distinction between the predicative sense of *einai* and its identity sense.¹² In the sixties and seventies, Michael Frede (1967) and G.E.L. Owen (1971) went in a different direction. Their findings suggested that neither Plato nor Aristotle marked off the different senses of *einai* from one another. The application of the distinction claim to ancient writers suffers from anachronistic use of sources. Instead of distinguishing the *Bedeutungen* of *einai* (namely, predication and identity), ancient authors would isolate the basic *copulative* sense (cf., Owen's "elliptical copula") that could mean different things in different syntactic settings.¹³

Doubtless a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of the problem has been conducted by Charles Kahn. By endorsing both Brown's discovery that "to be is always to be

¹² Cornford (1936) in part accepts the distinction between the meanings of *estin* (i.e., existential and identical), however, without mentioning the terminology of copula. See Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: the Theaetetus and the Sophist of Plato* (Indianapolis, IN: Library of Liberal Arts, 1957), p. 296; After refuting Cornford's claim to Plato's ignorance of the copula, Ackrill (1957) reads Plato's *Sophist* as distinguishing three senses of the verb *einai*: (1) the copula (*metechei*), the identity-sign (*metechei tautou*), and the existential *ἔστιν* (*metechei tou ontos*). See J. L. Ackrill, "Plato and the Copula: *Sophist* 251-259," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77:1 (1957): 1-6, at p. 6; In the same line of thought with him, A.E. Taylor (1961) also claims that Plato 'has definitely distinguished the "is" of the copula from the "is" which asserts actual existence and ...has discriminated the existential sense of "is" from the sense in which "is" means "is the same as", "is identical with." A.E. Taylor, *The Sophist and the Statesman* (Translation and Introduction), ed. Raymond Klibansky and Elizabeth Anscombe (London, New York, T. Nelson, 1961), pp. 81-82; Pursuing the footsteps of Ackrill, Runciman (1962) also debates that "...Plato, in exposing the ambiguity, is distinguishing between two different senses of εἶναι [attribution and identity], not between senses of ταὐτόν." See W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 89; Agreeing with Ackrill, Vlastos (1973) admits that the distinction has been identified in Plato's *Sophist*, but rejects his contention that Plato managed to mark off the existential 'is' from the other two uses. See Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 288 n. 44; Job van Eck, "Plato's Logical Insights: On *Sophist* 254d-257a," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000):53-79, at pp. 71-74; I. M. Crombie (1962) holds that Plato makes a clear distinction between predication and identity, further crediting him with an awareness of the existential sense of "is". See I. M. Crombie, *An examination of Plato's doctrines* 2 vols (Bristol : Thoemmes, 2002), Vol. 2; pp. 498-499 and 509-510.

¹³ Michael Frede, *Prädikation und Existenzaussage: Platons Gebrauch von '...ist...' und '...ist nicht...' im Sophistes* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 31, 71-72; also *Idem.*, "Plato's *Sophist* on false statements," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 402; G.E.L. Owen, "Plato on Not-Being," in G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, science, and dialectic: collected papers in Greek Philosophy*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 129-130

something” as well as the transformational grammar of Zellig Harris, he has made criticism of any distinction between the copulative and the absolute (existential) construction.¹⁴ Kahn wrote, “...the copula use is implicitly existential, and that most if not all existential uses of *einai* are potentially predicative.” This being the case, his argument continues, there is only one concept of Being (expressed by *einai*, *ousia*, and *on*) that ancient philosophers used to hold. No matter how the proposition is syntactically constructed (complete or incomplete), the concept will embrace the meanings of predication, identity, existence, truth, and maybe more, thereby all forming a remarkably unified philosophical system of Being, a conceptual network of mutually dependent notions clustering specifically around the concept of predication.¹⁵

Contemporary linguistic philosophy that took place concerning the Arabic *rābiṭa*
(syntactic link between subject and predicate) could not remain indifferent to challenges and

¹⁴ Brown (1986), 69, concludes: “...the complete and incomplete uses are related as follows: *X is* (complete use) entails *X is something* and *X is F* entails *X is*.” See Lesley Brown, “Being in the Sophist: A Syntactical Enquiry,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1986): 49-70. He exploits the formula that “to be is always to be something or other,” which Owen (1965) has already discovered before him in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. See G.E.L. Owen, “Aristotle on the Snares of Ontology,” in *Logic, Science, and Dialectic: Collected Papers in Greek Philosophy*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp.259-278. Kahn also takes this formula as one of the strongest evidences for his view on the priority of the predicative/copula use of *estin*.

¹⁵ Kahn (2004), 382-3, proposes the following objections to the dichotomy between the copulative and existential uses of “is”: (1) there are important uses of *einai* that are neither, such as the veridical; (2) There are other uses that are both, such as existential-locative; (3) the distinction itself is problematic, since the copula use is defined syntactically while existence is a matter of the lexical meaning of *einai* (the proto-Indo-European verbal root *es-, meaning “exists,” recurrently put forward as evidence for the prehistoric origin of the copula verb *einai*). In discussions of whether the copulative or existential use is primitive, he (2009), 2, obviously argues for the former (though not in the sense of a chronological priority, but only on the basis of a transformational analysis of sentences), further stating that existence could not be justified as a theme of central importance in ancient Greek philosophy, but rather it is the notions of predication and truth that are dominantly employed in ontological speculations from Parmenides to Aristotle. Kahn (2004), 402-3, concludes his argument saying: “Thus it is this twofold structure of predication, both syntactic and semantic, that provides conceptual unity for the system of sentence forms with *einai* that expresses not only the basic subject-predicate connection in copula sentences, but also the semantic notions of existence for the subject, truth for the sentential content, and occurrence or instantiation for predicates.” For a synopsis of his whole argument, see, e.g., Charles H. Kahn, “A Return to the Theory of the Verb *be* and the Concept of *Being*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 24 (2004): 381–405; *Idem.*, *Plato and the post-Socratic dialogue: the return to the philosophy of nature* (Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95-98. A more detailed analysis of his argumentation can also be found in his *Essays on Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and *The Verb “Be” in Ancient Greek* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003 [1973]).

issues, which have long been raised by Western linguists and classicists. Indeed, a special concentration on the predication-existence dichotomy also appears prevalent among scholars working in Arabic studies. When it comes to the Arabic language, one most noticeable fact is that it does not conventionally have a copula, which would serve to overtly mark the link between the subject and the predicate and thereby express semantic functions like equality, existence, identity, predication, copulation, veridicality, etc., a doctrine which, as Mates has stated, “has a long history and by now received in many quarters as philosophical gospel.”¹⁶

Soheil Afnan (1964) was the first scholar to introduce the absence of the copula in Semitic languages as a fundamental problem. He proposed that for this reason, they are unable to express the thought adequately.¹⁷ It is explicitly plain to us what he meant, namely that if a language has no linking verb like “to be” that would indicate one or more semantic functions, the main problem facing us here is that that language could not, so to speak, perform these functions. As far as the linguistic structure of Arabic is concerned, the problem would be but the steppingstone to another problem: namely that there is a number of *to-be*-type words to be assigned to these different functions, which, for instance, could be performed in Attic Greek by a single word. For example, copulation or predication is expressed either by a set of words—like *inna*, *kāna*, and *huwa*, or by a grammatical construction of the nominal sentence in form *the S* [is] *P*, whereas existence (which is other than Being as an expression of the relationship of a predicate to the simple subject), is by the words (i.e., *mawjūd*, *yūjadu*) derived from the root *w j*

¹⁶ Benson Mates, “Identity and Predication in Plato,” *Phronesis* 24 (1979): 211-29, at p. 217.

¹⁷ Soheil Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), p. 29-30

d. This problem is what Angus Graham (1965) calls the sharp separation between the copulative and existential functions.¹⁸

In fact, the claims of Afnan and Graham were not much welcomed among writers like Shehadi, one of the leading scholars in Islamic studies penning works specifically on the relation between the Arabic language and ontology. In an article where he examines the Arabic copula with respect to the concept of being, he challenges both the assertion of Afnan (the Arabic language's failure to express the explicit sense of Being as distinct from existence on the grounds that it lacks a syntactic copula) and that of Graham (a sharp distinction between predicative and existential functions and Arabic's lack of a multifunctioning *to-be*-type device). Shehadi argues that from the fact that Arabic has no single privileged copula as do the Indo-European languages, it does not follow that it does not, indeed, possess any word, which would in some way or another perform linguistic functions whether syntactical (copulative) or semantical (i.e., existential, veridical, instantiation). Thus, his argument continues, the task of performing all these functions could in fact be carried out in Arabic by a number of words (sc., *kāna*, *inna*, *mawjūd*, *huwa*), though not by a single and privileged *to-be*-type device as has been true of other languages. This is the first linguistic feature of Arabic that Shehadi calls "the nonsingularity of *to be*."¹⁹

Against Graham, Shehadi further puts forward: "...each of the *to-be* type words can perform (or was made to perform) both the predicative and the existential functions. Therefore,

¹⁸ A. C. Graham, "'Being' in Linguistics and Philosophy: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Foundations of Language* 1.3 (1965): 223-231, at p. 223.

¹⁹ Fadlou A. Shehadi, "Arabic and the Concept of Being," in *Essays on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, ed. George F. Hourani (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 151

the sharp separation thesis cannot mean that in Arabic it would be impossible to indicate both functions by the same term.”²⁰ Such is the case for *huwiyya* (lit. “he-ness,” derived from the copula *huwa*) and *al-mawjūd* (“existent,” derived from the root *w j d*). In his translation of *Metaphysics* 1017a7–22, where Aristotle is assumed to have discussed a number of the uses of *einai*,²¹ Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn (d. 873) prefers *huwiyya* as equivalent of τὸ ὄν possibly to designate the copulative-essence side of the notion (to be something). On the other hand, Averroes (Ibn Rushd), in his commentary on *Metaphysics*, puts the term *mawjūd* in apposition to *huwiyya* as a synonym for it, thus indicating the existential side of the notion (to be *simpliciter*).²² The same artificiality, *mawjūd* (existent), in a tripartite sentence where the normal predicate is placed in an accusative of respect, has been taken by al-Fārābī (d. 950) as the equivalent for the Greek term *estin* so as to indicate primarily the relation of identity between subject and predicate (a hyparctic copula) and only *implicitly* an existential aspect of predication.²³

²⁰ Shehadi, “Arabic and the Concept of Being,” p. 154

²¹ See Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Aristotle’s Metaphysics 5*, trans. with annotations William E. Dooley (Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 43 and 143, ff. 147. For a modern interpretation of the passage, see, for example, Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” pp. 248-249 and Christopher Kirwan, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Books Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon*, trans. with notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 140-1.

²² Averroes (Ibn Rushd), *Tafsīr mā ba’d at-ṭabī’at*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, 4 volumes (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938—1952), p. 552-553.

²³ In a context where he argues that already in both al-Fārābī and Avicenna tripartite statements (i.e., A is B) designate as a truth condition an existence claim for the subject, Allan T. Bäck (1987), 356, says: “...so every subject of a proposition is existent either in individuals or in the intellect.” This view too may be implicit in al-Farabi’s work.” For a brief analysis of al-Fārābī and Avicenna’s account of the copula with a perspective on logical foundations of the Aristotle’s aspect theory of predication in Arabic philosophy, see Allan T. Bäck, “Avicenna on Existence,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25:3 (1987):351-367; What further struck us here in al-Fārābī is that throughout his writings (e.g., *Hurūf* 111.11 and 113.6) he erroneously takes ἔστιν as a noun (*kalima*) without time reference. It is highly likely that he considered *estin* and ὄν/ὄν as meaning the same thing. Zimmermann (1981), p. 38, n. 4, explains the possible reason for his mistaken view, saying: “...it is possible that he had found out that the Greek word translated by *mawjūd* at various places in the corpus *Aristotelicum* and the *De Int.* was ἔστιν.” For further information about al-Farabi’s viewpoint on the copula, see F.W. Zimmermann, *al-Farabi’s Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione* (London : Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. xlv-xlv (n.1); lx (n. 1); 98-99; For al-Fārābī’s emphasis on the role of a timeless connector that certain words (i.e., *huwa*, *mawjūd*, and *yūjad*) play in expressing the copulative-predicative function

What is obvious here is that Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn, al-Fārābī, and Averroes follow the protocol so well expressed by one of the main characters, Humpty Dumpty, in Lewis Carroll’s novel *Through the Looking Glass*: “When I use a word,... it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less... The question is which is to be master—that’s all.”²⁴ Each language has its own distinctive system; even to some extent, the structure of a language determines the way its speakers express the patterns of thought. As it has been understood from Humpty Dumpty’s assertion, it is an undeniable truth that thinkers often force natural language to fit into their conceptual framework. I think such is the case with the heated controversy we encounter between the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites over self-predicational sentences, e.g., “the substance is a substance in nonexistence.” It is for this reason that linguistic and somewhat logical though it might be, the problem of self-predication, with respect to the nonexistent, is essentially theological.

3.3. The function of *kawn* (to be) in self-predicational sentences: The dialectic between essence and existence

As we have very briefly mentioned above, Muslim theologians branched off into two groups with regard to how to read self-predicational statements, e.g., “The substance is a substance in

of *einai*, see also Shukri B. Abed, *Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Alfarabi* (Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 136-141; For the relevant Arabic passages, see Al-Fārābī, *Sharḥ al-fārābī li-kitāb Aristūṭālīs fī l-‘ibāra*, ed. W. Kutsch and S. Marrow in *Alfarabi's commentary on Aristotle's Peri hermēneias (De interpretatione)* (Beirut: al-maṭba‘ah al-kāthūlikiyya, 1960), p. 103,3-23.

²⁴ Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition: “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and “Through the Looking-Glass,”* ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 213; Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1992), p. 107

nonexistence” (*al-jawhar jawharun fī ‘al-adam*). The Basran Mu‘tazilite school, which was represented by Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d. 915) and his son Abū Hāshim ibn al-Jubbā’ī (d. 933), holds the claim that the *ante-creationem* (eternal) equation between the same subject and predicate would designate a thing’s essential reality (or if you wish, its essence). Unlike the first group, some Mu‘tazilites, i.e., Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Ṣāliḥī (d. 890), as well as Ash‘arite theologians, view this equation as designating an existence claim for the qualified subject. By providing a close reading of the five select fragments that are of importance to my argument, I will explore how these two groups of theologians show some awareness of the copula by reflecting it in their informed elaborations of the problem of nonexistence. Or at least, I hope that a consideration of discussions of the copula will enable us to better understand their theological position.

10th-11th century Bahshamite writers report that Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī is a prominent proponent of the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt*.²⁵ In a quote, al-Ash‘arī strangely attributes an opinion to him and writes that he rejects the statement that entities are *per se* entities before creation. Since we are not supplied with the broader setting of this quote, it is hard to draw from it any precise conclusion with regard to Abū ‘Alī’s perspective. This misrepresentation might also be due to a scribal error. As will be seen below, this opinion in fact looks similar to that of al-Ash‘arī. For this reason, I will call the author of this opinion pseudo-Abū Alī. Al-Ash‘arī quotes him as stating:

T1: Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Helmut, p. 162.5-162.7: *Wa-Kāna yunkiru qawla man qāla al-ashyā’ ashyā’ qabla kawnihā wa- yaqūlu hādhihi ‘ibāratun fāsīdatun li-anna kawnahā huwa wujūduhā laysa ghayrahā. Fa-idhā qāla al-qā’ilu al-ashyā’ ashyā’ qabla kawnihā fa-ka’annahu qāla ahsyā’ qabla anfusihā*

²⁵See ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Aḥmad, *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-Khamsa*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Uthmān (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1965), p. 199; Abū Rashīd, *Masā’il al-Khilāf*, ed. Ziyāda and al-Sayyid, pp. 37-47

“He would refuse to admit the statement of someone who says, “Entities are *per se* entities even before their existence.” He would rather say, “This is a false statement because their Being (*kawn*) is identical with their existence (*wujūd*) and is nothing other than themselves. Predicating that entities are entities before their existence is like asserting that they are/exist before themselves.”

Pseudo-Abū ‘Alī refuses to accept that things are *per se* things before they come into existence (*qabla kawnihā*).²⁶ This is a false statement (*fāsida/khata’*), says he, because their Being (*kawn*)²⁷ is identical to their existence (*wujūd*) and is nothing other than themselves (*li-anna kawnahā huwa wujūduhā laysa ghayrahā*).²⁸ In order for any premise stated in the form of the *S* is *S* (i.e., entities are entities) to be true, it is required that its subject actually exist *in re*. Assuming this to be the case, if the condition of an actual existence is not met, the aforementioned premise that predicates things of themselves would be false. Moreover, the self-identical premise in question, his argument continues, would come to signify that entities are entities before themselves (*ashyā’ qabla anfusiḥā*), leading into a sort of the absurdity of an existence before existence.

Pseudo-Abū ‘Alī’s statement *kawnahā huwa wujūduhā laysa ghayrahā*²⁹ makes use of the double meaning of the word *kawn*. In the phrase *kawnahā huwa wujūduhā*, he first combines two ontological levels: essence and existence. *Kawnahā* is precisely an abbreviated form of *kawna al-ashyā’ ashayā’*, which is in turn a periphrastic reformulation of the sentence *al-ashyā’ ashayā’*,

²⁶ *Idem.*, *Maqālāt*, 162, 5-162,7; 522,8-522,10.

²⁷ From now on, “Being” in order to refer to the self-predicational basis of the statement. This indeed designates the essential side of *kawn*.

²⁸ *Idem.*, *Maqālāt*, 522,8-522,10 reads “*li-anna kawnahā huwa hiya*”

²⁹ “...their being is the same as their existence and is nothing other than themselves.”

thereby alluding to the essential side of *kawn*.³⁰ The phrase would then amount to asserting a relationship of identity between *kawn* (Being) and *wujūd* (existence). But this is so only on condition that things exist *in re*. In cases where the condition of existence has not been met, the self-predicational sentence *al-ashyā' ashyā'* would rather mean that entities *ab aeterno* exist as what they are in themselves, for which reason it is false. Through resort to the existential import of *kawn*, which is set side by side with *wujūd*, pseudo-Abū 'Alī further identifies, in *kawnahā...laysa ghayrahā*, existence and self.³¹ Hence, *kawn* (being/existence) = *nafs/ashyā'* (self). What further endorses this reading is that when construing the adverbial expression of *qabla kawnihā* (before themselves), he employed *anfusiḥā* (themselves), in *qabla anfusiḥa*, as a substitution for *kawnihā* (their existence), whereby equating their existence with themselves. Hence, *kawn* (Being) = *kawn* (being) / *wujūd* (existence) = *nafs/dhāt*. This formulation indeed reflects al-Ash'arī's ontological nomenclature.

So then, the following results can be inferred from pseudo-Abū 'Alī's above statement.

First, the concept of *kawn* absorbs *essentia* as signaled by the things' being identical with themselves (*kawn al-ashyā' ash'yā'*), on the one axis, and *existentia* or *esse* implicitly indicated

³⁰ It is well-known, grammatically speaking, that *kawn* is employed to re-state a sentence in the verbal noun form transforming it into a single syntactic unit, which is no longer to be considered a sentence, though composed of several words. The sentence *balaghanī anna zaydan mu'allimun* (It has been related to me that Zayd is a teacher), for instance, would be restated by being changed into the form only after the force of the case ending is lost: *balaghanī kawnuhu mu'alliman* (It has been related to me his being a teacher). This linguistic rule applies specifically to sentences that are juxtaposed in the nominal form of *A is B* having a copulative pattern—either with the *kāna* construction, or with the particle *inna*, or with the third-person pronoun (e.g., *huwa* or *hiya*) interposed between the subject and predicate, or without any one of them.

³¹ Pseudo-Abū 'Alī does not state *kawnahā laysa ghayrahā* (in reference to *wujūd*) but *kawnahā laysa ghayrahā* (in reference to existing entities). If the first were the case, this would designate the identity of *kawn* and *wujūd* which is already expressed in the first part *kawnahā huwa wujūduhā*. The second case which is *kawnahā laysa ghayrahā* here expresses the union of existence and existent. We often come across such ambiguous usages in Ash'arite writings. For a parallel analysis, see Frank *Idem*, "Ḥāl," In E. Bosworth et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New ed. Supplement, Fasc. 5–6 (1982):343–8: "The Ash'arīs understand the subject term to denote entity simply as an object: as an existent (*mawjūd*) whose existence is its "self" (*nafs*). Thus, *shay'* = *mawjūd*=*wujūd*=*nafs/dhāt*,..."

in the concept's identification with *wujūd* (*kawn=wujūd*), on the other, whereby embracing both the existential and essential side of *kawn*. In other words, the term, *kawn*, does not indicate the existential side of *kawn* alone, being equivalent to *wujūd*. But it here additionally functions as a copula to designate the connection of identity between one and the same subject and predicate (i.e., *ashyā'*) because the import of essence only proceeds from its copulative/identity function. Second, pseudo-Jubbā'ī proceeds from *esse/existentia* (existence) to *essentia*; speaking philosophically, he subordinates essence to existence. This assumption could be inferred from the necessary truth condition that pseudo-Abū 'Alī puts forward for the use of self-predicational statements, namely that the qualified subject exists.. In this way, he implies that existence is logically prior to essence. This perspective is contrary to the position of the Basran Mu'tazilites and the Muslim philosophers. For instance, Aquinas describes Avicenna's perspective as such: *Essentia autem est secundum quam res esse dicitur* (But essence is that according to which a thing is said to be).³² In this respect, his position runs parallel with that of the Mu'tazilites, according to whom (nonexistent) essence is logically and ontologically prior to existence. Third, Pseudo-Abū 'Alī deems it *fāsida* (false) to state that things are *per se* things in the state of nonexistence, since this would imply the absurdity that they already exist before themselves.

Al-Ash'arī's position perfectly complies with that of pseudo-Abū 'Alī. His remarks could be seen as a paraphrase, or maybe, further elaboration of the latter. As we have discussed in due course, he similarly asserts the relation of identity among *kawn* (Being) = *kawn/wujūd* (existence) / *ḥudūth* (originated existence) = *nafs* (self) = *mawjūd* (existent). Ibn Fūrak quotes him as stating:

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Le « De ente et essentia » de S. Thomas d'Aquin*, ed. M.-D. Roland-Gosselin (Kain, Belgique: Le Saulchoir, 1926), p. 10,4-5

T2a: *Mujarrad Maqālat al-Ash‘arī*, p. 254: *idhā... (wa) kāna al-jawharu qabla wujūdihi jawharan wa al-‘araḍu ‘araḍan, addā ilā an yakūna qadīman jawharan qadīman ‘araḍan wa an lā yakūna jawharan bi-fā‘ilin. Wa idhā lam yakun ḥudūthu l-jawhar siwāhu bal huwa nafsu l-jawhar; fa-yaqtadī dhālika anna alladhī kāna bi al-fā‘il huwa alladhī lam yakun bi al-fā‘il. Wa hādhā muḥālun.*

T2b: *Wa kāna yaqūlu inna dhālika yu‘addī ayḍan ilā an yakūna al-shay‘u qabla nafsihi, li-anna ḥudūthahu in kāna nafsahu wa kāna qabla ḥudūthihi shay‘an fa-huwa shay‘un qabla nafsihi. Wa-dhālika muḥālun.*

T2c: *Wa-kāna yaqūlu... (li)-annahū li-nafsihi kāna jawharan fa-idhā wujīdat nafsuhu wajaba an yakūna jawharan wa- tanāqāḍa an yakūna lā- jawharan wa nafsuhu al-muqtaḍiyatu li-kawnihi mawjūdatun... ”*

T2a: ...if they are already a substance and an accident before their existence, this would lead to the conclusion that the substance and accident are eternal (*qadīm*) and that the substance does not exist by an agent. Given that the originated existence of the substance (*ḥudūth al-jawhar*) is not anything other than itself but indeed identical with itself (*nafs al-jawhar*), it would also follow from their assertion that what is supposed to exist by an agent [e.g., the substance’s self-identity] would come into being without an agent, which is impossible.”

T2b: He further used to say, “the assertion [that the substance is a substance] would also compel them to acknowledge that a thing exists even before itself (*an yakūn al-shay qabla nafsihi*). For, considering that the originated existence of a thing (*ḥudūthuhu*) is nothing other than itself (*nafsuhu*), if it were a thing before its existence, it would be a thing before itself. This is impossible.”

T2c: He used to say, “..it is by virtue of itself that [the substance] is a substance. When the substance’s self exists, it must be a substance and therefore it would be contradictory that it is a *non*-substance (something other than a substance) while there exists its identity that entails its being a substance.”³³

Here, al-Ash‘arī argues alongside pseudo-Abū ‘Alī when he proposes that predicating that substance is a substance means nothing other than asserting that it exists. In **T2b**, he states that *dhālika yu‘addī ayḍan ilā an yakūna al-shay‘u qabla nafsihi*, that is, “that would lead to the conclusion that a thing exists even before itself. By the demonstrative pronoun *dhālika*, there is no doubt that he refers to the ontological reality of Being (*kawnuhu jawharan/‘araḍan*), which is the Basran Mu‘tazilite way of expressing *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Since *kawnuhu jawharan/‘araḍan*, to

³³ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt* ed. Gimaret, p. 254

him, amounts to indicating *kawnuhu* (its existence), he equates the essential side of *kawn* (the incomplete use) with its existential side (the complete use). Like pseudo-Abū ‘Alī, al-Ash‘arī stipulates the existence of the qualified subject as a truth condition sufficient to make the self-identical premise true. In this respect, existence is always logically prior to Being/essence. When he states (T2a) that the originated existence of a substance is nothing other than itself, al-Ash‘arī further establishes the relation of equation between the qualified object’s self (*nafs al-jawhar*) and its originated existence (*ḥudūth al-jawhar*). In T2c, he affirms that the substance’s *nafs* entails that it is *per se* a substance (*-nafsuhu al-muqtaḍiyatu li-kawnihi jawharan*). Al-Ash‘arī here argues that the substance’s Being/essence is grounded in its *nafs*, which he takes as a synonym for existence. This would equally amount to designating that *ṣifat al-dhāt* depends on existence for its actuality. He articulates this idea when he states that the actuality of all positive attributes is conditional upon the existence of the qualified object (... *awṣāf al-ithbāt li- al-dhawāt allatī yata‘allaqu nafyuhā bi- intifā’ al-dhawāt*).³⁴ As mentioned above, *S is S* is the unique way of expressing the attribute of the essence (*ṣifat al-dhāt*). Like the Basran Mu‘tazilites, al-Ash‘ari also puts into words this attribute through resort to the essential side of *kawn* (incomplete), whereas he communicates the idea of the quality of existence in reference to the existential side of the *kawn* (complete). But in the end, they relate to each other extensionally.

Ibn al-Rāwandī (d. 910) is our last theologian who argues for the identity of the essential and existential sides of *kawn*, His perspective is to some extent compatible with pseudo-Abū ‘Alī and al-Ash‘arī. Al-Ash‘arī quotes him as stating:

³⁴ Ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt* ed. Gimaret, p. 254:22-23

T3: Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 160,9-160,10: “*wa-kāna yaz ‘umu anna-l-ashyā’ a innamā hiya ashayā’u idhā wujidat; wa-ma ‘nā annahā ashayā’u annahā mawjūdātun.*”

He [al-Rāwandī] would assert, saying, “Entities are *per se* entities only on condition that they exist. What is meant by the entities’ being themselves is indeed that they are existent.³⁵

Ibn al-Rāwandī here argues that predicating that entities are entities (*kawn S S*) has no meaning other than asserting that they exist (*kawn S*). He thus establishes the relation of equality between Being/essence and existence. The important question facing us here is whether the source of existence claim that Ibn al-Rāwandī has maintained through his interpretation of the self-identical premise lies in his construction of the premise in polemic with the Basran Mu‘tazilite perspective of *ṣifat al-dhāt* or in his insight into the meaning of the individual syntactic unit *shay’* (thing). Some contemporary scholars held the source of the existence claim observed in Ibn al-Rāwandī’s comment as grounding simply in the early *Kalām* discussions over whether the term *shay’* is synonymous with *mawjūd* (existent).³⁶ Thereby, they disregarded the immediate intra- and inter-textual context in which it is introduced. In contrast, I would prefer to assert that given the setting, where the subject and predicate in all the illustrated examples are identical (i.e., *al-ma‘lūmāt ma‘lūmāt* and *al-maqdūrāt maqdūrāt*), it would in fact seem more reasonable to read al-Rāwandī’s interpretation of the self-identical premise *al-ashyā’ ashayā’* (entities are entities) as a response to the Basran Mu‘tazilite doctrine of *ṣifat al-dhāt*. Moreover, Ibn al-Rāwandī’s position strikingly resembles that of pseudo-Abū ‘Alī and al-Ash‘arī who likewise proposed that the self-predication of entities would designate their existence. The phenomenon

³⁵ Al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt*, 160,9-160,10.

³⁶ See, e.g., Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's Metaphysics in Context* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 149

of self-predication, in regard to the nonexistent, was indeed one of the critical issues of shared interest occupying the minds of theologians of this early period though they adapted different reading strategies in response to it. Therefore, ibn al-Rāwandī's interpretation would not have escaped the polemical taste that charged the intellectual atmosphere, where several other theologians dealt with the same issue. In this respect, they all belong to the same interpretive community since they share the same cognitive frameworks and analytical skills primarily centered on the conspicuously linguistic bias, which, as Frank has pointed out, is congenial to the cultural milieu.³⁷ All this would be considered a good indication that ibn al-Rāwandī here stipulates an existence claim as a truth condition sufficient to make the self-identical premise true. So then, if my reading is true³⁸, it is likely that he primarily and chiefly employed the predicate *ashyā'* in the sense of entities, being the same as the subject, and not in the sense of *mawjūd* (existent), thus having self-predication on his mind without primary concern for the

³⁷ Frank, *Beings and their attributes*, 11

³⁸ The post-creation self-predication applies only if my reading is true. Considering the context where the subject and predicate in the given examples are identical (i.e., *al-ma'lumat ma'lumat* and *al-maqdurat maqdurat*), I have preferred to read the premise *al-ashyā' ashya'* by focusing on the entire logical structure of the premise and not on the single syntactic units in it. Thus, I take the predicate *ashyā'* in the premise not in the sense of *ma'lūm mukhbar 'anh* (object of knowledge and information) as has commonly been suggested, but in the sense of entities, being identical to the subject. In other words, according to the best of my understanding, what al-Rāwandī is specifically discussing is not the meaning of the single unit mentioned in the premise in question, that is, *ashyā'*, but whether the entire logical premise would designate an existence claim. Unfortunately, the setting of the whole discussion for al-Rāwandī has not been given here. Also, the narration of his ideas has been interrupted over and over by reporting expressions like *kana yaz'umu* (he used to claim) and *kana yaqūlu* (he used to say). For this reason, it is not always easy to reach a certain conclusion about whether there is a continuity between sets of sentences regularly mediated by these expressions so that we would consider this premise either as a continuation of the topic of self-identity or a change to a new topic from al-Rāwandī. Even if such a narrative interruption prevents us from making certain assumptions about whether or not we are to take the premise as indicating existential import, what strengthens my reading here is that he touches upon the principle of independency (*lā tata 'allaqu bi-ghayrihā*) in making a judgment about the premise *al-ashyā' ashya'*, while, on the other hand, he deals with the principle of dependency (*mā yata 'allaqu bi-ghayrihi*) in attributing, for example, *maqdurat* to *al-maqdurat*, a predicate, in both cases, identical to its subject. Thereby, he here makes some sort of contrastive analysis which doubtless combines these two distinct self-identical premises. This contrast could be seen as a clear sign that al-Rāwandī pays attention to a claim of existence the statement *al-ashyā' ashya'* has, thus essentially having self-predication on his mind, without primary concern for the meaning of a single particular unit *shay'*.

semantic problem associated with the individual term *shay'* itself. Put differently from a linguistic point of view, al-Rāwandī's above quotation would designate that the copula “*kawn*” exercises not only a copulative-predicative power which links the predicate to the subject but also an existential power which expresses actual existence.

Basran Mu'tazilites, Bahshamites in particular, rather argued that the essential side of *kawn* as implied in *kawnuhu jawharan* has a different meaning from the existential side of *kawn* as indicated in *kawnuhu mawjūdan*. These two levels of ontological realities correspond to *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-mawjūd* in their theology. Ibn Mattawayh states,

T4: Kitāb al-Tadhkira fī Ahkām al-Jawāhir wa al-A'rād, p. 24: *Fa-in qāla: fa-kawnuhu jawharan wa kawnuhu mawjūdan sawā'un. Fa-idhā athbattumūhu jawharan fī al-'adam, fa-qad athbattumūhu mawjūdan fī al-'adam. Qīla lahu: inna ṣifat al-jins ghayru ṣifat al-wujūd bi-mā maḍā tafṣīluhu*".

If someone asks, “The substance's being a substance (*kawnuhu jawharan*) and its being existent (*kawnuhu mawjūdan*) are one and the same thing, because when you assert that it is a substance in nonexistence, you indeed affirm that it is existent in nonexistence,” it may replied to him, “As has been elaborated above, the generic attribute (*ṣifat al-jins*) precisely has a different meaning than the attribute of existence.”³⁹

Bahshamites take *kawnuhu jawharan* as designating what an entity essentially is, or say, its Being/essence. They thus regard existence as an additional quality to essence. In this respect, essence is logically prior to existence. They do not stipulate an existence claim as a truth condition sufficient to make the self-predicational premise true or form the idea of essence.

As a result, the Mutakallimūn took a premise of *tertium adiacens*, expressed in the form ‘*S is S*’ (i.e., the black is *per se* black even in the state of nonexistence), as indicating either **(Ash'arites and some Mu'tazilites)** that the black exists *in re ante creationem*, for which reason

³⁹ Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira*, ed. Gimaret, Vol.1, p. 24.8-11

the premise is false (*fāsida*), or (**Basran Mu‘tazilites**) that it is what it essentially is and distinct from others in the state of nonexistence. Therefore, Basran Mu‘tazilites held the priority of *ṣifat al-dhāt* (cf. Being/essence) over *ṣifat al-wujūd* (being/existence), the former of which they expressed, in reference to the essential side of *kawn*, in the form S is S, whereas they uttered the latter by predicating existent of the qualified object. It is only *ṣifat al-wujūd* which is conditional upon the agent’s power. They thus made some sort of unqualified, shadowy existence claim (cf. Avicenna’s *al-wujūd al-khāṣṣ*) for *ṣifat al-dhāt* apart from actual existence, though they stress that it fundamentally originates in divine knowledge. But Ash‘arites and some Mu‘tazilites proposed the identity of *ṣifat al-dhāt* and the quality of existence by equating the essential side of *kawn* with its existential side.

Avicenna also engages in these discussions with an Aristotelian flavor. In his *Dāneshnāme-i ‘Alā’ī*, he highlights an entity’s essence in reference to the incomplete use of *kawn* (*S is S*), whereas he draws attention to its existence by resort to the complete use of *kawn* (*S is*). He treats the problem in relation with Aristotle’s categories. He writes,

T5: *Dānesh-Nāme-e ‘Alā’ī, Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. Mo‘in, pp. 36-37: *Mardmāni ke ishān-rā didār-e bārīk nist pendārānd ke lafz-e hasti barin chiz beshterāk-e esm oftad chonān-ke har dah chiz rā yek nām bud, ma ‘na-ye ān nām yeki nabud, va in na dorost ast. zirā-ke agar chonin budi goftār mā jowhar rā ke hast ān budi ke jowhari jowhari* (read “jowhari jowhari” instead of “jowhar ast”). *va-ma ‘na-ye hasti ‘i jowhar joz ma ‘na-ye jowhari nabudi va ham-chonan hast ke bar kayfiyyat oftadi ma ‘nayesh joz kayfiyyati* (read “kayfiyyati” instead of “kayfiyyat”) *nabudi. Pas agar kasi gofti: kayfiyyati hast, chonan budi ke kofti kayfiyyati kayfiyyati. va chon-ke gofti: jowhar hast, chonan budi ke gofti: jowhari jowhari.*

T5: People who have no keen insight think that the concept “*hasti*” (existence) is predicated equivocally (*beshterāk-e esm*) of these ten categories, so that there would only be a single name for all of them and that its meaning would not be univocal (*yeki*). This is incorrect because if it were so, when we assert that the substance *is* (*jowhar ast*), it would amount to saying, “The substance is a substance” (*jowhari jowhari*). In this case, the substance’s existence would have no meaning other than substantiality (*jowhari*). Likewise, the word ‘*is*’, when asserted of quality, would mean nothing other than qualityness (*kayfiyyati*). Thus, if one asserts that the quality *is* (*kayfiyyati hast*), that

would be like asserting that the quality is a quality (*kayfiyyati kayfiyyati*), just as, when they predicate that the substance *is* (*jowhari ast*), it would be equal to predicating that that the substance is a substance (*jowhari jowhari*).⁴⁰

Avicenna here explores the connection of *hasti* (being) with Aristotle's ten categories (e.g., substance, quantity, quality, relation, place). He proposes that being univocally applies to all these categories. This would mean that it has a particular content which for each category remains one and the same. If *hasti* equivocally applied to ten categories as his imagery opponent has asserted, it would then have ten different senses and thereby would be identical with their essence. This is indeed the traditional Ash'arite position. As has been discussed above, classical Ash'arite theologians, since they establish the relation of identity among Being/essence (*kawn*), existent (*mawjūd*), existence (*kawn/wujūd*) and self (*nafs/dhāt*), maintain that all existents share the name of being without having the same intension. Following the Mu'tazilite framework, Avicenna rather subscribes to the distinction between essence and existence. He views the incomplete use of *kawn*, in the form of *jowhari jowhari*, as expressing the substance's essence, whereas the complete use of *kawn* (*jowhar ast*) designates its existence in his ontological system.

All these authors construed self-predicational sentences as assertions of identity/essence or existence. Their metaphysical position and predication are never apart in their perspective. Their description clearly suggests that the way in which an expression is predicated of itself is deeply and profoundly connected to extralinguistic reality. In this way, they established an obvious connection between logico-syntactic and ontological categories. What we see here is, then, that ontology, logic, and language are closely intertwined with one another. Their defense

⁴⁰ Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), *Dānishnāma-'i 'Alā'ī*, ed. M. Mo'in (Tehran, 1952), pp. 36-37

or refutation of the duplication of things into themselves stems directly from their own theological views. In fact, through an analysis of the subject-predicate structure of sentences they connected language to the metaphysical and theological categories which they had in mind.

3.4. Conclusion to the chapter

Throughout the chapter I have sought to explain the underlying logico-syntactic structure of the problem of the nonexistent. Muslim theologians formulate the problem, through resort to formulaic sentences repeated here and there, in the logical form of *S is S*, e.g., “the substance is substance even in the state of nonexistence.” Their approval or disapproval of the *a parte ante* duplication of things into themselves aptly reflects their theological concerns. They thus connect language to the metaphysical and theological categories which they have enthusiastically promoted. One of the underlying representations which manifest themselves in their divergent interpretations of the same sentence components is the key role that the copula plays in their theological ontology. As I have explored in Section 3.3, “*is*” in *S is S* shifts its meaning, in their differing interpretations, between making primarily an existence claim and performing a merely copulative-essential function between the same subject and predicate. The role of the copula can easily be seen in their rephrasing of self-predicational statements in a verbal noun form using periphrastic constructions, e.g., *kawnuhū jawharan* (the substance’s Being identical with itself) as a periphrasis for *al-jawharu jawharun* (the substance is substance).⁴¹ In modern scholarship the word *kawn* has most often come to be taken as an adequate and simple synonym for the word

⁴¹As mentioned above, in theological works self-predicational statements are put into words sometimes in a nominal sentence mediated by the pronoun *huwa*, *S huwa S*, or without any mediation, *S S*, and sometimes in the verbal *kāna* construction, *kāna S* (nominative) *S* (accusative). They are all rephrased in the verbal noun form in the same way, thereby revealing the role of the copula *kawn*.

wujūd (existence). This might be true for the Ash‘arite account of self-predicational sentences, since, in their view, the expression *kawnuhū jawharan* (the substance’s Being identical with itself) is equal to saying *wujūduhū* (its being/existence). However, this is not the case for the Mu‘tazilites. For they employed the same expression to designate what an entity essentially is or its essence, thus alluding to the essential side of *einai* (to be). Considering the issue of copula within the narrower context of the question of the nonexistent, one could propose that in the Ash‘arite understanding, the concept of being (*kawn*) is restricted to existing entities, whereas the Mu‘tazilites took it as referring to the ontological category of *essentia*, which, in their viewpoint, would correspond to what is not.

CONCLUSION TO PART I

The concept of nonbeing of a dialectical, epistemological, and semantic nature as properly defined by Schwarz has a complicated history of representation in the classical period of Islamic thought. In early period the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was in circulation among Muslim theologians. But they were not much concerned with the idea of nonbeing in this sense, but rather in connection with divine knowledge. This observation is crucial to follow the tracks of 9th century debates on divine knowledge with regard to the nonexistent. In Chapter 1, I discussed that this aspect of nonbeing proceeded from a complex socio-cultural and political dynamics in effect during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties of the late 7th-early 9th centuries. The failure of varied revolts and rebellions intended to transfer leadership to pro-Alids placed a heavy burden on the shoulder of Imami leaders. The future prophecies of Imami figures proved to be false. All this led the Imāmī community to go through traumatic experiences. In order to justify the defeats and the failure of prophecies, Imami personalities held that something had intervened (*badā lahu*), which forced God to change his mind. Would this come to mean that God is mutable in his knowledge? Why would he report his previous decision to the Imams knowing that he would alter it soon? The political doctrine of *badā'* caused Imami audience to raise questions and challenges about the tension between God's immutable knowledge and the impeccability of the Imams. From the second half of the 8th century onwards, the Imami theologians sought to resolve this tension and offered various solutions. In earliest Imami *hadith* collections, divine knowledge is presented as the central theme of discussions of *badā'*. First Sunni doxographers like al-Khayyāṭ (d. 913) and al-Ash'arī (d. 936) align with them in their treatment of *badā'* in connection with divine knowledge. Especially, al-Khayyāṭ's *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, a refutation of the Imamite ibn al-Rāwandī's (911) *Faḍīḥat al-Mu'tazila*, abound in polemical reactions to these

two topics (Sections 39, 48, 71-74, 77-87). Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 975) is the main target of al-Khayyāt’s attacks on Kufan Imamism over his polemic with ibn al-Rāwandī. It is in this intratextual polemical setting that we encounter the formulation of the concept of the nonexistent in the question whether God of eternity knows things. He argues that God *ab aeterno* has no knowledge of nonexistents until they exist. He resorts to the *lam yazal* locution in his expression of the nonexistent. Thereby, his account of the nonexistent is not only in tune with the createdness of divine knowledge (*ḥudūth al-‘ilm*) but also accommodate other aspects of his thought such as the doctrine of *‘isma* (the Imam’s immunity from sin), *badā’* and the anthropomorphic idea of God (*tajsīm*). Textual evidence (T5) shows that the two additional lines of reasoning are involved in Ibn al-Ḥakam’s discussion of the nonexistent. He problematizes divine knowledge of future events with regard to human freedom. He perhaps argues alongside the Qadarites who advocate the principle of free will starting from the end of the 7th century to the beginning of the 9th century. They basically proposed that God does not foreknow the deeds of man as this would nullify the qur’ānic principles of trial on earth, human responsibility, and divine justice. Ibn al-Ḥakam further engages in polemic with a mysterious group of people called eternalists (*azaliyya*), who hold that divine knowledge would entail the eternity of known objects and therefore believe in the eternity of the world. In order to get rid of the problem raised by them, he denies God’s knowledge of things *ab aeterno*. As a result, we cannot explain the emergence of the idea of nonbeing by reference to a single factor. Indeed, various socio-cultural processes and lines of thought seem to have been involved in the formation of the nonexistent. But there is no doubt that Ibn al-Ḥakam, whose Imami ideas stirred controversy among early Mu’tazilites, played a key role.

The Basran Mu‘tazilite scholars known as the two masters (*shaykān*), Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 915) and his son Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 933), introduced new perspectives and questions into meontological debates. They are famous for holding the idea of *dhāt* (essence or thing-itself) in nonexistence. Unlike Hishām Ibn Hishām, they argued for God’s knowledge of nonexistents in eternity, which they viewed as a fundamental doctrine of the Qur’ān. Their starting point was exegetical; following the mainstream Mu‘tazilite framework, they argued that the presentation of nonexistents as objects of divine knowledge in such Qur’ānic verses as 22:1 and 36:82 shows the eternity of divine knowledge. The term *shay’* (thing) plays a key role in their elaboration of nonexistent essences. Being a general category covering not only what is but also what is not, the term designates “that which may be known and of which predication may be made.” In this sense, the nonexistent is a thing. Abū ‘Alī’s idea of attributes (*ṣifāt*) and Abū Hāshim’s reworking of the idea in light of the theory of *aḥwāl* (states) allowed them to express the knowability of essential realities in eternity. In their opinion, knowledge designates not a simple conceptualization of entities but rather a logical process of comprehending them as being qualified by an attribute through which they are known and distinct from one another. Accordingly, in order to explain the intelligibility of nonexistent essences by God, Abū ‘Alī and Abū Hāshim argued for the idea of *ṣifat al-dhāt* (the attribute of the essence). However, the latter transforms the concept of *ṣifat al-dhāt* into the notion of *ḥāl* (state), an ontological category that is additional to substances and accidents and that is neither existent nor nonexistent. In other words, he argued a metaphysically real yet nonexistent status for it. The attribute of the essence signifies the most characteristic feature (*akhaṣṣ ṣifātihi*) of an entity, whose loss would ruin its identity, and which makes it what it essentially is and distinguishes it from others. Abū Hāshim thus posited this attribute as the ground of the intelligibility of entities in nonexistence. It is

ungrounded in anything else and therefore always actual whether the qualified object exists. Like his father, Abū Hāshim puts it into words in the logical form of *S is S*, e.g., “The substance is a substance” and “The black is black.” Another category of attributes (=states) is what he labels as *ṣifat al-wujūd* (the attribute of existence). This category is rather conditional upon the act of the autonomous agent. He argued that predicating that the substance is a substance has a different meaning than asserting that it exists. Existence is thus taken as an additional category to the attribute of the essence. The ontological status of *ṣifat al-dhāt* received severe criticism from opponents like Ash‘arites and Baghdadian Mu‘tazilites. The question of whether it is a product of God’s power constitutes a fundamental part of the problem of the nonexistent that continued for centuries but was never resolved to the satisfaction of both parties. The Bahshamites (the followers of Abū Hāshim) indeed problematized searching for the ground of a qualified object’s *ṣifat al-dhāt* in anything other than itself as it would lead towards the destruction of its identity. Therefore, they allocate God’s impact to his creation by elucidating it as conferral of existence upon nonexistent essences. In sum, from Bahshamites’ elaborations of varied categories of attributes appeared the dialectic between the attribute of the essence and the attribute of existence, the former of which is unconditioned by anything else, that which makes something what actually it is, and that by which it is distinct from others. The latter is grounded in the act of the agent and is taken as an additional category to the former. In Chapter 3, I argued that it is this dialectic between *ṣifat al-dhāt* and *ṣifat al-wujūd* that in turn laid the foundation for Avicenna’s essence-existence distinction. *Ilāhiyyāt* 1.5 34.11-14 is an important textual evidence showing his familiarity with discussions of *aḥwāl*. Word choices, given examples, ontological themes he engaged with, and syntactic structures all prove that he finds the distinction between essence and existence ready to use, in some nascent form, in Bahshamī distinction between the attribute of

the essence and the attribute of existence. Jolivet and Wisnovsky are two prominent authors who held that early *kalām* discussions of the terms thing (*shay'*) and existent (*mawjūd*) were the background against which Avicenna developed essence-existence distinction. They sought to reconstruct Avicenna's position and give a reasonable explanation for it by laying out Avicenna's deep conceptual analysis. I rather contend that without considering Bahshamites' abovementioned distinction, it is hard to find a gratifying consistency in Avicenna's conceptual analysis, which would reveal the distinction between essence and existence. Wisnovsky argues that there is a progression from the *Mutakallimūn*'s employment of *shay'/'shay'īyya* (thing) to Avicenna's employment of *māhiyya* (essence), just as there is a route from *mawjūd* (existent) to *wujūd* (existence). But later, he felt compelled to confess, "...the concept of what it is to be a thing (of thingness, in other words) which Avicenna articulates in *Ilāhiyyāt* in 1.5, appears to be inconsistent with his discussions of things elsewhere."¹

As mentioned above, *ṣifat al-dhāt* was formulated through resort to self-predicational sentences, i.e., "The substance is a substance in nonexistence." In Chapter 2, I approached the phenomenon of self-predication in light of studies by modern classicists, linguistics, and Islamic studies scholars, to mention some, Fadlou A. Shehadi, Charles Kahn, and A. C. Graham, who investigate linguistic categories in relation with ontology. I accordingly tried to pin down the ontological and linguistic basis for Muslim theologians' two differing interpretations of self-predicational structures. Our earliest source for discussion is al-Ash'arī's doxographical work *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*. Since he does not give the wider setting of theological debates, I sought to provide, on the basis of 10th-11th century Bahshamite sources, some suggestions regarding our

¹ Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's metaphysics in context* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 2003), 158

topic, thus filling in the gaps in al-Ash‘arī’s presentation. To this end, I often referred to Abū Rashīd (d. 1068) and ibn Mattawayh (d. 1076). In order to lay out the Ash‘arite position, I brought for discussion Ibn al-Fūrak’s (d. 1015) *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ash‘arī*.

According to all these sources, Basran Mu‘tazilites construe the self-identity of things as an assertion of some sort of essence (cf. essential function of *einai*), whereas Ash‘arites and Baghdadian Mu‘tazilites interpret the same phenomenon as an assertion of existence (cf. the existential function of *einai*). Indeed, Arabic language does not have a single privileged copula as other languages do. However, as Shehadi has explored, the absence of the copula does not mean that it does not have any word which would perform linguistic functions like existence and identity/predication. I think *kawn/kāna* is the Arabic language’s best candidate for expressing the idea of *einai*. It becomes manifest especially when we change sentences into a verbal noun phrase by using periphrastic constructions, e.g., *kawnuhu ‘āliman* (his being knowledgeable) as a periphrasis for *huwa ‘āliman* (he is knowledgeable).

Pseudo-Abū ‘Alī and al-Ash‘arī are the principal theologians who are reported to have found fault with the self-identity of things in nonexistence. With regard to the interpretation of the premise, “Entities are entities before creation,” both argued that this would mean to indicate that *kawnahā huwa wujūduhā laysa ghayruhā*, that is, their being (*kawn*) is identical to their existence (*wujūd*) and is nothing other than themselves. The concept of Being (*kawn*) here soaks up *essentia* as designated by the things’ being made identical with themselves (*ash‘yā’* of *kawn al-ashyā’=hā* of *laysa ghayrahā*), on the one hand, and *existentia* implied in the equation between the concept and *wujūd* (*kawn=wujūd*), on the other, whereby expressing both the existential and essential side of *einai*. In order for this premise stated in the form of the *S is S* to be true, pseudo-Abū ‘Alī and al-Ash‘arī require that its subject (e.g., things) exist *in re*. In other

words, that the subject has an existential import is a necessary truth condition that they put forward for the use of self-predicational statements. Al-Ash'arī accordingly argues in favor of the identity between the quality of existence and the attribute of the essence.

But other theological camp, represented by Basran Mu'tazilites, Bahshamites in particular, contended the acceptance of pre-creation duplication of the substance into itself. They argued that predicating that the substance is a substance (*kawnuhu jawharan*) has a different meaning than asserting that it is existent (*kawnuhu mawjūdan*). Therefore, in order for this premise to be accepted, it is not required that the substance truly exists. From all this it follows that since *kawn* here functions only to designate the connection of identity between one and the same subject and predicate, it does not designate the substance's *existentia* in eternity but only its essential reality. Considering the issue of copula within the narrower context of the question of the nonexistent, one could propose that in the Ash'arite understanding, the concept of being (*kawn*) is restricted to existing entities, whereas the Basran Mu'tazilites took it as referring to the ontological category of *essentia*, which, in their viewpoint, would correspond to what is not.

**PART II: THE ISMAILI TRADITION: THE MEONTOLOGICAL
ACCOUNT OF GOD**

CHAPTER 4: Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī's (d. 943) *Mubdi' al-shay' wa al-lā-shay'* (the Originator of beings and no-beings): The harbinger of double negation

4.1. Introduction

4.2. The earliest form of the Ismaili apophasis: The testimonies of Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid's treatise and Zaydī sources

4.3. Al-Nasafī's cosmology: The intermediary role of *ibdā'* (the act of origination)

4.4. Al-Nasafī's meontology: Negation of being and nonbeing

4.5. Conclusion to the chapter

4.1. Introduction

One focus of controversy among medieval Muslim sects was the question of God's transcendence or de-anthropomorphism (*tanzīh*). As seen in all other forms of negative theology, the Islamic account of apophasis generally consists in negating all determinations and predicates of deity on the model of the classical subject-predicate schema. This is especially true of the Ismailis. In their articulation of apophatic statements, the negative copula "is-not" plays a key role, which is applied between two expressions on the subject side of which God always is placed. What exactly might they have signified when they repeatedly predicated the negative expression "not substance" (*lā jawhar*) or "not accident" (*lā 'araḍ*) of God? What does it mean to predicate 'not-being' of God? How should we interpret the negation of categories expressing existence, e.g., God is not "existent" (*mawjūd*) or "thing" (*shay'*)? Would it indeed indicate the non-existence of God?

The problem of divine attributes, one of the controversial issues in medieval Muslim theology, plays an important part in setting the major trends in the development of apophatic discourse. Theological schools like the Mu‘tazilites, Jahmites, and Ismailis held the view that the predication of attributes of God would inevitably lead to anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) and the introduction of duality into him (cf. the Mu‘tazilite argument of *ta‘addud al-qudamā*).¹ For this reason, they preferred to deny positive attributes of God and speak only in terms of what he is not rather than what he is. Thus, these theological schools made use of negative reasoning as a method by which they aimed at clarifying the Qur’anic conception of the transcendence of God. What then would one be warranted to achieve if one denies all positive predicates of God? It would be an untainted unity of God (*tawhīd*).

Throughout the long, diverse, and rich history of discourse on divine transcendence Ismaili writers of the 10th century Fatimid period, Ismaili writers of the Fatimid period, such as Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 943), Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 971) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1021), offer one of the most radical forms of apophasis. The Ismaili movement was one of the three major branches of the Shi’ite Islam and was founded in Khuzistan in southwestern Iran. Nothing is known of the movement’s earliest venture as well as their writings. It is only after the second half of the 9th century that the movement came into view, as a missionary and revolutionary organization, throughout the Muslim world from Transoxiana and Khorasan to

¹ For the Mu‘tazilites, See Yahya Michot, “Revelation,” in *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 192-193. Michot describes the Mu‘tazilite path of apophasis as an excess form of the apophatic and negationist theology; For the Jahmites, See Cornelia Schöck, “Jahm b. Safwan (d. 128/745-46) and the ‘Jahmiyya’ and Dirar b. Amr (d. 200/815)” in *The Oxford handbook of Islamic theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2014-2016), pp. 55-80; H. Laoust, “Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Ed. By P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 26 December 2021 <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0027> First published online: 2012. Laoust presents the polemical perspective of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal’s polemical perspective when depicting the Jahmites’ apophasis as *ta‘īl* (a form of atheism), a negative connotation expressing a form of atheism.

the Maghrib. The dissemination of the Ismaili ideology was carried out by the *dā'īs*, a term applied to religio-political missionaries responsible for the Ismaili mission (*da'wā*).² Being an active *dā'ī* in Transoxiana, al-Nasafī (d. 943) posited a different representational scheme of God. He merged the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being and the Plotinian apophasis with the rigorous monotheism of Islam. Accordingly, he so that he proposed some form of sort of deprived God of all me/ontological categories and determinations. With Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 971), double negation, claimed to have been an ideal form of showing God's absolute transcendence, became available for wider circulation within the Ismaili community. Formulated as *nafyun wa nafyu nafyin* (negation and negation of negation), it consists of two steps: (1) a strict stripping of all physical predicates from him in logical form "A is not B," e.g., "God is not a body," and (2) the negation of the first negation in form "A is *not* not B," i.e., "God is not not-body."³ The first step is to disassociate all physical attributes and things from God. This step must further be supplemented by a second negation, a doubling negation, i.e., "*not* not-thus," which intends to render God beyond spiritual beings defined in meontological terms. So formulated, a two-fold negation essentially serves to invalidate the mode of relationality and predicability between God and beings, thereby conceiving God as absolutely transcendent, totally other, and entirely disconnected from beings. What the Ismailis offer, then, is to remove any ontological, logico-

² For a detailed account of the Ismailis, see Wilferd Madelung, "Isma'ilism: The Old and the New Da'wa," in *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, N.Y. : Persian Heritage Foundation, c1988), pp. 93-105

³ See al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-malkūtīyah*, ed. Ismā'īl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwāla (Tūnis : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2011), pp.77-98; *Idem.*, *Kitāb al-Ifṭikhār*, ed. Ismā'īl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwāla (Bayrūt : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2000), pp. 84-99; al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), pp. 127-155; *Idem.*, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Faqīr Muhammad Hunzai and Hermann Landolt (Forthcoming), pp. 196-217. Abū Ḥātīm al-Rāzī also offers a form of double negation, see *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ*, ed. ed. Ḥasan Manūchīhr and Maḥdī Muḥaqqiq (Tehran, 1383 Sh./2004), pp. 36-37

syntactic, and discursive relation between God and physical beings, on the one hand, and between God and spiritual beings, on the other.⁴

Al-Nasafī is one of the most prominent members of the Ismaili movement who pioneered missionary activities in Khorasan and Bukhara. There is no direct evidence from him; his fundamental work *al-Maḥṣūl* written around 300/912 is no longer extant. We can only reconstruct his world of thought from the critics of his work. His ideas were given attention not only by insider critics such as Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934) in his *al-Iṣlāḥ* and al-Kirmanī (d. 1020) in his *al-Riyāḍ*. Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 971) also wrote a book entitled *al-Nuṣra*, which is no longer extant, in order to defend al-Nasafī’s theological position against al-Rāzī.⁵ Al-Kirmānī’s *Riyāḍ* in particular is crucial for our study as it preserves unique fragments from al-Nasafī’s *al-Maḥṣūl*. The quotes from this work are often interrupted by al-Kirmānī’s critical comments on his assumptions. As he has stated in the introduction, he sought to rectify what he labels as al-Nasafī’s errors, particularly those concerning major issues like the doctrine of *tawḥīd* and the First Intellect. By so doing, he adds, he aims to protect the faith principles of the Ismaili movement which he referred to as *al-da‘wa* (mission).⁶

⁴ For further information, see H. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne: textes edites avec traduction française et commentaires* [Teheran, Département d’iranologie de l’Institut franco-iranien, 1961], pp. 10-11 ; 18-20 ; 30-31 ; 35-36 ; 53 ; Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism : the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.72-80; D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l’intellect : néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l’œuvre de Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/XIe s.)* (Leuven : Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 1995), pp. 90-100; Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, “The Concept of Tawhid in the Thought of Hamid al-Din al-Kirmānī” (PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 1986), pp. 47-89; Eva-Maria Lika, *Proofs of Prophecy and the Refutation of the Ismā‘īliyya: the Kitāb Ithbāt Nubuwwat al-Nabī by the Zaydī al-Mu‘ayyad bi-llāh al-Hārūnī* (d. 411/1020), pp. 69-74; Aydogan Kars, *Unsaying God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2019]), pp. 23-72

⁵ Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, pp. 13-16; 55-60; Farhad Daftary, *Ismaili literature : a bibliography of sources and studies* (London ; New York : I.B. Tauris ; New York : In the United States of America and in Canada distributed by St. Martin's Press, 2004), pp. 13; 29-30; 125;

⁶ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 197

In what follows, I will first provide a brief analysis of the earliest form of the Ismaili apophasis as we have seen in the Egyptian *dā'ī* Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid's (d. 980) treatise. Then, I will discuss in some detail the two fragments gleaned from al-Kirmānī's *Riyāḍ* (which I call **T1** and **T2**). Since his work is not available to us, it is hard to make a definitive assumption for his position. What is crucial for our present study, in fact, is to show how me/ontological categories penetrated the Ismaili apophatic tradition through his contribution. On the basis of al-Kirmānī's quotes, I argue that even though he does not supply an explicit expression of double negation, he could at least be seen as the precursor of this doctrine.

4.2. The earliest form of the Ismaili apophasis: The testimonies of Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid's treatise and Zaydī sources

As Stern has shown, earliest evidence of the Ismaili doctrine in its most inchoate and unfledged form is found in the writings of their adversaries, Zaydī texts in particular. In his work, the 12th century historian al-Laḥjī includes several Ismaili fragments from *Sīrat al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh Aḥmad b. al-Hādī*, a biography of the Zaydī Imam al-Nāṣir (d. 913-5) written by 'Abd Allāh b 'Umar al-Hamdānī. Al-Laḥjī quotes several poetic lines by 'Abd Allāh al-Tamīmī and a passage from al-Hamdānī in which the Qarmatians (a derogatory term used by their opponents to refer to the Ismailis) are charged with polytheism due to their claim about the two gendered principles of creation: the female *kūnī*, the first creature created from light, and the male *qadar*,

the second creature created by the former. It is obvious here that the Zaydī writers seem not to have been aware of the idea of hypostasis when they analyzed these principles as gods.⁷

Another significant reference to the doctrine of early Ismailis can be seen in the Egyptian *dā'ī* Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid's (d. ca. 980) treatise, discovered and edited by Stern and dating from the time of al-Mu'izz (953-75). The text combines a variety of topics like the cyclical history of revelation, a hierarchical model of creation, and the two mythical and personified principles *kūnī/sābiq* and *qadar/tālī*, which all betray the original form of the later Ismailian account of creation. In terms of the idea of God as transcendent, we encounter a few passages (pp. 10:19-11:12) which seemingly inform of the circulation of a deantropomorphic tendency (*nafy al-tashbīh*) within the early Ismaili community, though not in the radical form we have seen in the later formulations of the Ismaili *dupla negativa*. According to Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid, God can be qualified neither by names nor by attributes. He accepts divine names mentioned in the Qur'ān. But he argues that these qur'ānic names are all derived from the names of creatures; they are part of the vocabulary or linguistic categories created by man. For this reason, they are employed primarily to describe beings, e.g., "Someone is hearing and knowing." The two exemptions are the names cited in Q 17:110, namely *allāh* and *rahmān*, which Muhammad took and made the peculiar names of the god of Islam. According to al-Murshid, it is not proper to predicate these two proper names of any creature by saying, "*fulānūn allāh aw al-rāḥmān*" (Someone is God or the Merciful).⁸

⁷ S. M. Stern, *Studies in early Ismā'īlism* (Jerusalem : Magnes Press, Hebrew University ; Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1983), pp.3-5

⁸ S. M. Stern, *Studies in early Ismā'īlism*, p. 11

Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid puts forward, as a metaphysical principle, that any name or characteristic that is attributed to creatures cannot be predicated of God. Neither can he be perceived by name and encompassed by thought; Nor can he be pointed to and sensed by sight or conceived by mind. So then, God is higher than speech, perception, or sense.⁹ It ought to be kept in mind, however, that these passages seem to run counter to the initial remarks (p. 7:7-12) at the very beginning of the text in which kataphatic discourse is deployed. The author proposes here that God can be known through his names, though his essence (*dhāt*) remains hidden, which would mean adopting a position contrary to the deantropomorphic orientation.¹⁰ When he claims the conceivability of God through his names, might the author have meant to refer to the abovementioned two names *allāh* and *rahmān*? These statements are the earliest evidence that would form the nuclei of the later articulation of the Ismaili *via negativa*.

At this early stage the Ismaili doctrine as given both in Zaydī sources and Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid’s treatise is gnostic in nature. As has been explored by Stern and Halm, the gnostic cosmology presented here constitutes a truly Islamic model saturated with Qur’anic concepts. It is hard to say that it belongs to any gnostic system already in the first centuries. According to this model, God represents an absolute reality and is beyond any ontological, linguistic, and conceptual categories. Defined in this way God creates a light through his imperative ‘Be’, and it is (*kun fa-yakūn*). From duplication of the two letters of the divine command originated the hypostasis *kūnī* (the feminine form of *kun*), or the preponderant (*sābiq*), which in turn created the

⁹ *Idem*, pp. 11: “*wa-bāri’ al-barāyā a ‘zam min an yudraka bi-ismīn aw yuḥāṭa bi-fikrīn wa yūmā ilayh bi-baṣar aw yuḥissa bi-bāl aw yunsaba ilayh mā yunsab ilā l-makhlūqīn. Fa-min hādhihi l-jiha ashakat al-umam ḥina nasabat ilayh mā yunsab ilā l-makhlūqīn.*” says: “Neither attributes nor predicates can define him,...” p.7 “..who was while there was neither space nor eternity nor things occupying space nor course of time...”

¹⁰ S. M. Stern, *Studies in early Ismā‘īlism*, p.7

second hypostasis, the follower (*tālī*). These hypostases will later be incorporated into the Neoplatonic-Ismaili cosmological hierarchy of being where the preponder came to be identified with the intellect and the follower with the soul.¹¹

Almost all themes treated in these early sources, the idea of divine transcendence in particular, were not yet distorted or modified by compromises with Neoplatonic negative theology. Although it is briefly stated and can be found to be vague and even somewhat contradictory, the Ismaili way of characterizing the transcendent God appears to run parallel with the classic negative theology of the Mutazilite and Jahmite schools. In consideration of the Ismaili *via negativa* in its fully developed form, this early testimony would correspond to the first step of double negation, while the second step is missing from this earliest formulation. But here we do not run into the speculative framework broaching the problem of divine transcendence in terms of the concept of nonbeing. As clearly understood from Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid’s treatise contemporaneous with the time of al-Mu‘izz, the Fatimids still propagate this earliest version of the Ismaili doctrine of the transcendent God.

4.3. Al-Nasafi’s cosmology: The intermediary role of *ibdā’* (the act of origination)

Before launching into the discussion of the essential role the notion of nonbeing plays in his position, I would first like to give a concise summary of al-Nasafi’s account of Neoplatonic cosmology.¹² Al-Nasafi’s God is called *al-mubdi’* (the originator), creator *ex nihilo* of the

¹¹ *Idem*, pp- 3-29; Heinz Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismā‘īliya : e. Studie zur islam. Gnosis* ([Mainz] : Deutsche Morgenländische Ges. ; Wiesbaden : Steiner [in Komm.], 1978).

¹² For a discussion of al-Nasafi’s cosmology, see also Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent : studies in the structure and semiotics of Islamic philosophy, theology, and cosmology* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1989), pp. 210-214

universe, which bears obvious traces of the influence of the *Neoplatonica Arabica*. It (from now on, “It” in reference to the originator) is the creator of beings and nonbeings. This shows his proclivity to some notion of transcendence; the originator transcends not only categories of being but also those of nonbeing.¹³ Its act of origination (*ibdāʿ*), which took place at one stroke, yields the Intellect, the first originated being. Al-Nasafī refers to this divine act interchangeably as his command (*amr*), word (*kalima*), and unity (*waḥda*).¹⁴ The concept of instantaneous creation, as put into words by such key terms as *dufʿa wāḥida* and *jumla wāḥida* (in one fell swoop or all at once), occupies a significant place in his account of origination,¹⁵ which runs parallel with the *Theology of Aristotle*.¹⁶ Al-Nasafī introduces the idea of intermediary (*wāsiṭa*) by interpolating the unity of God (*waḥdat al-bārī*) between the transcendent God and Intellect,¹⁷ which is consistent with the Neoplatonic insertion of the inchoate form of Intellect between the One and fully flown Intellect.¹⁸ As has often been witnessed among the late antique Neoplatonic writers, who closely followed the orthodox Plotinus’ program of transcendence, this attempt might have been the result of a desire to warrant the indispensable distance between God and the world. The

¹³ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 198; 201

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 206-208, 210

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 204

¹⁶ Badawī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ed. *Aflūṭīn ‘inda al-‘Arab* (al-Qāhirah : Multazimat al-Nashr wa-al-Ṭab‘ Maktabat al-Naḥḍah al-Miṣrīyah, 1955), pp. 31, 41; 70; 114

¹⁷ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 206

¹⁸ Andrew Smith, “Prophyry and his school,” in ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 333: Plotinus refers to this intermediary principle by what might have been called an inchoate form of νοῦς. I would like to thank Professor Michael Sells for sharing this critical information with me. Though, some modern writers held the claim that this perspective is not of Neo/platonic origin; but it originated from a Hermetic source. See Paul Walker, “Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī and the Development of Ismaili Neoplatonism” (PhD. diss., University of Chicago, 1974), p. 79

somewhat complicated problem relating to al-Nasafi's doctrine of intermediary arises at another time when he places the Intellect in the realm between the word of God and the sub-intellectual world. If the Intellect drew its power from the word, would this then not come to mean that it is the Word, and not the Intellect, which was the actual cause of things flowing out from the Intellect?¹⁹ Unlike him, al-Kirmānī, however, asserts that the assignment of such an intermediary role to the Intellect would further lead to the destruction of the hierarchical system of being (*ikhtilāl rutab al-mawjūdāt*) in which the Intellect generally enjoys a conception of the first being.²⁰ If we pay attention to his word choice, we will see that al-Nasafi supports both the creationist (*ibdā' ex nihilo*) and emanationist (*tawallud*) models of generation, in which the former pertaining to the creation of the intellect gives rise to the flowing out of the Soul (the second being) and what is in hierarchy below.²¹

4.4. Al-Nasafi's meontology: Negation of being and nonbeing

Al-Nasafi's introduction of Neoplatonic elements into the Ismaili doctrine brought along complex speculations on the notions of negation and nonbeing, thus leading to the development of some form of apophatic language. Al-Kirmānī quotes al-Nasafi's ideas on his apophatic language in the tenth chapter (*al-bāb al-'āshir*) of his *al-Riyād*, at the very beginning of which he promises to rectify the errors in the *al-mahṣūl*, especially those errors dealing with the idea of

¹⁹ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent*, p. 212

²⁰ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyād*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 213

²¹ See Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ*, ed. Manūchihr and Muḥaqqiq, p. 28: “*fa-amma al-qawl fī: anna l-hayūlā mutuwallidatun min al-thānī; wa-annahā lā-tushbihuhu; kamā anna al-thānī mutawallidun min al-awwal wa-huwa la yushbihuhu.*”

tawḥīd and the originated first being (*al-mubda‘ alladhī huwa al-mawjūd al-awwal*) that escaped Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī’s scrutiny. Below I will focus on a few passages derived from al-Nasafī’s *Maḥṣūl* independently of al-Kirmānī’s criticism as much as possible so that I may give him his due. These passages are essential to understanding the vital role the notion of nonbeing plays in his negative approach to God. in the 10th section of al-Kirmānī’s *al-Riyāḍ*, al-Kirmānī quotes him as saying:

T1: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198:7-8: “God is the originator of things and no-things (*mubdi‘ al-shay‘ wa al-lā-shay‘*)—whether they be objects of the Intellect (*‘aqlī*), imaginary (*wahmī*), intelligible (*fikrī*), or logical (*manṭiqī*).²²

T2: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 201:12-202:2: “God is the originator of things not from something (*mubdi‘ al-ashyā‘ lā min shay‘in faqaṭ*). He (was) and there was not anything with him in eternity (*huwa wa lā shay‘a ma‘ahū*). When we say, “he [was] and there was not anything with him,” we negate both things (*shay‘*) and no-things (*lā-shay‘*) and thus put them all in the category of the originated (*mubda‘*). We also negate every form, simple and compound, from his identity (*huwiyya*). Thereby we make all things, speakable and unspeakable, originated, essentially caused, and finite. Indeed, no-thing (*lā-shay‘*) comes after thing (*shay‘*), because the origination of its name happens after the existence of thing.”²³

The above excerpts (T1 and T2) perfectly parallel with Arabic Neoplatonic works. The author of Pseudo-Ammonius and the heresiographer Shahrastānī attribute similar statements, though slightly different in wordings, to *Empedocles Arabus* (or *Arab Anbaduqlīs*).²⁴ Before anything

²² Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198: “*fa-huwa mubdi‘ al-shay‘ wa l-lā shay‘ al-‘aqlī wa l-wahmī wa l-fikrī wa l-manṭiqī; a‘nī mā huwa wāqī‘un taḥta ḥādhihi l-‘anāṣiri wa mā laysa bi-wāqī‘in taḥtahā*”

²³ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 201-202: “*...mubdi‘ al-ashyā‘ lā min shay‘in faqaṭ. Huwa wa lā-shay‘a ma‘ahu lam yazal fa-idhā qulnā huwa wa lā shay‘a ma‘ahu; fa-qad nafaynā al-shay‘ wa l-lā-shay, fa-ṣayyarnāhumā jamī‘an mubda‘ayni. Wa-nafaynā kulla ṣūratin basīṭatin wa-murakkabatin ‘an huwiyyatihī; wa-ja‘alnā kulla shay‘in mimmā yaqa‘u ‘alayhi l-qawlu aw lā yaqa‘ ‘alayhi l-qawli mubda‘an ma‘lūlan bi l-ḥaqīqati mutanāhiyan; wa inna l-ashyā huwa ba‘d al-shay‘ li-anna ḥudūtha ismihī innamā ḥadatha ‘inda zuhūr al-shay‘*”

²⁴ Al-Shahrastānī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Fahmī Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 379-380: “*wa lā anna shay‘an kāna ma‘ahu; fa-abda‘a al-*

else, al-Nasafī here describes God as *mubdi' al-ashyā' lā min shay'in faqaṭ* (the originator of things not from something), a well-known epithet of God that was circulated among medieval Muslim Neoplatonists beginning with al-Kindī (d. 873). From the mid-9th century on, this term, with a variety of different derivatives, found a place within *Neoplatonica Arabica* such as *Theology of Aristotle, Liber de causis*, and Pseudo-Ammonius.²⁵ The word choice and terminology of Ismaili writers are in tune with them.²⁶ Thus, according to the Ismailis, God's act

shay'a al-basīṭ alladhī huwa awwal al-basīṭ al-ma'qūl, wa huwa al-'unṣur al-awwal....wa huwa mubdi' al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' al-'aqlī wa al-fikrī wa al-wahmī."

Ulrich Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios: ein Beitrag zur Neuplatonischen Überlieferung im Islam* (Stuttgart : Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner Wiesbaden, 1989), pp. 36, 37, 38, p. 36: (7) *fa-huwa huwa wa lā shay'a ma'ahu*; p. 37: (5:3): *wa-lā anna shay'an kāna ma'ahu*; pp.37-38 (4:5-7): *fa-abda'a al-shay' al-basīṭ alladhī huwa awwal al-basīṭ al-ma'qūl wa huwa al-'unṣur al-awwal; thumma kaththara al-ashyā' al-mabsūṭa min dhālika al-mubda' al-basīṭ al-wāḥid al-awwal; thumma kawwana al-murakkabāt min al-mabsūṭāt; wa huwa mubdi' al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' al-'aqlī wa al-fikrī wa al-wahmī*; p. 38 (5:14-15): *fa lammā šāra hādihā hākadhā lam yajuz lil-manṭiq an yaṣifa al-bārī jalla wa 'alā illā ṣifatan wāḥidatan faqaṭ wa-dhālika an yaqūla innahu huwa wa lā shay'a min hādhihi al-'awālim murakkabun wa lā-basīṭun* (15) *fa-idhā qāla huwa wa lā-shay'a fa-qad naḑā al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' wa-ṣayyarahumā mubda'ayni wa naḑā kulla ṣūratin basīṭatin aw murakkabatin ma'a al-huwiyya wa-ṣayyara kulla shay'in mubda'an wa-huwa 'illatun faqaṭ.*

²⁵ Ulrich Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios*, pp. 33-36; For a history of the term in the early philosophical literature, see S. A. Altmann and S.M. Stern, Isaac Israeli : *A Neoplatonic philosopher of the early tenth century : his works translated with comments and an outline of his philosophy* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2009, 1958), pp. 70-72. Richard Taylor, the *Liber de causis (kalam fī maḥd al-khayr)*: A Study of Medieval Neoplatonism (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1981), pp. 287 (Proposition 3); 312 (Proposition 17), 363-364. As Taylor has pointed out, only the First Cause is called *mubdi'* (originator) in the Arabic *Liber de causis*. He adds that no form of the root *b-d-* ' occurs in Proclean Arabic, but that in spite of its lack of the form the compiler/s of these Proclean texts taught the doctrine of creation ex nihilo by the first cause. For the occurrences of the concept in *Neoplatonica Arabica*, Badawī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān, ed. *Aflūṭīn 'inda al-'Arab* (al-Qāhira : Multazimat al-Nashr wa-al-Ṭab' Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣrīyah, 1955), p. 135.12-136.5; *PLOTINI OPERA. Tomus II: Enneades IV-V. Ediderunt Paul HENRY et Hans-Rudolf SCHWYZER. Plotiniana arabica ad codicum fidem anglie vertit Geoffrey LEWIS* (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer ; Bruxelles : Edition universelle, 1951-1973), p. 293.

²⁶ Al-Sijjīstānī makes distinction between *ibdā'* (origination) and *inbi'āth* (procession), the former of which he attributes to the creation of the intellect and the second to that of the soul. The first originates out of nothing (cf. *ibdā'* of a nonexistential nature), whereas the second arises from something. See Abū Ya'qūb Ishāq al-Sijjīstānī, *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. 'Arīf Tāmīr (Bayrūt, Lubnān : al-Maṭba'ah al-Kāthūlikīyah, 1966), p. 46. See also *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwālā, pp. 140-141.

of originating *par excellence* is called *ibdā'*.²⁷ Such terminology derived from the same root also appeared in the Qur'ān. The divine persona depicts himself as *badī' al-samāwāt wa l-arḍ* (Q 2:117). But it is hard to state that the qur'anic expression has a connotation of creation from nothing. Indeed, the doctrine of creatio *ex nihilo* in Islamic thought has a philosophical root in the Graeco-Christian philosophical tradition. As numerous Graeco-Arabicum studies have patently shown, the concept of creatio *ex nihilo* infiltrated into Muslim circles from different intellectual backgrounds and points of view soon after translations of the sixth century Byzantine theologian John Philoponus' (d. 570) polemics against Aristotle and Proclus.²⁸ Likewise, al-Nasafī clung to this philosophical line of thought by defining the term *mubdi'* in a way that it betokens creatio *ex nihilo*.

In **T1** and **T2**, we encounter two expressions signifying the idea of *nihil*. One of them is *lā min shay'* (not from a thing) and related to the idea of creatio *ex nihilo*. The other is *lā shay'* (no-thing) that is of great importance to al-Nasafī's idea of apophasis and whose negative particle seemingly designates otherness and distinction, e.g., an ontological category other than that of

Like al-Sijistānī, al-Kirmānī also explains the emergence of intellect through resort to the concept of *ibdā'* (the act of origination). He states:

Qulnā inna alladhī yataratabu awwalan fī al-wujūd huwa al-mutaṣawwaru annahu lam yakun fa-wujida 'alā ṭarīq al-ibdā' wa al-ikhtirā' lā min shay'in, wa la 'alā shay'in, wa lā fī shay'in, wa lā bi-shay'in, wa lā li-shay'in, wa lā ma'a shay'in..

“We say, “what is the first in the hierarchy of being [intellect] can be thought to have been nonexistent and then have come into being through the divine act of origination and creation *ex nihilo* (*ibdā'/ikhtirā'*), not from a thing, not upon a thing, not in a thing, not through a thing, not for a thing and not with a thing.” See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), p. 157.

²⁷ The definition given by al-Kindī is *ta'yīs al-aysāt 'an lays* (making existing things from the non-existent). See Jean Jolivet and Roshdi Rashed, eds., *Oeuvres philosophiques et scientifiques d'al-Kindī* (Leiden ; New York : E.J. Brill, 1997-1998), Vol. II, p. 169.

²⁸ For a list of sources, see Introduction.

shay'. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus my attention on the second one. The phrase *lā shay'* (no-thing) is used in two slightly different contexts: (1) *mubdi' al-shay' and al-lā-shay'* (the originator of things and no-things), where *lā-shay'* consisting of *lā* (not) and *shay'* (thing) is presented as an object of divine origination; (2) *huwa wa lā shay'a ma 'ahū fa-qad nafaynā al-shay' wa al-lā-shay'* (he was and there was not anything with him and we negate both things and no-things), where the negated *shay'* is viewed as a general concept covering not only what is but also what is not. In both cases, al-Nasafī emphasizes that both categories of things and no-things are brought into existence by the originator. In the second case, the impossibility of the eternal co-existence of beings and nonbeings along with the originator is further underscored.

Wolfson provides us with invaluable insights into the formation of these two fundamental meontological phrases, namely *lā min shay* and *min lā-shay*, in early Sunni theological writings. They are not closely relevant to the Ismaili literature. But, his argument on the development of these phrases might nevertheless be valid and illuminating for our discussion of al-Nasafī's remarks. Speaking within the context of the medieval Arabic-speaking world, which included both Jewish and Muslim traditions, Wolfson argues that though not always steady and uniform, *lā min shay'*, mostly collocated with terms expressing creation, designates "from absolute nonbeing" or *ex nihilo*, whereas *lā-shay'*, composed of 'not' and 'thing', signifies not but just 'no-thing' (cf. alpha negative). He traces the origin of the latter back to the two different Aristotelian subtexts. Depending on the context in which it is employed, *lā-shay'* can mean either 'something', e.g., prime matter, which does *not exist* independently of form and is accidentally a nonbeing (derived from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*), or 'something other than the thing' which is expressed through use of a privative negative (derived from Aristotle's *De*

Interpretatione).²⁹ It seems to me that the expression of *lā-shay'* in the sense of category of being other than that of *shay'* (thing) that Wolfson has given here is of particular relevance to al-Nasafi's meontology. From al-Kirmānī's critical comments on al-Nasafi's *Maḥṣūl* we understand that the use of the expression in this Aristotelian sense circulated among the Ismaili theologians as well. I will discuss al-Kirmānī's analysis later in the chapter.

Let us now return to the question of where *lā-shay'* lies in al-Nasafi's apophatic theology. In **T2**, al-Nasafi attracts attention to the transcendental reality of God through resort to the "he [was] and there was not anything with him" locution (*huwa wa lā shay'a ma'ahū*). It is difficult to account for the origin of this locution. Though with slightly different wordings, it was attested in the 9th century *hadith* collection and its use became widespread among Sunni Muslim intellectuals of various backgrounds.³⁰ The same expression was also repeatedly ascribed to Empedocles in Arabic Neoplatonic sources as well as in Muslim heresiographical works³¹ and received wide circulation among the Ismailis.³² Considering al-Nasafi's intellectual background, one might be tempted to assert that al-Nasafi took this apophatic expression from *Neoplatonica*

²⁹ Harry A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 355-372; Idem., "The Kalam Problem of Nonexistence and Saadia's Second Theory of Creation," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1946):371-391; Idem., "Infinite and Privative Judgments in Aristotle, Averroes, and Kant," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8 (1947), p. 176

³⁰ In his commentary on al-Bukhārī's (d. 870) *Ṣaḥīḥ* Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 1449) provides several variants of al-Bukhārī's actual narration *kāna allāhu wa lam yakun shay'un ghayruhu* (God was and there was not anything except himself), among which he cites *wa lam yakun shay'un ma'ahu* (God was and there was not anything with him). See Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī fī sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-bukhārī*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1959), vol. 6, p. 289 <http://shamela.ws/index.php/book/6897>

³¹ Ulrich Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios*, pp. 36: (7), p. 37: (5:3); p. 38 (15); Al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad, pp. 379-380

³² al-Sijistānī reconstructs the doctrine of negation over his analysis of this locution. See al-Sijistānī, *Sullam al-Najāt*, in Mohamed Abualy Alibhai, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Kitāb Sullam al-Najāt: A Study in Islamic Neoplatonism* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1983), p. 12-21 (Arabic)

Arabica by making slight changes to match his theological framework. Setting apart the question of whether this apophatic locution originates in the prophetic tradition or in the Neoplatonic tradition, there is no doubt that al-Nasafī takes the term *shay'* here in *huwa wa lā shay'a ma 'ahū* (he was and there was not anything with him) as a general term encompassing not only what is, but also what is not. So then, his argument continues, God is the originator (*mubdi'*) of both what is and what is not. Placing them all within the category of the originated (*mubda'*), he separates God from all beings—whether they are existential or nonexistential, and whether they be comprehended by intellect, imagination, or speculative thought, and whether they are simple or compound. God is transcendent not only with respect to beings, but also with respect to nonbeings. However, from the above-mentioned fragments given in al-Kirmānī *al-Riyāḍ* we cannot know what exactly al-Nasafī intended to say by the term *lā-shay'* (no-thing or nonbeing) except (1) that it is subsumed under divine origination and hence it has its own concrete reality; (2) that it is not deemed to be eternal. In respect of these two qualities, namely its subsumption under God's origination and its contingency, both beings and nonbeings are considered to be equal.

Indeed, we are not completely helpless in understanding what al-Nasafī might have meant by the term *lā-shay'* (no-thing). al-Nasafī describes it as an object of divine origination and disallows its co-existence with God in eternity, thereby depriving God of it. By contrasting *lā-shay'* with *shay'*—both of which are objects of God's act of origination, al-Nasafī must have referred to a category of being other than that of *shay'* to which the negative particle is attached. Al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī's testimonies at least would support this interpretation. Al-Kirmānī gives us two interpretations of *lā-shay'*: **(1)** one signifying an affirmation of something other than that thing" (*ijāb mā-huwa ghayru shay'in*) and corresponding to what Aristotle calls indefinite

noun (ὄνομα ἀόριστον) and **(2)** a denial of the existence of the thing itself (*nafy* ‘*ayn al-shay*’).³³ He even criticizes some commenters for having mistakenly construed al-Nasafī’s expression *lā-shay*’ (no-thing) as designating a category of spiritual beings which is other than the category of *shay*’ corresponding to physical beings. Al-Kirmānī possibly had in mind al-Sijistānī (d. 971), who is al-Nasafī’s disciple and chief *dā’ī* of Khurasan and Sistān, because the latter interprets *lā-shay*’ in this way. As will be discussed below in Chapter 5, al-Sijistānī was the first Ismaili author to give an explicit expression of double negation, often articulated in the Arabic phrase *nafyun wa-nafyu nafyin* (negation and negation of negation). His formulation of *tawḥīd* consists of two negations in logical form of “God is not X and is not not-X” (*lā mawjūd wa lā lā-mawjūd*). By the former negation (*lā mawjūd*; “is not X”), he means to disassociate God from all characteristics and attributes possessed by physical creatures such as “thing,” “being,” “limited,” “attributed,” “finite,” and “visible.” By the second consisting of two negative particles (e.g., *lā lā-mawjūd*; “is not not-X”), where the first is attached to the copula and the second to the predicate, he aims at stripping of God all attributes of spiritual beings, which in turn transcend physical creatures and hence do *not* possess any physical attributes. In order to express the transcendence and otherness of spiritual beings, he adds the negative particle *lā* (cf. Gr. alpha privative) to words indicating physical beings. He delineates spiritual beings as *non*-attributed (*lā-mawṣūf*), *in*-finite (*lā-maḥdūd*), and *in*-visible (*lā-mar’ī*). Considering the master-disciple relation between al-Sijistānī and al-Nasafī, one might be tempted to claim that by the term *lā-shay*’ the latter might have referred to the ontological category of spiritual beings and hence have used it to express the transcendence of spiritual beings (intellect and soul).

³³ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 200

4.5. Conclusion to the chapter

Some writers consider al-Nasafī the first Ismaili author to develop the Neoplatonic Ismaili double negation formulated in the statement “God is not X and not not-X.” Considering fragments, quotations and paraphrases from *al-Maḥṣūl* preserved in works by insider and outsider critics, it is highly unlikely to regard him as the pioneer of this doctrine.³⁴ The main problem with al-Nasafī’s view is that his proposal of God’s origination of both being and not-being (*mubdi‘ al-shay’ and al-lā-shay’*) ruins out the Neoplatonic-Ismaili hierarchy of being, according to which from the originator comes only one principle, that is, the intellect. This is one of al-Kirmānī’s objections to him. When I examine al-Kirmānī’s critical remarks on al-Nasafī, I will present further problems that al-Nasafī’s perspective may perhaps raise. But, perhaps one could at least propose that in **T1** and **T2** al-Nasafī presents some form of apophasis in the following two ways: (1) by describing all beings and nonbeings as the object of divine origination (i.e., *mubdi‘ al-shay’ wa al-lā-shay’*) and (2) by denying their co-existence with God in eternity, e.g., *huwa wa lā shay’a ma’ahū*. More importantly, al-Nasafī, in reference to *lā shay’*, seems to have supplied a meontological category of being. By this expression, he possibly refers to spiritual beings.

³⁴ Faquir Muhammad Hunzai, “The Concept of Tawhid,” p. 67-68;

CHAPTER 5: Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī’s (d. 971) language of unsaying: God without being

5.1. Introduction

5.2. The continuity and discontinuity of al-Nasafī’s cosmology

5.3. al-Sijistānī’s double negation: the meontological hierarchy of being

5.4. *Ibdā’*: The disontological creator of the world *lā min shay’ (ex nihilo)*

5.5. al-Sijistānī’s conceptual repertoire: Emptying of *mubdi’* of me/ontological categories

5.6. Conclusion to the chapter

5.1. Introduction

Abū Ya‘qūb Al-Sijistānī (d. 971) was a prominent Ismaili, who contributed to the formation and crystallization of the Ismaili doctrine of *tawḥīd*. Unlike his mentor al-Nasafī, his writings have survived. Paradoxically enough, biographical information is scarce on him. His works at least, as well as a few insider and outsider remarks, bear witness to his significance not only in the history of the Ismaili *da‘wā* (mission), but also the history of Ismaili philosophy. As a prominent *dā‘ī*, he performed missionary activities in Baghdad, Rayy, Khurasan, and Sijistan.¹ Walker proposes, on the basis of internal citations, that his earliest two works are *Ithbāt al-Nubū‘āt* and *al-Yanābi’*.² The latter includes a great deal of material that is essential to the understanding of Ismaili philosophy and supplies invaluable information about Ismaili meontology. This work marks his

¹ S. M. Stern, “The Early Ismā‘īlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurāsān and Transoxania,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 23/1 (1960): 56-90, p. 68; Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism : the Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 16-19

² Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, pp. 20-21

first attempt to reformulate Neoplatonic ideas and perspectives in accordance with the Ismaili doctrine.

In the midst of his years of literary production al-Sijistānī composed his work *al-Qurb al-Malakūtiyya*, the most comprehensive of his works, which treats almost the same theological themes, motifs and problems with far greater depth and complexity than he does in *al-Yanābiʿ*. In this work also, al-Sijistānī provides invaluable information on Ismaili meontological language. He then wrote respectively *Kitāb al-Iftikhār* and *Sullam al-Najāt* (of which only some portions are still extant) in the final stage of his intellectual career.³ As its title implies, his *al-Iftikhār* is more polemical in tone than his earliest works. “What pride could be greater than comprehending the real truth and alighting on the right path,” asks al-Sijistānī many times in every section of the work. “Giving an overview of Ismaili theosophy,” states H. Corbin about *Sullam*, “this treatise forms an excellent introduction to the Islamic doctrine interpreted in the sense of Ismaili esotericism (“...une excellente introduction à la doctrine islamique interprétée dans le sens de l’ésotérisme ismaélien”).⁴ *Kitāb al-Iftikhār* and *Sullam al-najāt* as well contain useful material related to the Ismaili doctrine of meontological God. These three works will also be discussed.

In the previous chapter, I discussed al-Nasafi’s failed attempt to present the *via negativa* on the basis of double negation. Since his *Kitāb al-Maḥsul* is no longer extant, our inquiry is confined to the fragments surviving in al-Kirmānī’s *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*. Nevertheless, these fragments are of critical importance because they allow us to make some tentative conclusions

³ Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, pp. 19-24

⁴ H. Corbin, *Le Livre des sources*, in *Trilogie ismaélienne: textes édites avec traduction française et commentaires* [Teheran, Département d’iranologie de l’Institut franco-iranien, 1961], 5

about his position. Based on them, we can better analyze the perspectives of later Ismaili authors. Al-Nasafi's disciple al-Sijistānī was the first Ismaili author who developed double negation in its full scope. In this chapter, I make several assumptions. **(I)** I will first argue that the Neoplatonic idea of the procession of the hypostases of being from the One and the apophatic theology of the *Neoplatonica Arabica*, as well as the strict monotheism of Islam, became the ground for the hierarchy of al-Sijistānī's *meontological* system. He presents a hierarchy not only in his Neoplatonic cosmology, but also in his apophatic expression. **(II)** I will discuss in some detail how al-Sijistānī's analysis of me/ontological categories helped him reconstruct his hierarchical-meontological cosmology. For this purpose, I sought to elucidate the significance of the following me/ontological concepts for his cosmology, e.g., *huwiyya / lā-huwiyya, huwa / lā-huwa, shay' / lā-shay', inniyya*. By undertaking close readings of the relevant passages, I have proved that all ontological terms are semantically associated, in one way or another, with the idea of existence. **(III)** Furthermore, I will show that al-Sijistānī perspective of double negation changes and develops based on context. He provides two formulations of double negations. **(IV)** The most characteristic feature of his apophasis lies in his frequent resort to the concept of negation. I will attract attention to the function of negation in his meontology.

5.2. The continuity and discontinuity of al-Nasafi's cosmology

Before getting into the discussion of al-Sijistānī's meontology, it may be helpful at the outset to provide a general overview of his cosmology.⁵ Al-Sijistānī's position has something in common with al-Nasafi's cosmological perspective. Like al-Nasafi, he stresses God's transcendence

⁵ For more details, see Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent : studies in the structure and semiotics of Islamic philosophy, theology, and cosmology* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1989), pp. 214-222

through incorporation of an intermediary between the divine and the created, which he occasionally refers to as his Word (*kalima*), Command (*amr*) or act of origination (*al-ibdāʿ*). It is this intermediary agency that caused the Intellect to come to be. Immediately after the intellect was brought into being by the act of origination, the former achieved the fullness of unity with the latter to the extent that they are united. The unity of the act of origination with the intellect is one of the theological motifs that we saw inherent in al-Nasafī and al-Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934).⁶ Accordingly, al-Sijistānī states:

T1: “Kitāb al-Yanābiʿ” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin, pp. 16: “*fa-inna l-kalimata ʿillatuhu; wa idhā kānat hiya al-ʿillata al-ūlā li-dhuhūr al-sābiq, fa-matā zahara al-sābiq, ittaḥadat bihi, fa-ṣārat ka-huwiyyat al-sābiq...*”

“The Word is the cause of the Intellect, and since the Word appears as the first cause for the emergence of the preponderant [intellect], whenever the preponderant emerged, the Word is united with it so that their being become one.”⁷

By characterizing the intellect as the source of all spiritual and corporeal light (*yanbūʿ kulli nūrīn rūḥāniyyīn wa jismāniyyīn*), al-Sijistānī assumes that the intellect is essentially connected not only with spiritual but also corporeal beings, which seems to be in conflict with

⁶ W. Madelung, “*Ismāʿīliyya*”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 03 January 2022 http://dx.doi.org.proxy.uchicago.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0390

See also Wilfred Madelung, “Aspects of Ismaili Theology: the Prophetic Chain and the God Beyond Being,” in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.), *Ismāʿīlī contributions to Islamic culture* (Tehran : Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), p. 56; Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī writes: “The first [originated being; e.g., intellect] and the command are one and the same thing.” (*fa-huwa wa al-amr aysun wāḥidun*). See See Abū Ḥātim Aḥmad ibn Ḥamdān al-Rāzī Rīyād, *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ*, ed. ed. Ḥasan Manūchīhr and Mahdī Muḥaqqiq (Tehran, 1383 Sh./2004), p. 35

⁷ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābiʿ” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne: textes édites avec traduction française et commentaires* [Teheran, Département d’iranologie de l’Institut franco-iranien, 1961], p. 16. Al-Sijistānī writes in his *al-Maqālīd*, “...anna al-sābiq huwa lladhī ittaḥada bi l-kalima ḥattā lā tarā baynahuma baynūnatan wa lā inḥiṣālan” (“...that the preponderant is that which is united with the Word so that you could see neither separation nor dissociation...”) See *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-malakūtīyah*, ed. Ismāʿīl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwāla (Tūnis : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmi, 2011), p. 105.

Neoplatonic viewpoint confining its activity to the intellectual world.⁸ Like Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', al-Sijistānī aligned his technical vocabulary with qur'anic terms like *al-qaḍā'* (divine decree), *al-kursī* (the Chair), and *al-qalam* (the Pen).⁹ Thus the Intellect, sometimes called *al-'aql al-kullī* (universal intellect), is the first originated being and resembles the Pythagorean One (*al-wāḥid*, cf. Monad), the first number, which is neither odd nor even and from which all other numbers propagate. He writes,

T2: “Kitāb al-Yanābi” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin, pp. 23:
“Wa-ayḍan fa-inna al-'aql yushbihu al-wāḥid alladhī huwa awwal al-a'dād; wa-lām yasbiq shay'un min al-a'dād, lā min al-afrād wa lā min al-azwāj, bal al-a'dād kulluhā innamā tatakaththaru min al-wāḥid wa bi al-wāḥid. Wa-kadhālika al-'aql wāḥid; wa huwa al-dhāt li-jamī' al-ma'qūlāt. Thumma tatakaththaru al-ma'qūlāt min al-'aql wa bi al-'aql.”

“Besides, the intellect bears a resemblance to the number one that is the first of numbers. It is not preceded by any number, either it be odd or even. On the contrary, all numbers become multiplied from the number one and by means of it. Likewise, the intellect is one. It is the source (*dhāt*) of all beings capable of being known. Then all these beings become multiple from the intellect and through the intellect.”¹⁰

Furthermore, neither perishability (*fasād*) nor mobility (*ḥaraka*) can permeate the intellect.¹¹ Al-Sijistānī's hierarchy of principles is, like that of other 10th century Ismaili *dā'īs*, congruent with the early Ismaili doctrine which incorporated into the cosmological system the two mythical and

⁸ al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. 'Ārif Tāmir (Bayrūt, Lubnān : al-Maṭba'ah al-Kāthūlīkīyah, 1966), p. 3

⁹ al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, ed. Ismā'īl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwāla (Bayrūt : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2000), p. 109

¹⁰ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-Yanābi” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 23

¹¹ *Idem*, pp. 26-28

personified principles *kūnī/sābiq* and *qadar/tālī*, the ontological rank of the latter of which follows the first who precedes.¹²

The next principle that comes after the intellect and emanates from it is *al-nafs al-kullīyya* (the universal soul). Thus, like al-Nasafī, he explains the generation of the soul through reference to the vocabulary of emanation (*inbi 'āth*). He states in *Ithbāt al-nubū'āt*:

T3: *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. 'Ārif Tāmīr, p. 46: “The soul proceeds forth from the intellect not in virtue of its existence within the primariness of the intellect, since nothing but the Preceder [the intellect] can uniquely attain to primariness (*awwaliyya*) by the will of the Originator's originating act (*ibdā' al-Mubdi'*). Procession (*inbi 'āth*) is from something (*min shay'*), whereas origination (*ibdā'*) is out of nothing (*min lā shay'*; e.g. *ex nihilo*). The prior (*awwal*) precedes everything that proceeds from a thing (cf. intellect). So then, the preceder (*al-sābiq*; e.g. intellect) with regard to its primariness precedes the follower (al-tālī; e.g., al-nafs) with regard to its procession.”¹³

Here he precisely distinguishes between *ibdā'* (origination) and *inbi 'āth* (procession), the former of which he ascribes to the emergence of the intellect and the second to that of the soul. The difference between them is that the intellect originates out of nothing (cf. *ibdā'* of a nonexistential nature) and the second from something. Furthermore, we come across, in al-Sijistānī's comments on the Soul, a standard Plotinian framework in which the Soul looked upwards towards the Intellect in longing towards the latter and downwards towards the Nature (*al-ṭabī'ah*) and the rest of creation.¹⁴ As in the case of the Intellect, al-Sijistānī's identification of

¹² S. M. Stern, *Studies in early Ismā'īlism* (Jerusalem : Magnes Press, Hebrew University ; Leiden : E.J. Brill, 1983), pp. 7-8; 9

¹³ al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb Ithbāt al-Nubū'āt*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 46: “*wa-laysa inbi 'āthu l-nafsi 'anhu bi-mūjibi wujūdihā fī-awwaliyyatihi; idh al-awwaliyya lam yanal-hā ghayru l-sābiqi bi-quwwati ibdā' al-mubdi'; bal bi al-inbi 'āth min shay'in; wa l-ibdā' u min lā shay'. Fa-kullu mā inbi 'āthuhu min shay'in fa-l-awwalu sābiqun 'alayhi. Fa-idhan al-sābiqun min jihati awwaliyyatihi sābiqun 'alā l-tālī min jihati inbi 'āthihi.*” See *idem, Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 42

¹⁴ Al-Sijistānī, “*Kitāb al-Yanābi'*” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, pp. 33-34

the Soul comes in agreement with a range of qur'anic vocabulary, such as *al-lawḥ* (the Tablet), *al-'arsh* (the Throne), *al-qadar* (the Decree), and *al-qamar* (the Moon).¹⁵

Lastly, I would like to explain how the English 'God' maps onto al-Sijistānī's terms designating divinity. Al-Sijistānī's god is not *Allāh* as expected, the creator and cause of the universe, but the absolutely transcendent *Mubdi'* (lit. innovator or originator). *Mubdi'* is beyond any determination, attribution, name, the duality of being and nonbeing, and even any form of creative activity, which all, according to him, would designate some plurality in *Mubdi'*'s unique oneness. He rather associates the name *Allāh* with the first being (*huwiyya*) which is the intellect having entered into cosmic marriage with the soul. From their cosmic marriage divinity or goddess (*ilāhiyya*) becomes manifest. And only from their union all existents come into being. He states,

T4: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p. 108: "...*wa-ūqi 'a ba'd ithbāt al-huwiyya bi-lizq al-amr al-ism alladhī huwa allāh, 'alā anna al-aṣṭayn alladhayni humā aṣṭā kulli huwiyya innamā yazharu bi-himā ilāhiyya al-mubdi subḥānahu...*"

"There appeared the name of *Allāh* after the emergence of *huwiyya* (i.e., intellect) united with the act of origination, provided that the two cosmic principles (e.g., the intellect and the soul) are the source of all beings and those from whose cosmic marriage appeared the divinity of the Originator exalted (*ilāhiyya al-Mubdi'*).¹⁶

He devotes a chapter in his *al-Maqāṣid* to a discussion of the causal nexus between *Mubdi'* and beings. Here he stresses that It (from now on "It" in reference to *Mubdi'*) does not have any immediate, causal relation with creatures.¹⁷The first cause, his argument continues, is rather the

¹⁵ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Ifṭikhār*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 109 ; *Idem.*, *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 48 ;

¹⁶Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 108.

¹⁷ *Idem.*, pp. 68-71; The chapter is entitled as "On the issue that God is not a cause" (*fī anna allāha ta'ālā laysa bi-'illa*)

act of origination (*ibdā'*). From time to time al-Sijistānī uses the term *Allāh* to refer to the Originator. It is only the context where it is used that determines what he means by the term, either it is the transcendent God or the relational/imminent God.

5.3. al-Sijistānī's double negation: The meontological hierarchy of being

Al-Sijistānī was the first Ismaili author to introduce an explicit formulation of double negation. He discusses it in his various works.¹⁸ As it becomes clear from these works, he is engaged in an obvious polemic with other Muslim sects prevailing in his day. He criticizes them for not holding onto an ideal form of *tawḥīd*. In *al-Iftikhār*, where he classifies Muslim sects into four categories, al-Sijistānī especially targets idol worshippers (*'ubbād al-awthān*) and anthropomorphists (*mushabbihā*), the second of whom read the Qur'an's depictions of God literally. The third group includes Mu'tazilites, Kharijites, and Rafidites who, according to him, called themselves *ahl al-'adl* (people of divine justice). He argues that this group came nearer the truth than other sects as they duly followed the *via negativa* in theology. Although they stripped attributes, characteristics, and determinations of God, nevertheless they still fell into anthropomorphic error. What is problematic with their perspective, his argument continues, is that they did not consider the attributes of spiritual beings for inclusion in their apophatic statement. In other words, their apophasis guarantees that God is beyond the attributes and characteristics of physical beings, but it does not guarantee Its transcendence over spiritual beings which share with It the quality of being *other* than physical attributes and characteristics (*idh al-manfiyyu 'an al-ṣifāt wa al-*

¹⁸ Al-Sijistānī, "Kitāb al-yanābi'" (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, pp. 15-17; *idem*, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp.77-98; *Idem.*, *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 84-99; *idem*, *Sullam al-Najāt*, in Mohamed Abualy Alibhai, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Kitāb Sullam al-Najāt: A Study in Islamic Neoplatonism* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1983), pp. 1-21 (Arabic)

kayfiyyāt wa al-adawāt ba ‘du khalqihī alladhī lā yalīqu bi-majd al-mubdi ‘ al-ḥaqq an yakūna mithlahu). Negation of attributes of physical beings in God must further have been supplemented by a second negation, *negatio negationis*, e.g., negation of attributes of spiritual beings. Because of their ignorance of a second negation, he continues to state, this third group lapsed into the hidden anthropomorphism (*tashbīh khafī*), while other Muslim sects who followed the kataphatic path went upon the obvious anthropomorphism (*tashbīh jalī*).¹⁹ What makes them distinct from other sects, according to him, is their subscription to the doctrine of double negation. It is for this reason that he extols the Ismaili community as *ahl al-ḥaqqā’iq* (people of truths).

We testify to al-Sijistānī’s first discussion of the topic in the first chapter of his *al-Yanābi’*. He elucidates his perspective through resort to the science of letters. He writes:

T5: “Kitāb al-Yanābi’” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin, p. 13:1-6: *wa-inna al-alif wa al-lām idhā jama ‘ā, kāna minhumā kalimatu l-nafy wa hiya “lā” —ghayru mushārun ilayhi—wa-idhā jama ‘a al-lām al-ākharu ma ‘a l-hā’ kāna minhumā kalimatu l-ithbāt wa huwa “lahū” muhsārun ilayhi; ‘alā anna al-aṣṣayni ghayru mushārun ilayhimā wa al-asāsayni musharun ilayhimā. Wa al-bārī—jalla jalāluhu—lā mushārun ilayhi wa lā lā mushārun ilayhi bi al-ishāra. wa hākadhā al-hawā’ wa al-nāru lā yudrakāni bi al-ishāra wa al-mā’ wa al-arḍ yudrakān bi al-ishāra.*

“When the letters *alif* and *lām* are combined, the word formed is the particle “*lā*”, which does not have any referent that can be pointed to. When the other *lām* [of the name of *Allāh*] is united with the letter *hā’*, the word formed is “*lahu*”, a positive-affirmative word that is capable of being referred to. Likewise, the two principles (e.g., the intellect and soul) cannot be pointed to, but the two founders (e.g., the law-giving prophet and the executer) can be referred to. The creator (cf. *Mubdi’*)—may his glory be glorified—is neither capable of being pointed to (*mushārun ilayh*) nor non-capable of being pointed to (*lā-mushārun ilayh*). Likewise, air and fire cannot be comprehended through being pointing at them, but water and earth can be so grasped.”²⁰

¹⁹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 78; 91; *idem*, *Kitāb al-Ifīkhār*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 88-94

²⁰ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi’” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 13 :1-6

First of all, al-Sijistānī does exactly what Steven Wasserstrom called “linguistic ontology” according to which the letters are thought to be the actual building blocks of reality.²¹ He divides the name *Allāh* into two separate syllables: 1-) one consisting of *alif* and *lām* and 2-) the other composed of *lām* and *hā’*. The latter syllable *lah(u)* expresses part of pointable physical reality that corresponds to the law-giving prophet (*nāṭiq*) and the executer (*waṣī*). By reversing the letters of the first syllable of *Allāh* he arrives at the negative particle “*lā*”. In al-Sijistānī’s thought, this negative particle designates the spiritual realm represented by the intellect and soul. One particular characteristic of this realm is that they are neither comprehensible nor capable of being referred to (*mushār ilayh*). Therefore, he assumes, it would be appropriate to define spiritual beings in negative terms so as to express their beyondness and otherness with regard to physical beings.

In the 18th chapter of his *al-Maqālīd*, a chapter that examines the conformity of the 112th Sura of the Qur’ān with the Islamic profession of faith, al-Sijistānī gives information of critical importance to the understanding of his apophatic language. What we see here in the Sura, and what is crucial to the Ismaili Neoplatonic doctrine of *tawḥīd*, is that the entire Sura, according to him, involves the dichotomy between being and nonbeing, affirmation and negation. The half of the Sura, beginning with *qul* (Say!) until the word *al-ṣamad*, is structured by affirmation and the other half from *lam yalid* to the end is constructed by negation, both of which, from al-Sijistānī’s point of view, point to the two distinct realities: respectively the Intellect united with the act of origination and the Originator (*Mubdi’*). Even the name *Allāh* mentioned in the first half of the Sura, according to him, is not an epithet for the transcendent and absolute *Mubdi’*, but for a

²¹ Hava Tirosh-Samuels, “Kabbalah and Science in the Middle Ages,” in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 482

multiplied-relational divine reality. It became manifest after the emergence of two Neoplatonic principles (*aṣḥlān*), namely intellect and soul, which in turn exerted influence upon all beings (*huwiyyāt*).²² Al-Sijistānī argues that the second part of Sura al-Ikhlāṣ from *lam-yalid* (“he has not begotten”) until the end is devoted to a description of the *Mubdi*‘ (Originator), who transcends both positive and negative reference. He is beyond both the category of being and nonbeing, and double negation is the best expression of *Mubdi*‘. Neither is it possible for *Mubdi*‘, who is marked by being neither qualified (i.e., physical beings) nor non-qualified (e.g., spiritual beings), to beget something of the same nature as Itself, because this is indeed the case for qualified physical or non-qualified spiritual things having properties in common with their offspring. Nor is it conceivable for It to be born of something qualified or non-qualified.²³ As a result, al-Sijistānī construes the successive use of negative particles in Verses 3-4 of the Sura as designating the transcendent being of the Originator (*Mubdi*‘).

Al-Sijistānī offers two formulations of double negation. He devises his first formulation through resort to adjectival descriptive categories like ‘limited’ vs. ‘non-limited’ and ‘qualified’ vs. ‘non-qualified’. The second of these pairs always points to spiritual beings (the Intellect and Soul) as they are ‘other’ than physical beings. Thus, **Formulation I**, e.g., “God is neither qualified nor non-qualified.” This would mean, from his apophatic perspective, that God transcends not only qualities of physical beings, but also those of spiritual beings (the Intellect

²²Al-Sijistānī explains the manifestation of God’s divinity in the Intellect as follows: “From the determination of the being of the intellect (*huwiyya*) through its bonds with God’s command appeared the name of *Allāh*. It is particularly through [the cosmic marriage of] the two principles that are the roots of every being (*huwiyya*) that the divinity of *mubdi*‘ was manifest” (*Wa-ūqi‘a ba‘da itbāt al-huwiyya bi-lizq al-amr, al-ismu lladhī huwa allāh, ‘alā anna l-aṣḥlayni, lladhayni humā aṣḥlā kulli huwiyyatin, innamā yazharu bi-himā ilāhiyyat al-mubdi‘ subḥānahū*). See Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 108

²³ *Idem*, pp. 107-110

and Soul) that are in turn not qualified by the former. Al-Sijistānī allocates to the act of origination a somewhat distinct reality independently of and high above the Intellect. He thus excludes it from the sphere of being encompassing spiritual and physical beings. He even defines it, in meontological terms, as *non-existent* or *non-being*. Therefore, he feels the need to create a second formulation so that he could declare God's transcendence even above the act of origination. Accordingly, he establishes his second formulation in reference to categories of being and nonbeing. Hence, **Formulation II**, i.e., "God is neither being nor non-being." Al-Sijistānī thus negates of God both the qualities of the act of origination of a *non-existential* nature and those of physical and spiritual beings.²⁴

Al-Sijistānī discusses the meontological dimension of the act of origination from different perspectives. In the 14th chapter of *al-Yanābi'* entitled "All beings are finite and possess a limit," al-Sijistānī discusses the meontology of the originating act in terms of the notion of infinity (*al-ghayr al-tanāhī*). He associates finitude with the category of being and infinitude with the category of nonbeing. Every originated or created being (*al-mubda'āt wa al-makhlūqāt*) must be finite and hence have a beginning (*awwaliyya*). The concept of finitude in his philosophy goes hand in hand with the idea of beginning. If there obtains a beginning (*awwaliyya*) for something, it is finite and should be included within the class of originated/created beings. In this respect, the act of origination is infinite and does not have a beginning as it is beyond the category of being, that is, both originated-spiritual and created-physical beings. He states:

²⁴ Al-Sijistānī, "Kitāb al-yanābi'" (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 13 :1-6 ; *idem*, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 80:4-8, 95, 98; *idem*, *Kitāb al-Ifīkhār*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 88-89, 92, 94:5-12; *idem*, *Sullam al-Najāt*, in Alibhai, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Kitāb Sullam al-Najāt*, pp. 13-18 (Arabic)

T6: “Kitāb al-Yanābi” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin, p. 39:2-3: “*Fa-ammā l-ibdā‘ nafsuhū fa huwa al-lays bi-ma‘nā nafs al-aysiyya wa al-laysiyya.*”

“As for the act of origination itself, it is non-being in the sense of a denial of beingness and nonbeingness.”²⁵

Another argument he proposes to show the infinity of the act of origination is that anything capable of being known must be finite. Since the act of origination is nonbeing, that is, beyond the category of being, it cannot be known and therefore it is indefinite.

In the 26th chapter of *al-Maqālīd*, al-Sijistānī argues that the ideal way of articulating the act of origination (*ibdā‘*) would be the use of privative words like *lā-ays*. He explains why the Word (*kalima* = the command = the act of origination) is called *lays*, or say, *lā-ays* (non-being). He writes that it is neither resting nor moving as these two qualities only apply to the category of being (*ta’yīs*). The characteristic of resting (cf. not-moving) belongs to the intellect, whereas the characteristic of moving is peculiar to what is below.²⁶ By attaching a negative particle to the notion of being (*ays*), al-Sijistānī would like to strip all these existential characteristics of the Word, thereby showing its transcendence and otherness with regard to physical and spiritual beings. Does he suggest here the four meontological levels corresponding to the four levels of reality? For, what he states would amount to implying the existence of four levels of meontology, namely, (1) non-negated (moving physical beings); (2) one-fold negated (non-moving (/resting) spiritual beings); (3) two-fold negated (*non-non*-moving originating act); and (4) three-fold negated (non-non-non-moving Originator). al-Sijistānī puts into words the double negation paradigm in a few ways and in several types of relationships. But he usually expresses the

²⁵ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 39:2-3.

²⁶ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 134

apophatic *Mubdi*‘ (the Originator) through employment of double negation in the form of *lā lā*, e.g., *lā lā ays*, *lā lā maḥdūd*.

As it becomes clear from our discussion, al-Sijistānī often uses privative and negative expressions especially in reference to higher ontological principles like *Mubdi*‘ (the Originator), *ibdā*‘ (the act of origination), *‘aql* (the intellect), and *nafs* (the soul). In *Maqālīd* he even devotes a specific chapter (27th Key) to the role negation plays in the Ismaili doctrine of *tawḥīd*. The chapter is entitled “On the word “*lā*” (not) which is a particle of negation and denial.” At the end of this chapter al-Sijistānī states that the negative particle *lā* is synonymous and employed interchangeably with the negative noun *lays*. He holds the word *lays* (*lays*₁) to be equivalent to *lā-ays* (non-being) consisting of *lā* (not) and *ays* (being). However, the true negation (*al-nafy al-ḥaqīqī*), to al-Sijistānī, is one which negates everything without leaving anything out, not only existing beings (e.g., spiritual and physical beings), but also the *non*-existential reality which is the cause of the former (e.g., *amr*). And this ideal negation could be expressed only by the term *al-lays* (*lays*₂), which is modified by a definite article. As al-Sijistānī notes, the definite article, consisting of the letters *alif* and *lām*, is equal to the negative particle *lā* in reverse order.

Additional *alif* and *lām*, his argument continues, would give the sense of another negation (*al-alif wa l-lām al-ākhar...humā kalimatu nafyin ākhar*). This being the case, the *lays*₁ (non-being) belongs to the cause of the Intellect that is the *ibdā*‘ (*inna lays simat al-‘illa*), whereas the *al-lays* (*lays*₂), whose negation is made doubled after the definite article is prefixed to *lays*₁, pertains only to the *Mubdi*‘ (the Originator). The *al-lays* (*lays*₂), then, would be used to indicate that the Originator transcends all qualities and attributes of causes as well as those of caused beings.²⁷

²⁷ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 138-139.

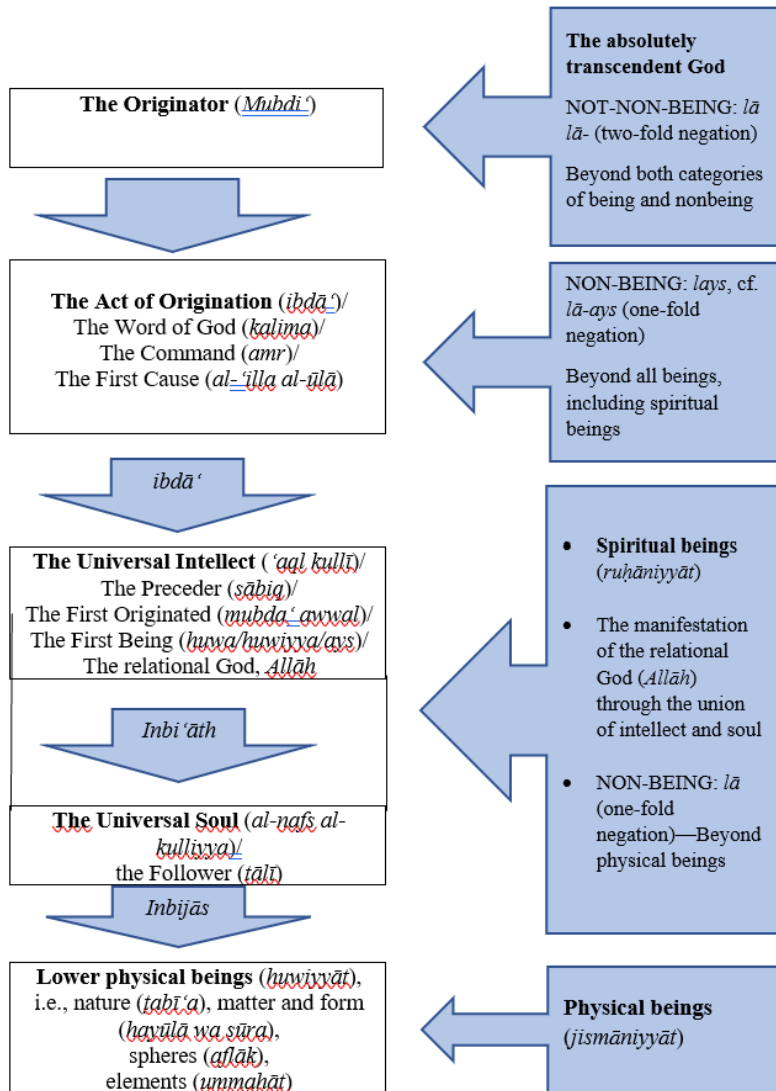
Al-Sijistānī's hierarchy of beings on the basis of intensity of negation/nonbeing is clearly in conflict with the mainstream ontotheological tradition of Islam. The higher a principle is, the more intense negation and privation it deserves and the more transcendent is also its reality. It is depending on the greater or lesser intensity of negation, he implies, that principles would capture more or less ontological determination. Accordingly, physical beings deprived of negation and nonbeing constitute a lower level of reality. But most Muslim theologians explain beings based on the level of intensity of perfection. According to this framework, the more intense degree of being a thing has, the more perfect and the more true it is and the higher the level of its being. In other words, al-Sijistānī argues, God in this tradition is not properly taken as transcendent above the category of being; he is conceived of as part of being. From an early period, most Muslim theologians describes God in ontological terms, e.g., *shay'* (thing) and *mawjūd* (the existent). This is even true for the Mu'tazilites who cleaved to a form of negative theology. Since they did not show total loyalty to the negative-meontological account of God, al-Sijistānī charges them with holding a hidden anthropomorphism (*tashbīh khafī*). He writes:

T7: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p. 78, 91 *Fa-idhan man 'abada allāha bi-naḥy al-ṣifāt wāqi 'un fī al-tashbīh al-khafī, ka-mā anna man 'abadahu bi-ithbāt al-ṣifāt wāqi 'un fī al-tashbīh al-jalī.*

“Whoever worships God through negation of attributes falls into hidden anthropomorphism, just as someone who worships him through affirmation of attributes falls into obvious anthropomorphism.”²⁸

²⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 78; 91

Figure 1: Al-Sijistānī’s Neoplatonic-meontological hierarchy of being:²⁹



²⁹ For a brief description of al-Sijistānī’s Neoplatonic hierarchy, please see Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 127-130. I also benefited from Netton’s chart in *Allāh transcendent*, pp. 221

5.4. *Ibdā'*: The disontological creator of the world *lā min shay'*

In al-Sijistānī's cosmological system, *Mubdi'* is neither a cause, nor it is the creator of the universe. He argues that since it is absolutely transcendent, It cannot have any mutual relationship with contingent beings. Therefore, It cannot even be called *Allāh*. Al-Sijistānī assigns all these titles and epithets to the originating act. One fundamental epithet of *ibdā'* is *lā min shay'*, which designates nonbeing, and he describes the creation of the intellect from *ibdā'* as *creatio ex nihilo (lā min shay')*.

Al-Sijistānī discusses his theory of causality in the 8th chapter of his *al-Maqālīd* entitled “On the issue that God exalted is not a cause”. Here, he levels a severe critique against Muslim ontotheologians and philosophers, which view God as the final cause that accounts for the totality of beings. He states:

T8a: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p. 69:10-11: “So then, you have learned that causes (*'illa*) grant their effects (*ma'lūlāt*) some of their states. And in their effects are present some characteristics by which causes would be qualified, and which would be attributed to them....”³⁰

T8b: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p. 70:1-2: “...as is the case with the command (*amr*), which is the cause of all existential beings and qualified by nonbeing (*al-lays*). This characteristic, namely that it was nonexistent and then it became existent, is present in all beings.”³¹

The logic of the cause-effect relation, according to al-Sijistānī, implies a relation of reciprocal and mutual implication. In order to avoid any link of contingent beings with the the Originator,

³⁰ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 69:10-11

³¹ *Idem*, p. 70:1-2

he stresses the impossibility of Its causation of existence and removes It from the chains of causality.

In the 28th chapter of his *al-Maqālīd* entitled “On the issue that God’s Command is transcendent over creation as it is the cause of creation,” al-Sijistānī brings for discussion the ontological status of the act of origination. He poses two possible scenarios for its identity. He first evaluates the possibility of the inclusion of *amr* (the Command) within the category of creation (*makhlūq, taklīq*). If it is thought to have been created (*takhlīq*), then it would fall into the category of *mu’ayyas* (that which is brought into being), which is either spiritual or physical beings. This would in turn entail that *amr* is *mushayya’*, something which is made *shay’* (thing), *mujawhara*, something which is made *jawhar* (substance), and *masbūqa bi al-’ilal*, something caused by preceding causes. If this is the case, then it is created either from something (*mu’ayyas min ays*) or *ex nihilo* (*mu’ayyas lā min ays*). If *amr* were considered to be a created being, “which of the above categories would the creation of *amr* belong to?” rhetorically asks al-Sijistānī. He stresses ahead of time that with both possibilities should be ruled out. The first possibility, namely the creation of *amr* out of something, should be dismissed because this would indicate the creation of *amr* by the agency of something else. This is not possible because this would designate the coming into being of that thing without *amr*. By “something else” he seems to have referred to the intellect which he imagines as the closest possible candidate to be the creator of *amr* and thereby examines the possibility of its existence from the intellect. This is not likely because it evidently contradicts the Ismaili view that no creative principle like intellect can come into being without *amr*. For this reason, he argues that there is no possibility that *amr* could arise from the intellect, which would otherwise demand the production of intellect without *amr*. As for the creation of *amr* from nothing, which is the second possibility, it is also remote

because this would yield the apparently contradictory result that *amr* is *mu'ayyas lā mu'ayyas*, that is, is simultaneously brought-into-existence and non-brought-into-existence, which is logically impossible.³²

In the same chapter, al-Sijistānī elucidates what he means by the expression *lā min ays* (*ex nihilo*) from the Ismaili point of view. He again underlines the meontological characteristic of the Word (cf. the act of origination and the command) in reference to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. He argues that the Word and *lā min shay'* (absolute nonbeing) are one and the same thing, and depicts the origination of the Intellect from the Word as *creatio ex nihilo*. He states,

T9: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p.141: “*wa-in kāna al-amr mu'ayyasun, lā min aysin, wa al-'aqlu aydan mu'ayyasun lā min aysin, wa lā mins aysin alladhī al-'aql mu'ayyasun bihi huwa al-amr, natījatu hādhā al-qawl: inna al-amr muayyasun lā mu'ayyasun. Idh lā min aysin laysa bi-mu'ayyasin. fa-ṣahha al-amr laysa bi-mu'ayyasin.*”

“If the command were brought into being *ex nihilo* (*mu'ayyas lā min ays*), while, on the other hand, the intellect was likewise brought into existence *ex nihilo* and the expression *lā min ays* (*ex nihilo*) from which the intellect was brought into existence is nothing other than *amr* (the Command), from this it would necessarily follow that the command was concomitantly brought-into-being (*mu'ayyas*) and non-brought-into-being (*lā mu'ayyas*), because *lā min ays* (*ex nihilo*) is not a thing brought into being (*laysa bi-mu'ayyas*).³³

Given that the act of origination is of a non-existential character (*lā min shay'* or *lā-mu'ayyas*), it is not possible that it would be brought into existence from something else. If it were the case, it would be both *mu'ayyas* and *lā mu'ayyas*, which is logically contradictory. As I have discussed in some details in the section on al-Nasafī, the expression *lā min ays* mostly used in the context of creation designates *ex nihilo*. He here clarifies what exactly he means by *creatio ex nihilo*. He

³² Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 140-143

³³ *Idem*, p. 141

thus proposes that intellect came into being out of the act of origination, which is nothing other than ‘nonbeing’.

5.5. al-Sijistānī’s conceptual repertoire: Emptying out of *mubdi‘* of me/ontological concepts

There is no doubt that in elaboration of Ismaili meontology, al-Sijistānī is the most distinguished for introducing rich and variegated me/ontological categories circulating in his time. His major concern is to safeguard God’s transcendence by stripping all these categories of him. Possibly derived from the pronoun *huwa*, the word-pair *huwiyya/lā-huwiyya* that for the first time figures in Chapter 2 of *al-Yanābi‘* is one of the most misleading and confusing terms today in Sijistānian studies, and occupies a crucial place in his apophysis. In his meontological cosmology, a pairing of *huwiyya/lā-huwiyya* tends to be identified with a repertoire of terms such as *huwa/lā-huwa*, *ays/lā-ays-lays*, *aysiyya/lā-aysiyya-laysiyya*, *shay’/lā-shay’*, *shay’iyya lā-shay’iyya*. The first of the pairs, as well as *anniyya*, *wujūd*, and *hasti*, is associated in one way or another with a post-creation reality, either physical or spiritual. By prefixing the transcendent-making particle *lā* to these terms, he most often seeks to show the originating act’s *non-existential* (*non-physical* and *non-spiritual*) reality as it is beyond all these categories of being. In this section, I will discuss the significance of these terms for his meontology with special focus on the pairing of *huwiyya-lā-huwiyya*. In accordance with Michael Sells’ recommendation, and in parallel with what Barbara Cassin suggests in the context of the pre-Socratics and Sophists, I will leave some

critical Arabic terms untranslated as their translation may destabilize meaning.³⁴ Nevertheless, I will suggest how terms would map onto their possible equivalents in English.

The title of *al-Yanābi*’s Chapter 2 *fī huwīyyat al-mubdi‘ al-mahḍa* is *prima facie* misleading as it may suggest that al-Sijistānī acknowledges a characterization of the Originator as *huwīyya*. Modern writers Corbin and Walker rendered it respectively as *ipséité* and identity? Would al-Sijistānī would make a case for the idea the Originator would have an *ipséité* or identity, while he at the same time argues that he is beyond all logico-linguistic and ontological categories? Let’s go to the text in question. Al-Sijistānī writes:

T10: “Kitāb al-Yanābi’” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, ed. H. Corbin, pp. 15:8-16:4, Section 22: *anna al-huwiyya al-mahḍa allatī tuḍāfu ilā al-Mubdi‘—subḥānahū ‘an huwa wa lā huwa—innamā hiya aysiyyat al-sābiq min aysiyyat al-ibdā‘ al-majūd bih ‘alayh; ya ‘nī anna al-Mubdi‘ huwa alladhī ‘arafahū al-sābiq bi-aysiyyatihī; fa-šārat ma ‘rifatuhū li-man abda ‘ahū bi-aysiyyatihī huwiyyat al-Mubdi‘. Lā anna hunāka huwiyyatan mawjūdatan wa lā huwiyyatan ma ‘ḍūmatan siwā mā aẓhara li s-sābiqi min aysiyyatihī, bi-anna al-Mubdi‘ lā huwa huwa ka-huwiyyāt al-mubda‘āt; wa lā huwa lā-huwa ka-lā-huwiyyāt al-aysiyyāt, bal huwiyyatuhū iẓhār nafy al-huwiyyāt wa l-lāhuwiyyāt ‘an al-Mubdi‘ subḥānahū.*

“The pure *huwīyya* that is attributed to the Originator, exalted is It above *huwa* and *lā-huwa*, is nothing other than the *aysiyya* of the preponderer derived from the *aysiyya* of the act of origination as vouchsafed to the preponderer. That is, the Originator is that which the preponderer knows through its coming into existence (*aysiyyatihī*). Thus, its knowledge of what originated through its coming into being (*aysiyyatihī*) is indeed the *huwīyya* of the Originator. It is not that a *huwīyya* is there that is in fact an existent or nonexistent *huwīyya*, but rather something that becomes manifest to the preponderer after its coming into existence (*aysiyyatihī*). So, neither is the Originator an existent (*huwa*) as would be the case with the existence of originated beings (*huwiyyāt al-mubda‘āt*), nor It is a nonexistent (*lā-huwa*) as would be the case with the nonexistence of nonexistents (*lā-huwiyyāt al-laysiyyāt*),³⁵ but the Originator’s *huwīyya*, exalted is It, is solely the

³⁴ Barbara Cassin, etc. *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, eds. Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, trans. Stephen Rendall et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. vii.

³⁵ Walker reads: *lā-huwiyyāt al-laysiyyāt* instead of *lā-huwiyyāt al-aysiyyāt*” in *The Wellsprings of wisdom : a study of Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī’s Kitāb al-Yanābi‘ : including a complete English translation with commentary and notes on the Arabic text* (Salt Lake City : University of Utah Press, 1994), pp. 49-50

manifestation of the negation of both existents and nonexistents of It (*naḥy al-huwiyyāt wa l-lāhuwiyyāt*).”³⁶

The bold expressions in the above-transliterated Arabic passage are of significant importance for our purpose because my analysis will extensively revolve around them. This passage is one of the most conceptually dense passages in al-Sijistānī’s works and constitutes the earliest expression of the doctrine of double negation in the extant Ismaili literature. Though with a slighter but more noticeable variation in style and word choices, al-Sijistānī continues the discussion of the topic in his later works *al-Maqālīd al-malakūtiyya*, *al-Ifṭikhār*, *Sullam al-naḥāt*, and even his *Kashf al-maḥjūb* that has survived only in a Persian paraphrase and has been edited by H. Corbin.³⁷ Here he tackles the impossibility of the description of the Originator in ontological terms as It transcends not only *huwiyya* (being) but also *lā-huwiyya* (nonbeing). One critical issue facing us readers is that al-Sijistānī’s comments on the concepts of *huwiyya* and *lā-huwiyya* are not sufficiently explanatory. Indeed, the same ambiguity is true for *huwa* vs. *lā-huwa* and *ays* vs. *lays* (*lā-ays*). It is clear that *lā-huwiyya*, *lā-huwa* and *lays* that al-Sijistānī employs here are meontological concepts that play out in the Kindi circle. One specific characteristic of these concepts is that the negative particle (cf. alpha privative) is placed before nouns *huwiyya*, *huwa* and *ays*, the first of which is usually taken either as an Arabic noun consisting of the pronoun *huwa* and the nominalizing suffix *-iyya* or an Arabized noun gleaned

³⁶ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, pp. 15-16

³⁷ al-Sijistānī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb* (*Le dévoilement des choses cachées*); *traité ismaélien du IV^e siècle de l’hégire*, ed. Henry Corbin (Téheran, Institut franco-iranien, 1949), 4-15

from Syriac *hwo*, ܗܘܐ.³⁸ The formation of these meontological concepts is similar to that of those concepts like *mawjūd* vs. *lā mawjūd* and *shay'* vs. *lā shay'*. As a matter of fact, the import of concepts beginning with the negative particle *lā* was shaped in accordance with that of their opposites, e.g., *mawjūd* and *ays*. So then, it is important to know, first, what al-Sijistānī means by *huwa* and *huwiyya*.

Before entering into the discussion of al-Sijistānī's position, I will give a brief account of the reception of the term *huwiyya* in Medieval Islamic thought. There are three distinct uses of the term that are attested in the Arabic translations of Greek works and in Muslim writings. First, as it is possibly originated from the Syriac active participle *howyo* (ܗܘܝܘܐ), the term *huwiyya* designates the being and existence of a thing and its entitative reality.³⁹ Second, it is employed in the sense of sameness to refer to the self-identity of something. Arabic writers occasionally express this idea by predicating the personal pronoun “*huwa*” of itself in the form of the *S is S*, e.g. *huwa huwa*. Third, it is equated with the sense of “to be” in reference to the essential side of *einai* so as to convey the meaning of ipseity. It ought to be stressed, however, that medieval Muslim translators and writers from the early period had been very far from consistent in the use of the term. The equivocality of this term occurs no less frequently, even sometimes in a single author's work/s.⁴⁰ The same is true for translations of works from the Greek philosophical

³⁸ Gerhard Endress, *Proclus Arabus; zwanzig Abschnitte aus der Institutio theologica in arabischer Übersetzung* (Beiruter Texte und Studien, Bd. 10) (Beirut: Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft; in Kommission bei F. Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1973), p. 163

³⁹ In reference to the Graeco-Syriacum passages supplied by Richard Frank, Gerhard Endress writes, “*huwiyya* can be explained as a transliteration of the Syriac word *howyo* (being); the -y of the Arabic abstract nouns would be the original -y of the Syrian verb *hwo*, to be.” See Endress, *Proclus Arabus*, p. 82. See also Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus: a philosophical study of the Theology of Aristotle* (London : Duckworth, 2002), p.126.

⁴⁰ The equivocality of the term *huwiyya* is not limited to Graeco-Arabicum translations, but it is also reflected in Islamic philosophical and theological materials. An example of this equivocality can be found in al-Kindī. The term appears 9 times in the Rashed and Jolivet edition of his works. It is often treated as synonymous with being and

tradition.⁴¹So, it would not be wrong to propose that the meaning of *huwiyya* is most of the time dependent on or relative to the context.

As has been evident from Corbin and Walker’s varying translations, we have the same ambiguity with al-Sijistānī’s use of the pronoun *huwa* in the above quoted passage. In this particular context al-Sijistānī appears to have employed the pronoun *huwa* in two different ways: **1-)** alone as a single, genitive indirect object (e.g., *subḥānahu ‘an huwa wa lā-huwa*)⁴² and **2-)** as

existence, just like *tahawwāl/tahawwī* (a fifth-form verb stemmed from the root *h-w-y*) represents ‘being brought into existence’. Al-Kindī sees the strong ontological implications that the notions of *waḥda* (unity) and *takaththur* (multiplicity) carry with it. *Waḥda* is presented here as a necessary condition for the existence of sensible beings which are both one and many. Thereby, he stipulates with their existence that they are given unity by *al-wāḥid al-ḥaqq al-awwal* (the First True One); without possessing a unity they would not come to be. In other words, sensible beings that are many would have had no *huwiyya* (existence) insofar as they had no god-given unity and their unity is nothing other than their *huwiyya* or *tahawwī*. However, the ambiguity of the term *huwiyya* increases the confusion when al-Kindī once uses it in the passage 35.14-15 as a synonym with *mā-huwa* (cf. *māhiyya*, ipseity). See *Œuvres philosophiques et scientifiques d’Al-Kindī* (Leiden ; New York : E.J. Brill, 1997-1998), vol. 2, pp. 33.25; 95.20-97.7; 35.14-15. Indeed, we find the same ambiguity in al-Fārābī. In a section of his *Kitāb al-ḥurūf*, he brings into discussion *huwiyya* and other concepts to render Greek expressions for being. He once treats it as a synonym of identity in his work. See Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf*, ed. Muḥsin Maḥdī (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1990), p.112-113 .

⁴¹ In the Greco-Arabic materials the equivocal sense of the notion *huwiyya* oscillates either between being and identity, just as has been the case with the Arabus Plotinus, or between being and essence, as has been the case with the Arabic translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. But the sense of being is prominent in these materials. There are several speculations on the formation of the notion, which present a variety of etymologies. The most likely formation appears to have been proposed by R. Frank. The translator of *Metaphysics*, Uṣṭāth’s (Eustathius) consistent and regular rendering of the original Greek ὄν as equivalent of *huwiyya* (pl. *huwiyyāt*) led him to conclude that *huwiyya* can be seen as a simple transliteration of the Syriac word *howyo*, “being”. “The Origin of the Arabic Philosophical Term ‘annīya,’” *Les Cahiers de Byrsa 6. Carthage, Tunisia*, (1956):181–201. For example, τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ἔν (Met. 1001a4) and τὰ ὄντα (Met. 1001a16) translates respectively *al-huwiyya wa al-wāḥid* in reference to the most abstract category of being and *huwiyyāt* in reference to concrete beings. In Met. 1017a22 where Aristotle points to the polysemy of the Greek verb *einai*, *huwiyya* is once treated as the equivalent of εἶναι; so, the term has as many meanings as there are ontological categories—whether it is a substance or an accident. Only in one instance (Met. 1017a31), the translator adopts it to render the Greek ‘to be’ (τὸ εἶναι) in the sense of ipseity and essence, which would correspond to such Arabic essential concepts like *māhiyya* and *ḥaqīqa*. See Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *Tafsīr mā ba’d aṭ-ṭabī‘at*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, 4 volumes (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1938—1952), vol. 1, pp. 260-262; vol. 2, p. 555-559. The use of the notion in more than one sense holds true for the Neoplatonic material as well. In the Arabus Plotinus, for instance, *huwiyya* is generally taken as a synonym for *annīyya*, a word which according to Endress expresses a substantification of the Arabic *anna* (“thatness”) and is used in the sense of “being.” There is only one exception where the notion is employed in the sense of identity and corresponds to the Greek term ταυτότης. Gerhard Endress, *Proclus Arabus*, p. 80; Peter Adamson, „Before Essence and Existence: al-Kindī’s Conception of Being,” *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002):297-312 at 299

⁴² Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 15:8-9

a seemingly self-belonging or self-repeating pronoun in propositional form (*al-mubdi' lā huwa huwa*).⁴³ In the second case, where he ostensibly predicates the pronoun *huwa* of itself in the syntactic pattern of *huwa huwa*, al-Sijistānī perhaps meant to designate the idea of “sameness” or “identity.” The self-predication of the pronoun to express “identity” is a linguistic strategy that we also find in the translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. The Greek term signifying “identity”, i.e., ταυτότης, is transferred into Arabic as *huwa huwa*, and even sometimes *al-huwa huwa*. The Greek phrase ὁ αὐτός in the sense of “the same” is also translated in the Arabic *Metaphysics* by the self-identical expression “*huwa huwa*” (1054a and b).⁴⁴ In Islamic theological and philosophical writings such self-identical expressions are also often used to indicate the being *qua* being or the self-identity of things. So, Walker seems to have had in mind this linguistic strategy when he translated the expression *huwa huwa* in *al-mubdi' lā huwa huwa* as “Himself.”⁴⁵ Corbin does not read the repeated form of *huwa* as a self-predicational expression; rather, he implies, the second *huwa* should be taken as a noun indicating being, whereas the first is the copula linking subject (*mubdi'*, “Originator”) to predicate (*huwa*, “being”).⁴⁶ In fact, the employment of the pronoun *huwa* as a noun in the sense of being has been attested in Medieval Arabic philosophical writings. For instance, the Arabic translation of *Metaphysics* 1027b29 treats *al-huwa* with a definite article as a synonym for the Greek term ὄν.⁴⁷ Likewise, al-Kindī employs

⁴³ *Idem*, p. 16:2-3

⁴⁴ A.M. Goichon, “Huwiyya”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 03 January 2022
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3011>

⁴⁵ Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of wisdom*, pp. 49-50

⁴⁶ H. Corbin, *Le Livre des sources*, in *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 34

⁴⁷ Averroes (Ibn Rushd), *Tafsīr mā ba'd aṭ-ṭabī'at*, p. 737

huwa and *lā-huwa* in the sense of existent and nonexistent.⁴⁸ Lastly, it should be noted that these authors' rendering of the terms *huwiyya* and *lā-huwiyya* respectively as *ipséité* and *ipséité négative* (Corbin) or “identity” and “nonidentity” (Walker) agrees with one another.

But, considering al-Sijistānī's overall cosmology and his association of these terms with concrete entities and their being, I preferred to render the pairing of *huwiyya* and *huwa* as being and that of *lā-huwiyya* and *lā-huwa* as nonbeing. Here in **T5**, al-Sijistānī ties the concept of *huwiyya* to the Originator (*al-huwiyya al-mahḍa allatī tuḍāfu ilā l-Mubdi'*). He employs the same expression in the 112th chapter (*Sura al-ikhlaṣ*) of his *Maqālīd*, where he makes a Neoplatonic interpretation of the qur'anic expression *huwa allāh*. In this verse, God is pointed to as *Allāh*.⁴⁹ It is also possible to associate the concept with the confession of faith *lā ilāha illā huwa* where *huwa* is predicated of *Allāh*. Al-Sijistānī does not explicitly mention this association neither in the 18th chapter of *al-Maqālīd* nor in the 30th chapter of *al-Yanābi'*, where he specifically comments on the confession of faith from a Neoplatonic point of view. But al-Kirmānī (d. 1021), who was after al-Sijistānī the most important of the early Ismaili ideologues, attracts attention to the significance of the concept of *huwiyya* within Ismaili debates on the interpretation of the confession of faith.⁵⁰

As a matter of fact, it would be worth providing here al-Sijistānī's Neoplatonic exposition of the 112th Sura. The Sura starts with the command “*qul*” (“Say!”), which he equates with the

⁴⁸ Al-Kindī, “Fī kammiyya kutub Aristū,” in *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafīyah*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Hādī Abū Rīdah (Miṣr : Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1950-53), p.375. Al-Kindī explains God's creative activity through resort to the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. He writes: “He made being from nonbeing.” (*ja'ala huwa min lā huwa*). Adamson & Pormann preferred to render the same passage as such: “He made ‘it’ from ‘not it.’” See Peter Adamson and Peter E. Pormann, *The philosophical works of Al-Kindī* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 288

⁴⁹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 107-110

⁵⁰ al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'aql*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), p. 148

creative principle called the originator's command (cf. *ibdā'* and *kalima*). As will be discussed below in some detail, he expresses this principle through use of privative words like *lays* (*lā-ays*, “non-being”) in such a way as to show its beyondness and transcendence in comparison with categories of being (i.e., the Intellect's being and that of those hierarchically below). What comes after the command *qul* (Say!) in the Sura is the pronoun *huwa*. Al-Sijistānī considers it to be the equivalent of the Preceder (*sābiq*), that is, the Intellect which is the first originated being. He interestingly takes the order of words and particles in the Sura as a mirror of the ontological order of realities. Basic to al-Sijistānī's claim is the observation that the fundamental hierarchism of Ismaili ontology is deeply inherent in and even derived from the linguistic-semantic structure of the Qur'ān. Hence the divine command as formulated here by *qul* (“Say!”) is ontologically followed by the existence of the Intellect alluded to here in the Sura as *huwa*. In al-Sijistānī's opinion, the word *huwa* is, first and foremost, an epithet for the Intellect. He states:

T11: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, pp: 107-108: “Do you not see that *huwiyya* comes and is placed after the command (*amr*) in Sura al-Ikhlās? [Consider] his saying “*huwa*”, because that which stands or abides through the command of the One (*al-wāḥid*), transcending all qualities of created beings is the preceder (*sābiq*, e.g., intellect) and it is paired with its follower (*tālī*, i.e., the Soul), like the pairing of the letter ‘*h*’ with ‘*w*’, so that from their marriage all beings would appear.”⁵¹

Al-Sijistānī here equates *huwa* with the intellect and regards it, as it were, as the first *huwa* (existent) that manifests and the first reality to possess *huwiyya* (being). Put differently, to be or to have *huwiyya* is to exist and be a constituent of the world. The second important point that he has made is that the creative principle called *amr* (cf. *ibdā'* and *kalima*), being the immediate cause of the intellect, would signify a reality transcendent and other than categories of being.

⁵¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 107-108: “*a-lā tarā anna al-huwiyyata muta'akhhiraturun 'anhu, wa mawqū'atun ba'dahu fī sūrat al-ikhhlās; wa-qawluhu “huwa” ‘alā anna lladhī qāma bi-amr al-wāḥid al-muta'ālī ‘an simāt al-marbūbīn innamā huwa al-sābiq al-muzdawij bi-tālīhi, ka izdiwāj al-hā’ ma ‘a al-wāw li-yazhara min baynihimā jamī’ al-huwiyyāt*”

Finally, he holds that all *huwiyyāt* (existential beings) come into existence through the cosmic marriage of the intellect and the soul.

With this in mind, a possible alternative way of reading the apophatic expression in Section 22 of *al-Yanābi* (p. 15:8-9) *subḥānahū ‘an huwa wa lā huwa* would then take the word *huwa* (existent) and its negated form *lā-huwa* (non-existent) as corresponding respectively to the Intellect and *ibdā’* (the act of origination), the second of which he here and there describes as *lays* (*lā-ays*; nonbeing). Specifically in Section 23 of *al-Yanābi*, al-Sijistānī assumes a dialectic between the concepts of being and nonbeing, equating the category of being with the Intellect (*aysiyya al-‘aql*) and the category of nonbeing with the originating act (*laysiyya al-ibdā’*).⁵² Thus, according to him, the Originator transcends not only the Intellect but also even the creative principle entitled *ibdā’*. It is also likely to read *huwa* as a more general concept covering not only the intellect but also any other category of being that hierarchically exists below it. The expression *subḥānahū ‘an huwa wa lā huwa* would then mean that the Originator stands apophatically not only beyond categories of reality as subsumed under the concept *huwa* signifying “being” or “existence”, but also beyond a nonexistential reality of some sort called *ibdā’*, which is transcendent to any being (*huwa*). This reading also works perfectly well for the better comprehension of the meontological formulation given on Page 16:2-3 (e.g., *al-Mubdi’ lā huwa huwa...wa lā huwa lā-huwa*), e.g., “Neither is the Originator a being ... nor is It a nonbeing.” So then, what al-Sijistānī concisely proposes is that the Originator cannot be contained under categories of being and nonbeing.

⁵² Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 16:7 (*bi-aysiyyatihi allatī hiya al-‘aql; am bi-laysiyyatihī allatī hiya al-ibdā’*). See also *idem*, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 70:1

In **T10**, al-Sijistānī argues that the Originator indeed has no *huwiyya* by which Its being could be referred to like beings of originated beings.⁵³ What, then, should have been meant by *huwiyya* (existence/being) when ascribed to him here and there in sacred texts such as the profession of faith and the 112th Sura of the Qur’ān? In response, Al-Sijistānī enunciates that the *huwiyya* (being) as predicated of the Originator is in reality nothing other than the existence (*aysiyya*) of the Intellect or its knowledge of It *via negativa*. “Beware of seeking beyond the Preceder (e.g., intellect) any *huwiyya* (being) after the appearance of the Preceder,” he states.⁵⁴ In a sense, this would mean that the Originator is neither comprehensible by minds nor expressible by words nor capable of being articulated by tongues. Since any description or any definition given of It in sacred texts, e.g., *huwa/huwiyya*, is an essential constituent of existing beings, its reference/substratum should not be sought in the Originator Itself, but in the intellect. As the first originated being, the intellect represents the Originator’s divinity (*ilāhiyya al-Mubdi’*) in both spiritual and material realms. And, as mentioned above, only to the intellect can the epithet *Allāh* be ascribed.⁵⁵ It is true, according to al-Sijistānī, that the Originator is an unknowable reality and other than categories of being and nonbeing, but this does not mean that It is not totally and absolutely incomprehensible or unspeakable. His apophatic theology, which primarily prefers to speak of the Originator only in terms of what It is not, nonetheless finds a way to the intelligible kataphatic realm where Originator could be recognized and put into relationship with the world. Thus, the intellect’s knowledge of the Originator seems to have been put forward to accord with

⁵³ See also Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of wisdom*, p. 50

⁵⁴ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi’” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 16:11

⁵⁵ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, 2011), p. 108. Furthermore, al-Sijistānī situates the Qur’an as a post-creational reality. He writes, “Indeed, the Qur’ān was a speech that was revealed after the appearance of creature and the completion of wisdom in creation.” See *Idem*, p. 58

the Ismaili-Islamic conception of the apophatic God, which still wishes to be comprehended in one way or another in the world wholly and completely detached from him.

What actually is the object of the intellect's knowledge that would constitute the absolutely transcendent Originator's *huwiyya* (being/existence)? What sort of knowledge is this? Al-Sijistānī's response to these questions lies in his doctrine of double negation that makes the Originator transcendent and other than both being and nonbeing. At the very beginning of our above quoted passage (*Al-Yanbū'* 2, pp. 15:8-16:4, Section 22), al-Sijistānī uses the apophatic phrase expressing praise, *subḥānahū* 'an *huwa wa lā-huwa* (exalted is It above both being and nonbeing), in apposition to the concept of *huwiyya* attributed to the Originator. In fact, this phrase composed of a two-fold negation is employed here to signify the so-called *huwiyya* of the Originator; his *huwiyya*, then, consists not in Its being, but in the intellect's comprehension of It as transcendent above both being and nonbeing. Al-Sijistānī explicitly points to this idea in Section 23 of *al-Yanābi'* when he states that the Originator has no positive *huwiyya* (being) other than the intellect's negating of it *huwiyyāt* and *lā-huwiyyāt*.⁵⁶ With this remark in mind, the notion of *huwiyya*, when applied to the Originator, would then express something other than that when applied to existential beings. The *huwiyyāt* of the latter can be objects of the intellect's knowledge to such an extent that their exemplary forms in the intellect would be identical to their *huwiyyāt* (cf. *ka-huwiyyāt*). But, when it comes to Originator, only Its quoddity (cf. Aristotle's *hoti estin*)—the fact that It is beyond categories of being and nonbeing, can be known by the intellect.⁵⁷ Thus, in al-Sijistānī's opinion, the *huwiyya* as attributed to the Originator refers not to

⁵⁶ Al-Sijistānī, "Kitāb al-yanābi'" (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 16:5-6 (Section 23): "lil-mubdi' ... *huwiyyatun muthbatatun 'ind al-mubda' siwā nafy al-huwiyyāt wa al-lā-huwiyyāt*." cf. Section 22: p. 16:3-4: *bal huwiyyatuhu iżhār nafy al-huwiyyāt wa al-lā-huwiyyāt 'an al-mubdi' subḥānahu*.

⁵⁷ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 43 "Fa-*kayfa taqdirūn 'alā al-nufūdh ilā ma 'rifat al-mubdi' subḥānahu bi-inniyyatin aw mā'iyatin aw kayfiyyatin aw limmiyyatin, wa-'aql alladhī huwa ālatu l-darki wa-*

Its unique and exclusive being so that intellect would be capable of comprehending it, but to the intellect's knowledge of Its *being* utterly transcendent with respect to beings and nonbeings.

Moreover, al-Sijistānī rejects the inclusion of the Originator in the category of being by associating the concept of *huwiyya* with the doctrine of causality ('*illa*) in the second chapter of *al-Yanābi*'. His god is undoubtedly not an ontotheological god. Since all causes necessarily carry the characteristics and states of their effects, It cannot be considered as a cause.⁵⁸ He devoted a separate chapter to this issue, in which the *falāsifa* (Muslim philosophers) were the primary target of his attack on the theory of causality. He writes:

T12: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, pp. 70-71: "Of *falāsifa* (Muslim philosophers) those who deny the transcendence of the originator (*mu'ṭṭila*) took on the burden of attributing the name of cause ('*illa*) to the Originator (cf. *mubdi*)—hallowed be Its majesty. For they concealed in their heart the eternity and endless duration of the natural world...

How could their minds not deny this (e.g., the ascription of the name of cause to It)? For they did not certainly comprehend the inseparability of a cause from its effects and their simultaneous-mutual coexistence on account of their similarity and homogeneity? Indeed, the heat, which they gave the rank of an effect, does not separate from the fire, which in their eyes occupies the rank of a cause. The flame becomes warm due to its being similar and homogenous to its cause. This is also the case with light and a luminous thing. The illuminated thing shines on account of its being homogenous to its cause. It is impossible for the universe to emerge from the Originator just like the heat arises from fire. For the heat is the same as fire. Is the universe the same as the Originator or different from It? If [you assert that] the universe is the same as the Originator, you would ineffectualize the Originator (*ta'īl*, avoidance of deanthropomorphism). If [you assert that] the universe is something other than It, how would the other originate from It in a similar way that the heat originates from fire? It has been established, however, that the Originator-exalted be

mir'ātu mā-barrāza al-mubdi' fih? Fa-yabruz al-mabrūzāt fih ka-huwiyyatihā; wa al-mubdi' al-ḥaqq ghayr mabrūzin fih, illā barrāzahu tanzīhan wa-taqdīsan wa-tasbīhan.

"How would you be able to come to know the originator exalted by his being (*inniyya*), whatness (*mā'iyya*), modality (*kayfiyya*), and his wherefore (*limmiyya*), that is, that for the sake of which he is made, while Intellect is an instrument for comprehension and a mirror of all things which the originator manifested therein? The things that are manifest were made manifest in it as though they are like their beings. But the true Originator is manifested in the intellect only in transcendent, deanthropomorphic and negative terms."

⁵⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 68-71.

It—is not a cause. But It is transcendent [over being both a cause and effect]. That which is the cause of causes is in reality Its command (*amr*) and all effects are originated from Its command.”⁵⁹

Thereby, al-Sijistānī excludes the transcendent God from the chain of causes. The command, interchangeably titled the Word or the act of origination, constitutes the first cause in the net of causal relations. In this respect al-Sijistānī differs from the theological and philosophical tradition of Medieval Islam, which regarded God as the cause (*‘illa*) or the first cause (*‘illa ūlā*). On the other hand, the model of causality he offers is hierarchical; thus, the Word/Command/the act of origination is the cause of the Intellect, the Intellect is the cause of the Soul, the Soul is the cause of what is below, and so on. In his *Yanābi‘* he further states concerning the close relation between the notion of *huwiyya* and his view of causality:

T13: “Kitāb al-Yanābi‘” (Arabic text), in *Trilogie ismaelienne*, ed. H. Corbin, pp. 17:1-3: “*Wa-innamā nafaynā al-huwiyyāt ‘an al-mubdi‘ al-ḥaqq, li-anna kulla huwiyyatin taqtaḍī ‘illatan ka-mā wajadnā ashrafa dhawāt al-huwiyyāt al-‘aqla fa-qad iqtadā huwiyyatuhu ‘illatan, wa hiya amrullāh...*”

We negate beings (*huwiyyāt*) of the true Originator because every being necessitates a cause. Accordingly, we found that the noblest of those things possessing being (*huwiyya*) is the intellect and the intellect’s being requires a cause, which is the command of God...”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, pp. 70-71: “*Wa-innamā ḥamala al-mu‘aṭṭilatu min al-falāsifa bi-ittilāq ism al-‘illa ‘alā al-bāri‘, taqaddasat ‘azamatuhu, li-annahum aḍmarū fī anfusihim azaliyyat al-‘ālam al-ṭabī‘iyyi wa sarmadiyyatahu.... kayfa lā yastankiru ‘uqūluhum dhālika, li-annahum qaṭṭu lam yushāhidū ‘illatan lā tufāriqu ma ‘lūlātihā wa lā tata‘akhharu ma ‘lūlātuhā ‘anhā min jihat al-mujānasa wa l-mushākala? Fa-inna al-iskhāna alladhī anzalūhu manzilat al-ma ‘lūl, lā yufāriqu min al-nār allatī anzalūhā manzilat al-‘illa. Innamā yaskhunu minhu al-muskhanu bi al-mujānasa wa al-mushākala. Wa kadhālika al-ḍaw‘u min dhī al-ḍaw‘. Innamā yataḍawwi‘u bi al-mujānasa. Fa-ammā an yakūna al-‘ālamu min al-bāri‘ ka-al-iskhān ‘an al-nār. Fa-muḥalun. Li-anna al-iskhāna nafsu al-nār. Fa-hal al-‘ālamu nafsu l-bāri‘ aw ghayruhu? Fa-in-kāna al-‘ālamu nafsa al-bāri‘, fa-qad ‘aṭṭaltuhum al-bāri‘. Wa-in-kāna ghayrahu, fa-kayfa al-ghayru minhu ka-al-iskhāni alladhī huwa nafsu al-nāri? Fa-qad thabata anna al-bāri‘a, jalla thanā‘uhu, laysa bi-‘illatin, bal huwa al-‘ālī, wa alladhī ‘illatu al-‘ilal huwa amruhu, wa al-ma ‘lūlāt kulluhā ṭābi‘atun li-amrihi.”*

⁶⁰ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-Yanābi‘” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaelienne*, p. 17:1-3. Parenthetically speaking, we also encounter the employment in al-Sijistānī of *huwiyya* and *lā-huwiyya* as abstract concepts. In the 2nd chapter of *al-Yanābi‘* he seems to employ these concepts in the sense of being and nonbeing. He writes, “God is not existent (*huwa*) like the being of existing beings, nor is he nonexistent like the nonbeing of nonexistential beings.” Thus, he clearly makes distinction between entities and their being. See *idem*, p. 16:2-4.

What is essential to al-Sijistānī's understanding of causality is that by equating *huwiyya* (being) with what is caused (*ma'lūl*) he asserts that to be caused is to possess the characteristic of *huwiyya* (being) and hence to exist. He conversely implies, in reference to the concept *lā-huwiyyāt*, to be non-caused is to lack *huwiyya* and to non-exist. In a way, through his equation of *huwiyya* with the state of being caused, he claims that the notion of *huwiyya* is primarily associated with the fact of belonging to the universe of beings whether spiritual or physical.

In the later period of his writing career al-Sijistānī indeed continues to reconstruct his doctrine of double negation through resort to ontological concepts expressing being and existence. In his work *Sullam al-Najāt*, he cements this point through polemics with those theologians (possibly the Ash'arites) who justify the ascribing to God of attributes saying that these attributes are only essential to him and do not designate an independent reality. In response, al-Sijistānī states that deficiency (*'ayb*) comes not from whether attributes exist essential to the transcendent God or separated from It, but from their existence with It (*min qibal-i wujūdihā*).⁶¹

Another ontological term al-Sijistānī employs to frame the doctrine of double negation is *shay'/shay'iyya* (thing/thingness). Two chapters hold keys to understanding his view of *shay'*: the 6th chapter of *al-Yanābi'*, where he proposes that no thing can be imagined prior to the existence of the First Intellect, and the 11th chapter of his *al-Maqālīd*, where he refutes the view that God is a thing not like other things (*allāhu shay'un lā ka-l-ash'yā'*). In both places al-Sijistānī seems to enter into polemics with the Ash'arite-Maturidite view of God as *shay'*.⁶²

⁶¹ The feminine pronoun refers to *ahsyā'* (things), by which al-Sijistānī means the qualities and characteristics of beings. See al-Sijistānī, *Sullam al-Najāt*, in Alibhai, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and Kitāb Sullam al-Najāt*, p. 13-14 (Arabic)

⁶² Al-Māturīdī, Abū Manṣūr, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. Ed. Bekir Topaloğlu and Muhammed Aruçi (Beirut/Istanbul: Dār Ṣādir & Maktabat al-Irshād, 2003), p. 104. For all early debates about the notion of *shay'* (thing) and its association

Since the second half of the 9th century the concept of *shay'* played a significant role in the development of the onto-theological depiction of God. A major concern that the proponents of this view had, according to al-Sijistāni, was to establish God's entity and show his existence by means of the concept of *shay'* (*li-tuthbita dhātahu wa-tuqawwima huwiyyatahu*).⁶³ He finds this view problematic and rather uses the same concept (*shay'*) to justify his apophatic project, thereby negating any positive attributes of the Originator. "How could a thingness be imagined before the Intellect, while the Intellect indeed constitutes the very thingness of all things, and likewise, the thingness of things is nothing other than the Intellect?" rhetorically asks. If it were possible to envisage a thingness beyond the Intellect, he continues to state, the Intellect primarily qualified by the notion of *shay'* (thing) would then exist before itself (*dhāt*). It is established, however, that a thing cannot exist prior to its entity. He defines the notion of *shay'iyya* as *huwa ithbāt li-dhātin mā* (an affirmation of some entity).⁶⁴ As it becomes clear from his comments in these two chapters, the essential characteristic of those beings subsumed under the category of thing (*shay'*) is their semantic association with entities—either it be sensible or intelligible. Briefly speaking, he asserts that anything that exceeds the limits of either sense perception or the intellect's intelligence cannot be a thing (*shay'*). So we cannot speak of the Originator's being.

One final important aspect of al-Sijistāni's employment of double negation concerns the notion of *inniyya/anniyya*. I think his analysis of *inniyya* is of critical importance for a better

to God, see Abu 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Ismā'īl al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islamiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallīn*, ed. Helmut Ritter (1929; Beirut: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2005), 158 :1-163:8; 181:1-182:4; 518:4-520:8. For a brief discussion of the problem of *shay'* in early Islamic theology and its repercussions in medieval Islamic philosophy, See Robert Wisnovsky, *Avicenna's metaphysics in context* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, c2003), pp. 149-154.

⁶³ Al-Sijistāni, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 83

⁶⁴ Al-Sijistāni, "Kitāb al-yanābi'" (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 25

understanding of his concept of *huwiyya* (being). In the 5th chapter of *al-Maqālīd* he associates them with one another to the extent that he uses almost identical expressions in describing them. The introductory phrase in **15:8-16:1** of *al-Yanābi‘*, *al-huwiyya al-maḥḍa allatī tuḍāf ilā al-Mubdi‘ ...aysiyya al-sābiq* (“...the pure quoddity that is attributed to the Originator...is the existence of the Preceder”),⁶⁵ may be compared with the similar phraseology in **56:3-4** of the 5th *Key*, *al-inniyya allatī tuḍāf ilā allāh...hiya al-ibdā‘ al-maḥḍ alladhī huwa amruhu wa-jūduhu* (the *inniyya* that is attributed to God...is the pure originating act that is Its command and generosity).⁶⁶ The major difference between them is that in *al-Yanābi‘* he designates the Originator’s so-called *huwiyya* in reference to the preceder (intellect) subsumed under the category of being, whereas in *al-Maqālīd* he depicts Its so-called *inniyya* through reference to the act of origination (*ibdā‘*) subsumed under the category of nonbeing (*lays*). Should this be taken as an indication that he makes a distinction between *huwiyya* and *inniyya*? I think not. It is true that al-Sijistānī subsumes the act of origination under the category of nonbeing (*lays*). But following the existence of the intellect, he states in the 2nd chapter of *al-Yanābi‘*, the act of origination is united with it in such a way that they become identical.⁶⁷ As seen in his apophatic expression “*subḥānahu ‘an huwa wa lā huwa*, by which he defines the Originator’s so-called *huwiyya* in a deantropomorphic and negative manner, he similarly defines the supposed *inniyya* of God as the intellect’s declaration of It as other and distant from the attributes of vassals as It is transcendent and exalted above the *inniyyāt* of attributed physical (*mawṣūfīn*) and non-attributed

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 15

⁶⁶ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 56

⁶⁷ Al-Sijistānī, “Kitāb al-yanābi‘” (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne*, p. 16:12-13

spiritual (*ghayr al-mawṣūfīn*) beings. This apophatic idea the intellect has of the Originator is what constitutes Its *inniyya*.⁶⁸

The fundamental reason why al-Sijistānī negates the concept of *inniyya* of the Originator lies in his argument that the concept connotes the qualities and characteristics of beings and nonbeings. He states:

T14: *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-Malakūtīyah*, p. 57:9-12 “An *inniyya* is attributed to something, because it is on a thing, toward a thing, in a thing, from a thing, for a thing, like a thing, above a thing, under a thing, in front of a thing, behind a thing, in the sense of a thing (*shay*’), or in the sense of no-thing (*lā-shay*’).”⁶⁹

All these categories of being and nonbeing belong to physical and spiritual beings. In a way, al-Sijistānī uses *inniyya* to designate their that-they-are-ness, e.g., the fact that they are in a certain state, or a thing’s being, e.g., Aristotle’s *hoti estin*. Al-Sijistānī finds the basis for his analysis of the concept of *inniyya* in the Qur’ān. He discovers that the Qur’ān supplies divine attributes in sentences beginning with the particle *inna/anna* “that” e.g., Q 22:6: *annahū ‘alā kulli shay’in qadīr* (“...Verily, it is he who has power over all things”). If the Originator is transcendent over and other than all things, how should we read these qur’ānic passages attributing *inniyya* to It? Al-Sijistānī answers this question by equating the Qur’ān with the post-creation reality and claims that the Qur’ān is revealed only after the appearance of creation and therefore it is possible to ascribe *inniyāt* (quoddities) to the Originator in the sense that It is who originated substances that are the cause of the manifestation of divine bounties and favors.⁷⁰ In his work *Ithbāt al-Nubū’āt* al-Sijistānī describes this post-creation divine reality as ‘*aql mujassam*

⁶⁸ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, 57:4-6: *Fa-inniyyat allāh ‘alā al-ḥaqīqa tanzīh al-sābiq iyyāhu ‘an simāt al-marbūbīn bi-annahū muta’ālin ‘an inniyāt al-mawṣūfīn muqaddasun ‘an inniyāti ghayr al-mawṣūfīn...*

⁶⁹ *Idem*, 57:9-12

⁷⁰ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 58

(intellect incarnate). Thus, for him, the Qur'ān does not reflect a reality beyond the intellect or the Word so that it would co-exist with the Originator in eternity. But rather it was manifested with the emergence of the intellect and even was incarnated in it. On the other hand, the Qur'ān, in al-Sijistānī's opinion, signifies the most perfect form of scripture. The legislating prophet (*nāṭiq*) steps on the stage and takes on the role of transmuting the intelligible qur'ānic reality into something possessing physical existence, because his area of authority is limited to the lower, material world in spite of the fact that he primarily refers to the higher world.⁷¹

In sum, al-Sijistānī's major concern is to show the Originator's transcendence through negation of all me/ontological categories in It to such an extent that he would empty being out of God's essence. This is the case not only when he negates of It such ontological concepts as *huwiyya* (being), *huwa* (being), *shay'* (thing), *dhāt* (entity), *inniyya* (being), *even mawjūd* (existent) and *hastī* (existent, being). It is also true when he denies of It such meontological concepts as *lā-huwiyya* (nonbeing), *lā-huwa* (nonbeing), *lā-shay'* (no-thing) and *ma 'dūm* (nonexistent). The Sijistanian conception of divine transcendence, saturated as it is with repetitive double negation and the rejection of ontic categories from God, led to severe attacks from other theological groups in the intellectual history of Islam. It is due to its divergence from the logico-linguistic rules of the conventional Arabic language that Zaydī and Sunni theologians found double negation problematic. He was even exposed to an intra-polemic from al-Kirmānī (d. 1021). The real challenge he would face here with regard to the apophatic method of double negation is that there is nothing left out of the image of God. In his discussion of al-Sijistānī's account, Walker pays attention to the fundamental problem with his perspective:

⁷¹ al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubū'āt*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 125. Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, p. 92

“But what then of the question of whether God is truly affirmed and certain, if *tawhīd* removes Him from all connection to the created universe. What certifies God if everything is denied?”⁷²

From the repetitious and perpetual negation of determinations and attributes, including ontic predicates, one may be tempted to infer that the Ismaili concept of God is emptied of all contents to the extent that it becomes almost nothing.

5.6. Conclusion to the chapter

In this chapter, I discussed how al-Sijistāni’s meontology is in conformity with the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being. As shown in Figure 1, he positions hierarchy of beings on the ground of degree of negation and nonbeing. The higher principle a cosmic principle is, the more emphatic negation it behooves and the more transcendental its reality is. It is based on the greater or lesser intensity of negation that principles would seize more or less ontological representation.

Accordingly, physical beings devoid of negation are granted a bottom level of reality, for which reason it does not deserve any negation. The *via negativa* he suggested throughout his magnum opus is based on double negation in the form “*Mubdi*’ is not **X** and not not-**X**”. He offers two possible formulations. Placed on the predicate side, **X** and not-**X** correspond to two categories of reality. They are respectively either physical beings vs. spiritual beings (the Intellect and the Soul) or all categories of beings (whether spiritual or physical) vs. the act of origination. The formulation would then designate, respectively, either (**Formulation I**) that God transcends both

⁷² Paul Walker, *Early philosophical Shiism*, p. 79

physical beings and spiritual beings, or (**Formulation II**) that he is transcendent not only with respect to all categories of beings but also with respect to the act of origination. Whereas, in the first case, al-Sijistānī resorts to descriptive categories like qualified vs. *non*-qualified, he employs me/ontological categories in the second such as being vs. *non*-being. He uses transcendent-making words (e.g., *lā*, *ghayr* and *lays*) as a linguistic strategy to declare the transcendence, ineffability, and incomprehensibility of higher principles. He even devotes a single chapter to discussing the importance of negation for his understanding of apophatic God. Numerous studies have so far been done to pinpoint the link between Ismaili apophasis and Neoplatonism. But they remained indifferent to the major part negation and nonbeing takes in the Ismaili apophasis. In this study, I aimed to fill this gap by elaborating on the intricacies and complexities of this linguistic phenomenon in his meontology. Me/ontological categories are of crucial significance to his reconstruction of his apophatic framework. His major concern is strip of him all attributes which would designate some sort of plurality in him. Therefore, al-Sijistānī does not need to put forward evidence for the existence of God. He is the most real of all that is real, though he shares no quality with limited or *non*-limited created beings (*allāh athbat min kulli thābitin wa- in- lam yushārik tarafay al-makhlūqayn min al-mahdūd wa gahyr al-mahdūd*).⁷³

⁷³ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 95

CHAPTER 6: Al-Kirmānī (d. 1021): Deviation from double negation

6.1. Introduction

6.2. Al-Kirmānī's cosmology: The union of the act of origination and the Intellect

6.3. Al-Kirmānī's meontology over polemics with al-Nasafi

6.4. Conclusion to the chapter

6.1. Introduction

Al-Kirmānī (1021) was a distinguished Ismaili missionary during the rule of the caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amr Allāh (996-1021). He contributed much to the formation of Fatimid Ismailism. Being active in Basra and Baghdad, he proposed a new Neoplatonic cosmological hierarchy influenced by the Fārābī school. Al-Kirmānī continued to exert an impact on the development of post-Fatimid Tayyibi Ismailism in Yaman and India.¹ Modern scholarship provide us with variegated accounts of al-Kirmānī. As a scholar who introduced Ismaili theology to Western scholarship, Wladimir Ivanow describes him as the most erudite and skilled Ismaili author of the Fatimid period.² Nasr delineates his works as demarcating the high point of Fatimid philosophy and compares him to Ibn Sīnā in terms of the intricacy of his philosophy.³ The author of *Neoplatonism* Richard Wallis likens him to the Iamblichus or Proclus with regard to his

¹ Wilferd Madelung, "Isma'īlism: The Old and the New Da'wa," in *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany, N.Y. : Persian Heritage Foundation, c1988), pp. 101

² Wladimir Ivanow, *Ismaili literature : a bibliographical survey* (Tehran : [Ismaili Society], 1963), p. 40

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "English Introduction," in *Ḥāmid al-Dīn Kirmānī, al-Aqwāl al-Dhahabiyyah* (Golden Sayings), ed. Salah al-Sawy (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1977), p. 1

extension of the Neoplatonic cosmological system of being in a down manner; al-Kirmānī multiplied a fundamental hypostasis like the Intellect by following the doctrine of intellect proposed by al-Fārābī. Thus, his Neoplatonic scheme involves far more hypostases than those that al-Sijistānī put forward.⁴

Al-Kirmānī wrote more than twenty-nine works which are all devoted to the understanding of the Ismaili doctrines. Here, I will limit my discussion of his meontology to *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* and *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, which devote great space to our topic. *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* is thought to be his most important and comprehensive work, examining fundamentals of Ismaili philosophy in its full scope. In his *al-Riyāḍ* also, al-Kirmānī supplies invaluable information about his meontological god. This work couches the remarkable controversy which took place between three Iranian *dā‘īs* with Neoplatonic tendency. In his *Kitāb al-Isḫāḥ*, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 935) attacks al-Nasafī’s (d. 945) assumptions in his *Kitāb al-Maḥṣūl*. Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (p. 971) came to the aid of the latter in his *Kitāb al-Nuṣra* which disproves of al-Rāzī’s critiques. In *al-Riyāḍ*, al-Kirmānī provides his own position while, on the other hand, generally siding with al-Rāzī against al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī.⁵ As I will show in my analysis of Text 7 (T7) and Text 9 (T9), these two works contain opposing viewpoints. In modern times, the chronology of *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* and *al-Riyāḍ* has been problematized because they refer to each other, the former to the latter three times and the latter to the former fifteen times. Van Ess’s tentative assumption is popular. He argues that there must have been two recensions of *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, one of which al-Kirmānī wrote in Iraq and brought along to Egypt. It is this version that is cited in several of his

⁴ Richard T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London : Duckworth, 1972), 126-127; 151-152

⁵ D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l'intellect : néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l'œuvre de Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/XIe s.)* (Leuven : Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 1995), p. 14

works including *al-Riyāḍ*. After he returns to Iraq from Egypt, he made a additional revision of the text and cited his earlier works like *al-Riyāḍ*.⁶ This scenario suggests, then, that *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* came both before and after *al-Riyāḍ* in two different versions.

Apart from the accuracy of this scenario, it is hard to know whether al-Kirmānī indeed found an opportunity to revise each and every topic of the former including his idea of apophasis. When we consider the discrete and dynamic nature of Ismaili literature and the writings of al-Kirmānī in particular, it will become harder to find a solution to the problem of chronology. Ismaili texts that have come down to us are originally written not to reach a large audience but designed for the immediate and oral teaching of *da‘wā*. Ismaili authors would constantly make modifications, corrections, clarifications just like professors do for course notes and syllabi. We are therefore faced up with what de Smet calls “*une littérature vivante*.”⁷ There are two reasons why I will view his comments in *al-Riyāḍ* as a continuation of his position in *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*: (1) his enthusiastic and passionate engagement with earlier Ismaili discussions in the former and 2) the number of internal citations and cross references in them. In *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, Al-Kirmānī only provides a general overview of al-Sijistānī’s perspective of double negation, which was already in circulation among Ismailis. But he deeply and critically engages in this perspective over his polemic with al-Sijistānī’s master al-Nasafī. Unless there is some evidence tending to invalidate al-Kirmānī’s passionate critiques in *al-Riyāḍ*, it will be hard to think that his

⁶ Josef van Ess, “Bibliographische Notizen zur islamischen Theologie,” *Die Welt des Orients* Bd. 9, H. 2 (1978), 259-261; D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l’intellect*, p. 11-12; Paul Walker, *Ḥamīd al-dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismaili thought in the age of al-Ḥākim* (London ; New York, NY : I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 1999), pp. 33-34

⁷ D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l’intellect*, p. 11-12

remarks in *Rāḥat* mark his final position. The greater number of reciprocal cross references from *Rāḥat* to *al-Riyāḍ* also urges me to assume the former as of a later date.

The *via negativa*, a negative path of speaking of God, has been in effect among Muslim communities of different backgrounds from a very early period. The path of negation tends to declare God's transcendence by describing what he is not rather than what he is. Modern studies trace its development in Islamic history back to Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 746) and Dirār b. 'Amr (815), who offer some sort of negative apophatic theology.⁸ There is no doubt that the Ismailis of the 10th century Fatimid period, such as al-Nasafī (d. 943), al-Sijistānī (d. 971) and al-Kirmānī (d. 1021) developed the most radical form of apophasis. It is generally assumed that these authors are uniform in their assumption of double negation. But this is, indeed, not the case. I have explored the theological views of the former two authors in Chapters 4 and 5. In this chapter, I will discuss al-Kirmānī's perspective in comparison to al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī. The major shift in Ismaili perspective is a result of the subtle change he brings to the Neoplatonic-Ismaili cosmological system. Unlike the other two Ismaili writers, he refuses to admit the idea of the act of origination as an intermediary principle between God and the Intellect. The originating act (*ibdā'*), unity (*waḥda*), word (*kalima*), and command (*amr*) are all indeed different names of one and the same reality, which is the Intellect. Thus, he holds it to be part of the realm of being and of the same nature as the Intellect. Al-Kirmānī pursues al-Sijistānī's meontology in his use of negative phrases (e.g., *lā* and *ghayr*) as an expression of transcendence and otherness. *Rāḥat al-'Aql* evidently champions al-Sijistānī's **first** formulation of double negation,⁹ according to which

⁸ David Bennett, "The Mu'tazilite Movement (II)," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford, United Kingdom : Oxford University Press, [2016]), p. 152-153

⁹ As I have discussed in Chapter 5, al-Sijistānī offers two formulations of double negation. He devises his first formulation through resort to adjectival descriptive categories like 'limited' vs. 'non-limited' and 'qualified' vs. 'non-qualified'. The second of these pairs always points to spiritual beings (the Intellect and Soul) as they are 'other'

the first negation, namely the rejection of all physical predicates in God (e.g., God is not qualified), must be supplemented by the negation of all spiritual qualities, that is, the (i.e., God is not *non*-qualified). But in *al-Riyāḍ*, he remains silent about it. On the other hand, since he denies the intermediary rank of the act of origination of a *non*-existential reality, he consequently nullifies al-Sijistānī's **second** formulation,¹⁰ which aims to show God's transcendence above it in addition to spiritual and physical beings. In what follows, I will argue on the basis of **T7** and **T9** in *al-Riyāḍ* that he approaches the topic in such a way that ruins the foundations of double negation. Perhaps, his polemical arguments led him to the outcome that he did not desire. This is the most obvious modification he brought to the Ismaili meontology. Another substantial change to al-Sijistānī's perspective seems to have come as a response to charges of atheisms against the Ismaili community. Al-Kirmānī stresses that God has *huwiyya* in the sense of "being" as a sign of the presence of a reality and not in the sense of "being" as an attribute, which runs counter to al-Sijistānī's position that God has no *huwiyya*.

6.2. Al-Kirmānī's cosmology: The union of the act of origination and the Intellect

than physical beings. Thus, **Formulation I**, e.g., "God is neither qualified nor non-qualified." This would mean, from his apophatic perspective, that God transcends not only qualities of physical beings, but also those of spiritual beings (the Intellect and Soul) that are in turn not qualified by the former. Al-Sijistānī allocates to the act of origination a somewhat distinct reality independently of and high above the Intellect. He thus excludes it from the sphere of being encompassing spiritual and physical beings. He even defines it, in meontological terms, as *non*-existent or *non*-being. Therefore, he feels the need to create a second formulation so that he could declare God's transcendence even above the act of origination. Accordingly, he establishes his second formulation in reference to categories of being and nonbeing. Hence, **Formulation II**, i.e., "God is neither being nor non-being." Al-Sijistānī thus negates of God both the qualities of the act of origination of a *non*-existential nature and those of physical and spiritual beings.

¹⁰ See n.9

Before entering upon the discussion of al-Kirmānī's meontology, I will deal in some detail with his Neoplatonic hierarchy of being.¹¹ His god is simply *Allāh*, though he seldom describes him as *mu'ill al-'ilal* (Causer of Causes) or *mubdi'*.¹² His account of God is consistent in some respects with al-Sijistānī's. He follows al-Sijistānī in denying causality of God. God is not a cause. As Makarem has maintained, God as the *mu'ill* of the cause of causes is, for Ismaili scholars, not he who causes beings, but who originated (*ibdā'*) the Intellect and made it the first or final cause in chain of causes (*al-mabda' al-awwal*).¹³ Since al-Kirmānī detaches God of any attributes and determinations, he instead ascribes to the Intellect some divine epithets that *Falāsifa* attributed to the Intellect such as *Intellectus intelligens intellectum* (*'aql wa 'āqil wa ma'qūl*)¹⁴ and the unmoved first mover (*al-muḥarrik al-awwal alladhī lā yataḥarraku*)¹⁵.

Al-Kirmānī's account of the Intellect are to some extent congruent with that of al-Sijistānī. The Intellect is created not by means of procession (*lā 'alā ṭarīq al-fayḍ*) as *Falāsifa* have proposed, but by the unknowable process of origination (*bal 'alā ṭarīq al-ibdā'*).¹⁶ Like al-

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of al-Kirmānī's cosmology, see Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent : studies in the structure and semiotics of Islamic philosophy, theology, and cosmology* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1989), pp. 222-229.

¹² Al-Kirmānī, *Risālat usbū' dawr al-sitr in Arba' Rasā'il Ismā'iliyya*, ed. 'Ārif Tāmir (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1966), p. 62. Poonawala supposes that this work may be inauthentic. See Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā'īlī literature* (Malibu, Calif.: Undena Publications, 1977), p. 102

¹³ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1983), p. 157; 199; 202; See also "al-Risāla al-Durriyya," in *Majmū'at rasā'il al-Kirmānī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Bayrūt, Lubnān : al-Mu'assasah al-Jāmi'iyyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 1983), pp. 20-23; Sami N. Makarem, "Isma'ili and Druze Cosmogony in Relation to Plotinus and Aristotle," in *Islamic theology and philosophy : studies in honor of George F. Hourani*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 82

¹⁴ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 202:8

¹⁵ *Idem*, pp. 199:3

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 171: "wa anna ṭalab al-iḥāṭati bi-kayfiyyati wujūdihi muḥāl." "It is not possible to investigate the essential quality of its [origination] existence."

Sijistānī, he posits it as the first originated (*al-mubda‘ al-awwal*)¹⁷ and the first existent being (*al-mawjūd al-awwal*).¹⁸ His description of the Intellect as *al-qalam* (the Pen) is aligned with qur’anic vocabulary.¹⁹ Moreover, he occasionally resorts to key cosmological terms circulated in the early Ismaili community like *sābiq* (preceder).²⁰

What is most distinctive in al-Kirmānī’s cosmology lies in his approach to the intermediary role of *ibdā‘* (the act of origination). As we mentioned above, al-Sijistānī, following al-Nasafī, subscribes to an ontological separation of *ibdā‘* from *‘aql* (the Intellect) by delineating the former as the creative *arche* of the latter. Although, in *al-Yanābi‘*, he asserts their complete union right after the origination of the Intellect, nevertheless *ibdā‘* initially appears detached from the Intellect. Al-Kirmānī criticizes the idea of any intermediary between God and the Intellect over his polemic with al-Nasafī in his *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*. He quotes al-Nasafī as stating,

T1: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 206: *Inna al-‘aql limā kānat ‘illatuhu waḥdat al-bārī, jalla wa ‘azza, wa al-waḥdat azaliyyatan, šāra al-‘aql azaliyyan li-azaliyyati ‘illatihī*

“Since the Intellect’s cause is the unity of the creator (*waḥdat al-bārī*), the mighty and exalted, and it is eternal, the Intellect would also be eternal on account of the eternity of its cause.”²¹

¹⁷ *Idem*, pp. 199, 202

¹⁸ *Idem*, pp. 155, 157, 158, 199

¹⁹ *Idem*, pp. 87, 155

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 163

²¹ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt (Forthcoming), p. 206

Al-Nasafī refers to the act of origination with variegated terms like unity (*waḥda*), word (*kalima*), and command (*amr*). And he proposes an intermediary cause between the creator and the Intellect. In response, al-Kirmānī writes:

T2: *Kitāb al-Riyād*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 206-207: “We have stated above that nothing can ever precede the First Intellect in the process of its being brought into existence directly by God so that it would be more entitled to assume eternity [as compared to the Intellect]. As we have explained, the existence of an intermediary principle is impossible. If nothing at all can come before the existence of the Intellect, then *waḥda* (God’s unity) is not the cause of the Intellect as a different reality so that it would precede the Intellect. Indeed, [whatever may be put forward to mediate between God and the Intellect] constitutes an essential reality of the Intellect. That is, the Intellect is the same as divine unity (*al-waḥda*) and it is the one (*al-wāḥid*); it is the cause and the caused (*al-ma’lūl*); it is the act of origination (*al-ibdā’*) and the originated being (*al-mubda’*); it is perfection and perfect (*huwa al-tamām wa al-tāmm*); it is eternity and eternal (*huwa al-azal wa huwa al-azalī*), it is being and the existent being (*huwa al-wujūd wa huwa al-mawjūd*); it is a single essence (*dhātun wāḥida*).”²²

Contrary to al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī, al-Kirmānī rejects the idea of an intermediary principle between the transcendent God and the Intellect. He argues that the primordial principle that theologians believed to have mediated between them is nothing other than the Intellect itself. He points out that the use of distinct names may be misleading; the originating act (*ibdā’*), unity (*waḥda*), word (*kalima*), and command (*amr*) are all in fact different epithets of one and the same reality, which is the Intellect.²³ As a result, to al-Kirmānī, there are no intermediary occupying the role as creator of the Intellect, and the Intellect was originated directly by God himself.

²² Al-Kirmānī, *al-Riyād*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 206-207: “*wa-qad qulnā fīmā taqaddama anna al-‘aql al-awwal lā yataqaddamu ‘alayh fī wujūdihi ‘an allāh ta‘ālā shay’un aṣlan, fa-yakūna huwa awlā bi al-azaliyya li istiḥālat wujūdihi ‘alā mā bayyannā. Wa-idhā kāna lā yataqaddamu ‘alā al-‘aql—fī wujūdihi shay’un; fa al-waḥda laysat bi-‘illatin li al-‘aql hiya ghayruhu ḥattā takūn mutaqaḍdimatan ‘alā al-‘aql, bal hiya dhāt al-‘aql wa al-‘aql huwa dhāt al-waḥda wa huwa al-wāḥid; wa huwa al-‘illa wa huwa al-ma’lūl, wa huwa al-ibdā’ wa huwa al-mubda’ wa huwa al-tamām wa huwa al-tāmm, wa huwa al-azal wa huwa al-azalī, wa huwa al-wujūd wa huwa al-mawjūd, dhātun wāḥidatun.*” For his detailed discussion of the matter, see also *idem*, See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 176-180.

²³ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent*, p. 225

Another inter-sectarian dispute concerning the Neoplatonic hierarchy of beings resulted from al-Kirmānī's attempt to introduce to the Ismaili cosmology al-Fārābī's emanationist system of ten intellects. As Netton has stated, "Al-Sijistānī's cosmology...is characterized initially by a single one-from-one procession, the emanation of the Universal Soul from the Intellect. In al-Kirmānī's scheme, the matter becomes more complex."²⁴ From the first intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*)²⁵ proceeds two intellects: (1) the second intellect (*al-'aql al-thānī*) that is given epithets like the soul (*al-nafs*),²⁶ the second to exist (*mawjūd al-thānī*), and the first emanation (*munba'ith awwal*)²⁷; (2) the third intellect that is called matter and form (*hayūlā* and *šūra*).²⁸ In spite of the fact that the first intellect is indeed the One (*al-wāḥid*), the procession of these two principles from it shows its dual-nature. He states:

T3: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 69: "From the cause without cause (*al-sabab alladhī lā sabab lahu*, e.g., God) that is unimpaired by and detached from plurality, can come only the One (*wāḥid*). Since this One that is the first intellect has two characteristics (*nispatayn*), it is a cause for the existence of all that was below it and it is an effect created and originated by the Originator, and two [viz., intellects] proceed from it on account of its dual characteristics. From its first characteristic appeared the second intellect (i.e., the soul) and from its other characteristic arose matter (e.g. the third intellect), from which heavenly spheres and other beings in the physical world in turn emerged."²⁹

²⁴ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent*, p. 225

²⁵ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 158, 173

²⁶ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ fī al-ḥukm bayna al-sādayn ṣāḥibāy al-iṣlāḥ wa-al-nuṣrah*, ed. 'Arīf Tāmīr (Bayrūt, Dār al-Thaqāfah [al-Muqadimah 1960]), p. 70

²⁷ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 212

²⁸ *Idem*, pp. 213-4, 221; *idem*, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 69

²⁹ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, ed. Tāmīr, p. 69: "wa ḥādḥā al-wāḥid alladhī huwa al-'aql al-awwal li-mā kāna 'alā nispatayn aḥaduhumā kawnuhu 'illatan li-wujūd mā-dūnahu, wa ukhrāhumā kawnuhu ma'lūlan; idh huwa mubda'un mukhtara'un wajaba an yakūna mā yūjadu 'anh ithnayn bi-ḥasabi mā 'alayh dhātuḥu min al-nispatayn; wa kāna alladhī wujida 'an al-nispat al-ūlā huwa al-'aql al-thānī, wa 'an al-nispat al-ukhrā huwa al-hayūlā allatī minhā al-aflāk; wa ghayruhā min mawjūdāt 'ālam al-jism."

What al-Kirmānī proposes in this passage is a two-fold emanation, which came into conflict with al-Sijistānī’s one-to-one emanation. As Netton has suggested, the conception of double procession reminds us of the long history of the *filioque* (lit. “and the son”) controversy within Christianity.³⁰ Al-Kirmānī argues, first, that there is an emanation of the second intellect from the first intellect. This emanation occurs on account of its active causal nature. The second manner of emanation resulting in the emergence of matter, however, is created through its passive causal nature. One issue that needs attention is that even though, in his *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*,³¹ al-Kirmānī, like al-Sijistānī, detaches God from any causal relation with beings, he delineates him here in his *Riyāḍ* as the cause (possibly of the first intellect), e.g., *al-sabab alladhī lā sabab lahu* (the cause without cause). The word *sabab* synonymous with *‘illa* first began circulating in Graeco-Arabicum and genuine Muslim philosophical works to render Greek terms like αἰτία and ἀρχή. For now, it is hard to provide a convincing response to this seeming contradiction. But he appears not to have maintained a conceptual consistency in terms of his detachment of God from causality. This contradiction is worth considering.

As for the other seven intellects, they proceed down to the tenth intellect, which al-Kirmānī takes as equal to the active intellect (*‘aql fa’āl*) and is responsible for the governance of the sublunary realm. The Neoplatonic framework he suggests is congruent with al-Fārābī’s cosmological system. However, as we have seen in al-Fārābī, this last intellect in al-Kirmānī is

³⁰ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent : studies in the structure and semiotics of Islamic philosophy, theology, and cosmology* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1989), p. 226

³¹ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 157-158

not the form-giver (*wāhib al-ṣuwar*) from which material forms emanate.³² Moreover, each one of the ten intellects governs, and is linked with, one corresponding to each of the celestial spheres.³³ Finally, al-Kirmānī's doctrine of emanation runs parallels with the Plotinian framework in the following three respects:³⁴ 1-) his comparison of procession (*inbi 'āth*) to a flowing emanation of light coming from the sun;³⁵ 2-) the emergence of the twin intellects (soul and matter/form) as a consequence of the first intellect's self-contemplation and delight within its own identity;³⁶ 3-) the procession of the second intellect from the first by virtue of necessity (*amr ḍarūrī*).³⁷

6.3. Al-Kirmānī's meontology over polemics with al-Nasafi

New concerns and challenges lead al-Kirmānī to reconsider and rework the current Neoplatonic-Ismaili framework. As he implies in *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, he seems preoccupied with charges of disbelief and atheism against the Ismaili community.³⁸ In addition to socio-political problems of

³² *Idem*, pp. 257, 264, 257, 259; 254-6, 255-7

³³ *Idem*, pp. 254-6. See Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent*, p. 227.

³⁴ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh transcendent*, p. 226

³⁵ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 207-209; cf. *Enneads* V.1.6

³⁶ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 207:9-11: *Fa-kāna 'an dhālika al-ighṭibāt bi-ishrāq dhātihi—'ind ihāṭatihi wa-'aqlihi iyyāhā wa mulāḥazatihi la-hā fī dhātihi fariḥan bihā--suṭū' nūr 'anh...*" cf. *Enneads* V.1.6

³⁷ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 212:6-9: "*ikhtaṣṣa al-mawjūd al-thānī al-tālī lahu fī al-wujūd amran ḍarūriyyan wujūduhu lāzimun 'ammā yakūnu wujūduhu—dhālika al-wujūdu fī kamāl al-ibdā 'iyya.*" cf. *Enneads* 111. 2. 1 - 111. 2. 2:

³⁸ See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148; Eva-Maria Lika, *Proofs of Prophecy and the Refutation of the Ismā'īliyya: the Kitāb Ithbāt Nubuwwat al-Nabī by the Zaydī al-Mu'ayyad bi-Ilāh al-Hārūnī* (d. 411/1020) (Berlin/Boston : De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 2:16-3:3; al-Bustī, Ismā'īl ibn Aḥmad, *al-Ismā'īliyyūn : kashf al-asrār wa-naqd al-afkār*, ed. 'Ādil Sālim al-'Abd al-Jādir (al-Kuwayt : 'Ā.S. al-'Abd al-Jādir, 2002), pp. 254-255; Muḥammad

the time, the Ismaili radical negation of ontological categories of God also might have instigated the dissemination of these accusations among other Muslim sects. Possibly for this reason, al-Kirmānī feels the need to propose that the denial of *huwiyya* of God would designate nothing other than that *lā huwa aw lā ilahun* (God has no essential reality or there is god). This would obviously be equal to holding atheism (*ta 'īl*). He argues that the *via negative* is clearly distinct from *ta 'īl* (atheism).³⁹ Al-Kirmānī deeply engages in intra-sectarian debates on meontology. The most subtle change he brings to it results from his denial of the idea of an intermediary principle between God and the Intellect, which is known in various terms such as *ibdā'* (the originating act), *waḥda* (Unity), *amr* (command) or *kalima* (word). This shift in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being consequently causes him to invalidate al-Sijistānī's second formula of double negation.⁴⁰ In *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, al-Kirmānī remains committed to the Ismaili way of employing negative particles (i.e., *lā*) as an expression of God's transcendence. He even approves of al-Sijistānī's first formulation of double negation in this work. But he remains silent about it in his (later) work *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*. Though more polemical in tone, he continues to expound his position, in the tenth section of this work, over his criticism of al-Nasafī. To such extent, his passionate polemical arguments lead him to diverge from double negation.

In *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, al-Kirmānī provides invaluable information about his meontology over criticism of al-Nasafī (d. 942). The latter is not only the first *dā'ī* who merged the Ismaili doctrine with Neoplatonism. But also, he introduced meontological concepts into the Ismaili

b. al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī, *Qawā'id 'aqā'id āli muḥammad*, intr. by M. Zāhid ibn al-Ḥasan al-Kawtharī and ed. 'Izzat al-'Aṭṭār al-Ḥusaynī (Cairo: Maktab Nashr al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1950), p. 14

³⁹ See Paul Walker, *Ḥamīd al-dīn al-Kirmānī*, pp. 40-42

⁴⁰ See n.9

doctrine of God. It is unfortunate that al-Nasafi’s major work, *al-Maḥṣūl*, has not reached us. For this reason, we do not have chance to arbitrate fairly in al-Kirmānī’s critiques against him. Therefore, I will quote al-Nasafi’s statement, not as an end in itself, but as a means to better engage in al-Kirmānī’s position. Below, al-Nasafi shows the Originator’s (*mubdi* ‘) transcendence by putting all things—both beings and nonbeings—within the category of the originated (*mubda* ‘). He states,

T4: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198:7-8: “God is the originator of beings and nonbeings (*mubdi* ‘ *al-shay*’ *wa al-lā-shay*’)—whether they be objects of the Intellect (*‘aqlī*), imaginary (*wahmī*), intelligible (*fikrī*), or logical (*manṭiqī*).⁴¹

In his critical analysis, al-Kirmānī discusses the logical results to which al-Nasafi’s conception of nonbeing (*lā-shay*) would lead him and what it would designate from a Neoplatonic-Ismaili point of view. He states:

T5: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198: “From such a statement it would necessarily follow that there are beings among God’s creation that were originated but can be perceived neither by intellect nor by imagination nor by mind nor can be predicated of. In fact, their existence is impossible and belief in their existence is a deviation from the straight path (*ḍalāl*). For if there existed something incomprehensible either by the Intellect, imagination, mind, or incapable of being predicated of, it would fall into one of the following categories: That thing (1) either preceded the Intellect, (2) coexisted with the Intellect, or (3) came to be after the Intellect.⁴²

⁴¹ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198: “*fa-huwa mubdi* ‘ *al-shay*’ *wa l-lā shay*’ *al-‘aqlī wa l-wahmī wa l-fikrī wa l-manṭiqī; a ‘nī mā huwa wāqi* ‘*un taḥta hādhihi l-‘anāṣiri wa mā laysa bi-wāqi* ‘*in taḥtahā*

⁴² Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198: “*qad awjaba bi-qawlihi dhālika anna fī al-mawjūdāt ‘an allāh ta‘ālā al-wāqi* ‘*a taḥta ibdā* ‘*ihi mā-lā-yudraku bi-‘aqlin wa-lā wahmin wa-lā fikrin wa lā yukhbaru ‘anhu bi-manṭiqin. Wa dhālika wujūduhu muḥālun wa i’tiqāduhu ḍalālun. Li-anna alladhī lā yudraku bi-‘aqlin wa lā wahmin wa lā fikrin wa lā yukhbaru ‘anhu bi-manṭiqin lā yakhlū, in kāna lahu wujūdun, an yakūna immā sābiqan ‘alā al-aql fī wujūdihi aw ma’a al-aql fī wujūdihi aw tāliyan lil-‘aql fī wujūdihi.*”

He elaborates the untoward conclusions to which al-Nasafi's conception of *lā-shay'* (nonbeing) as an object of God's origination would lead. He draws out three possible interpretations and eliminates them one by one. **First**, it is not possible that *lā-shay'* could precede the existence of the Intellect. As discussed in Chapter 5, al-Sijistānī somewhat embraces this idea. He argues that the Intellect was derived from the act of origination which precedes it as a creative principle. He holds the act of origination to be of a nonexistential nature (*lā-shay'*) and transcendent. He even declares that it is *min lā shay'* (absolute nonbeing). Thus, al-Sijistānī takes nonbeing as preceding the existence of the Intellect, which runs parallel with al-Nasafi's remarks here. In accordance with his new assumption of the relationship between the Intellect and the act of origination, namely that they are one and the same thing, al-Kirmānī contends that nothing can mediate between the Originator and the Intellect. He argues that "it is impossible because the Intellect is identical with the act [of origination], beyond which there is nothing but God. It is God from whom it emanated and came to be. It itself is the act of origination and the true existent, the first thing that came into existence from God."⁴³

Al-Kirmānī problematizes the second possible interpretation as well, which is, the co-existence of *lā-shay'* (nonbeing) with the Intellect. He puts forward almost the same argument for the invalidity of this interpretation. But he adds that the Intellect can arise only as a single identity, but not united with another thing. This would amount to asserting the procession of two distinct realities from God. Upon his rejection of this possibility, he resorts to the Neoplatonic assumption that from the One only one proceeds. From the Ismaili theological point of view al-Nasafi's perspective would further cause another theological problem concerning the unity of

⁴³ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyād*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 198-199

divine reality. The procession of two differing realities from the one simple God, al-Kirmānī writes, would either designate his plural nature or the existence of any partners whatsoever with him. One could read al-Kirmānī’s argument against the backdrop of al-Sijistānī’s argument on causality, namely that an effect (*ma’lūl*) receives the characteristic features of its cause. So then, the procession of two distinct realities would designate multiplicity on the side of God (*‘illa mutakaththira*) and hence would ruin his unity.⁴⁴ Therefore, al-Kirmānī’s argument continues, “it is impossible for two distinct effects to come from a single cause whose identity is free from all diverse relationships and attributions.”⁴⁵

Al-Kirmānī holds that the **third** possible interpretation, that is, the origination of *lā-shay’* after the Intellect and from it, would also lead to a dilemma. The concept of nonbeing (*lā-shay’*) as defined by al-Nasafī requires that it cannot be comprehended either by the Intellect, imagination, or mind. But its origination following the Intellect ruins this definition. For its emergence after the first intellect, in al-Kirmānī’s opinion, necessarily entails that it be known by all intellects. He writes:

T6: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 199: *Idh law kāna wujūduhu tāliyan lil-‘aql wa ‘anhu la-kāna lā ya ‘zibu ‘an al-‘uqūl ma ‘rifatuhu wa lā ya ‘tāṣu ‘alayhā taḥdīduhu wa la-kānat tudrikuhu wa tuḥaddiduhu kamā ḥaddat sā’ir al-mawjūdāt maḥsūsan wa ma ‘qūlan fī maydān al-ījāb wa al-salb.*

If [*lā-shay’*] were brought into existence by the Intellect and came to be after it, it would not escape knowledge of intellects, it would not be hard for them to constrain it. Conversely, they would comprehend and constrain it as they do other existential beings—whether sensible or intelligible in the spheres of affirmation and negation (*maydān al-ījāb wa al-salb*).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd al-malakūtīyah*, ed. Ismā‘īl Qurbān Ḥusayn Pūnāwāla (Tūnis : Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmi, 2011), p. 69

⁴⁵ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 199

⁴⁶ *Idem*, p. 199

The Ismaili hierarchy of being, al-Kirmānī implies, would not license the *post-intellectum* existence of such a nonexistential reality as depicted by al-Nasafī. Nothing would come into existence without being delimited and comprehended by intellects. By the expression *maydān al-ījāb wa al-salb* (spheres of affirmation and negation), he seems to have pointed respectively to sensible, physical beings of an existential nature and intelligible, spiritual beings of a nonexistential nature—both of which are eventually included within the category of being.

The major problem with al-Nasafī’s conception of *lā-shay’*, al-Kirmānī further argues, lies in the second part of his statement which would lead to an affirmation of the impossible (*ījāb al-muḥāl*). Al-Nasafī first defines God as the “originator of things and nothings (*mubdi’ al-shay’ wa al-lā-shay’*). And then he rephrases this definition, saying, “I mean whatever falls under the above-mentioned categories and others that do not fall under those categories” (*a’ nī mā huwa wāqi ‘un taḥta hādhihī al- ‘anāṣir wa-mā laysa bi-wāqi ‘in taḥtahā*).⁴⁷ Al-Kirmānī rightly asserts that from this second part of al-Nasafī’s statement necessarily follows that his concept of *lā-shay’* would amount to designating nothing other than *muḥāl* (the impossible). If al-Nasafī had been content to state the phrase *mubdi’ al-shay’ wa al-lā-shay’* (the originator of things and no-things) without elaborating on it with the abovementioned second part, al-Kirmānī’s argument continues, we would think that he means by *shay’* “bodies characterized by attributes” (*mā kāna mawṣūfan min al-ajsām*) and by *lā-shay’* “the realm of origination that cannot be characterized by the attributes of bodies” (*mā lam yakun mawṣūfan bi-ṣifāt al-ajsām min ‘ālam al-ibdā*).⁴⁸ Then we would conclude that al-Nasafī employs negation here as a linguistic strategy to express the

⁴⁷ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 200

⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 200

transcendence and otherness of spiritual beings with regard to physical beings, and hence that he includes even spiritual beings of a nonexistential nature within objects of divine origination. Al-Kirmānī states that there are some scholars who interpreted al-Nasafī's words in a somewhat similar manner. Might al-Kirmānī have had in mind al-Sijistānī who follows al-Nasafī on this assumption? Although he does not reiterate the second part of al-Nasafī's expression, which is specifically subject to al-Kirmānī's criticism, nevertheless al-Sijistānī subscribes to the use of negation to speak about spiritual beings so that he intends to show their transcendence. But, be that as it may, al-Sijistānī would not argue for the procession of two different realities from God.

After al-Kirmānī has discussed that al-Nasafī's *lā-shay'* as an object of God's origination has no place within the Neoplatonic hierarchical system, he evaluates al-Nasafī's statement through his analytical analysis of the concept of *shay'*. *Shay'* is one of the key critical concepts which takes a significant part in the discussions of Sunni theologians. One major controversy concerns whether God can be qualified as *shay'*. The majority argued for God's qualification by it so as to confirm God's being and existence. Unlike them, Ismaili theologians, however, drew on the same term to negate it of God so that they could reconstruct their meontological account of God.⁴⁹ Since the better understanding of *lā-shay'* is bounded by that of its opposite, al-Kirmānī deals with the question of what al-Nasafī might have meant by *shay'*. *Shay'*, according to al-Kirmānī, "...is an equivocal term under which fall all existential beings, whether substances or accidents, whether sensible or intelligible."⁵⁰ Accordingly, he provides two possible

⁴⁹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, ed. Pūnāwāla, p. 83; Al-Sijistānī, "Kitāb al-yanābi'" (Arabic text) in H. Corbin (ed.), *Trilogie ismaélienne: textes édites avec traduction française et commentaires* (Teheran, Département d'iranologie de l'Institut franco-iranien, 1961), p. 25

⁵⁰ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 200: "*annahū mushtarakun yaqa'u tahtahu jamī' al-mawjūdāt min al-jawāhir wa al-a'rāḍ maḥsūsan wa ma'qūlan.*"

interpretations of *lā-shay*: (1) an affirmation of something other than that thing” (*ijāb mā-huwa ghayru shay’in*) and (2) a denial of the existence of the thing itself without affirming anything that is not a thing (*min ghayr ijāb mā laysa bi-shay’in*).⁵¹ The first interpretation, which dates back to Aristotle as received in the Islamic philosophical tradition, takes the negative particle *lā* as denoting “otherness”, whereas the second, put in circulation among the Ash‘arites, views it as expressing the negation of existence.

In the first interpretation of the concept of *lā-shay*, it is likely that al-Kirmānī makes direct reference to Aristotle. Even the example he gives of this interpretation, i.e., *lā-insān*, might have been gleaned from Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*. Al-Farabī quotes Aristotle as stating that if the negative particle ‘not’ (Ar. *lā*; Gr. *ouk*) is placed before the predicate noun (e.g., οὐκ ἄνθρωπος and *lā insān* “not-man”), it is neither a phrase (*lafẓat al-ism*) as it consists of two expressions, nor a negation (*sāliba*) as it includes the negative particle (*ḥarf lā*).⁵² This noun Aristotle calls ὄνομα ἄόριστον (indefinite noun), which was rendered into Arabic as *ism ghayr muḥaṣṣal* and such proposition predicating an indefinite noun of something is called *al-qadiyya al-ma’dūla* (reversed proposition).⁵³ Having been literally taken to denote “not-something” or “no-thing,” the expression *lā shay’* designates something *other* than the thing to which the negative particle is affixed. Assuming that this is what al-Nasafī might have meant, al-Kirmānī reexamines his expression “the originator of the no-thing” (*mubdi’ al-lā-shay’*). He even reports

⁵¹ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyād*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 200-201

⁵² Al-Fārābī, *Alfarabi's Commentary on Aristotle's "Peri hermēneias"=(De interpretatione)*, ed. Wilhelm Kutsch & Stanley B Marrow (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1971), p. 32

⁵³ Harry A. Wolfson, *The philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1976), 355-372; Idem., “The Kalam Problem of Nonexistence and Saadia's Second Theory of Creation,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1946):371-391; Idem., “Infinite and Privative Judgments in Aristotle, Averroes, and Kant,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8 (1947), p. 176

that al-Nasafi's defenders would propose that *lā-shay'* (no-thing) indicates an ontological category of spiritual beings transcendent and other than the category of *shay'* and corresponds to physical beings. Based on this interpretation, al-Nasafi might have asserted that God is the originator of spiritual beings. Or, as al-Kirmānī has construed, would his *lā-shay'* indicate God himself as *lā* functions as a transcendent-making particle? I will examine this possibility below.

Al-Kirmānī also examines the second possible meaning of *lā-shay'* that I have mentioned above, namely a denial of the existence of the thing. If by *lā-shay'* the negation of the thing's essence (*nafy 'ayn al-shay'*) is meant, al-Kirmānī's points out, al-Nasafi's expression "God is the originator of no-thing" would be pointless. He finds the root of al-Nasafi's error in his disregard for the theological import of *ibdā'* (origination). God's act of origination needs something as its object so that he would be given the epithet of *mubdi'*. If *lā-shay'* would come to mean a negation of the existence of a thing, how then would God be its originator? "This is impossible," writes al-Kirmānī. Moreover, according to him, the semantic implication of origination (*ibdā'*) entails that only *shay'* as an ontological category is to be taken as its object because to be originated is to be *shay'* and have an essence and reality *in re (wujūd)*.⁵⁴

Another problem regarding al-Nasafi's *lā-shay'* lies in his employment of the negative particle for something other than God. In light of the first interpretation, al-Kirmānī interprets al-Nasafi's following statement again, "God is the originator of beings and nonbeings (*huwa mubdi' al-shay' wa- al-lā-shay'*). He writes,

T7: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 201: "*fa-ina kāna murāduhu ijāba mā huwa ghayru shay'in kāna qawluhu 'inna allāha mubdi'uhu' khaṭun. Idh al-lā-shay' lam-mā kāna huwa mā lā ya 'tūruhu ṣifat al-shay' wa lā yakūnu fī mithl ḥālihi min kawnihi jawharan aw 'araḍan..., fa-kannahu qāla bi-qawlihi: inna allāha mubdi' al-shay' wa al-*

⁵⁴ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 201

lā-shay' innahu mubdi' dhātihi allatī hiya ghayru shay'in wa mubdi' al-shay' alladhī huwa ghayr dhātihi wa dhālika khaṭa'un.

“If what he meant to say by *lā-shay'* is an affirmation of what is other than beings (*shay'*), then his statement “God is the originator of it” would be false. For, since *lā-shay'* is that which no attribute of beings would befall and that in whose state there would not something like being a substance or accident...,” this statement would indicate that he is the originator of his identity (*mubdi' dhātihi*) that is other than beings and the originator of things that are other than his identity. This is false.”⁵⁵

Al-Kirmānī clarifies his own position on the matter and states that the negative particle is used to show God’s transcendence (*tanzīh*) and immaculateness (*taqdīs*) and belongs only to God. In other words, the way of showing God’s transcendence can only be accomplished by attaching the negative particle to ontological categories, e.g., *lā-jawhar* (not-substance) and *lā-'araḍ* (not-accident). Since the affixing of the negative particle to *shay'* would not inform but of God himself, al-Nasafī’s expression *mubdi' al-lā-shay'* would then mean that he is the originator of himself (*mubdi' dhātihi*) which is other than things. Al-Sijistānī’s second formulation also has his share of this critique because it tends to declare God’s transcendence by negating the qualities of the act of origination (*ibdā'*) that he holds to be other than the categories of being (*lā-shāy'*). If one leads al-Kirmānī’s arguments to their results, they may argue that in this case, al-Kirmānī invalidates his second formulation.

In the 10th section of his *al-Riyāḍ*, we have another remarkable fragment of al-Nasafī that is subject to al-Kirmānī’s criticism. From what he states that even the unspeakable is an object of divine origination, one may infer that al-Nasafī sees it possible to attribute the quality of *un-speakability* to anything other than God. Al-Kirmānī analyzes his statement from an apophatic point of view. He quotes al-Nasafī as stating:

⁵⁵ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 201

T8: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 201-202: *wa-ja ‘alnā kulla shay’ in mim mā yaqa ‘u ‘alayh al-qawl wa lā yaqa ‘ ‘alayh al-qawl mubda ‘an ma ‘lūlan bi- al-ḥaqīqa mutanāhiyan*

“Thereby we make all things that are speakable or unspeakable, originated, essentially caused, and finite.”⁵⁶

By the category of the speakable (*mā yaqa ‘u ‘alayh al-qawl*), al-Nasafi may refer to physical beings. It is also possible that by the unspeakable he meant spiritual beings. Al-Kirmānī comments on it as such:

T9: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 204: *Kayfa yaṣīru mā lā yaqa ‘u ‘alayh al-qawl alladhī huwa fī aṣl al-i ‘tiqād annahu huwa allāhu ta ‘ālā alladhī wujida ‘anhu al-mawjūdāt kulluhā mubda ‘an ma ‘lūlan. Inna dhālika khaṭa ‘un.*

“How is it possible that the *unspeakable* (*mā lā yaqa ‘u ‘alayh al-qawl*) would be originated and caused given that it is central to the principles of belief that the *unspeakable* could be only God from which all existential beings are brought into existence? This is indeed wrong.”⁵⁷

He points out that since words, phrases, and letters functioning as instruments in communication are all originated, human language is not capable of expressing the transcendental reality of deity as he deserves. Therefore, al-Kirmānī allots the quality of *unspeakability* specifically to God, and hence stresses that in this case negation belongs only to him so as to express God’s beyondness and transcendence. In this respect, al-Kirmānī’s position here in *al-Riyāḍ* is doubtless at odds with that of al-Sijistānī who grants the act of origination a transcendent status with regard to all categories of beings whether physical or spiritual.

Finally, al-Kirmānī in *al-Riyāḍ* brings criticism to al-Nasafi’s following statement. He disallows the eternal coexistence of beings and nonbeings with God:

⁵⁶ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, pp. 201-202

⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 204

T9: *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 202:3-6: *Fa-idhā qulnā huwa wa lā shay'a ma'ahū, fa-qad nafaynā al-shay' wa al-lā-shay', fa-ṣayyarnā jamī'an mubda'ayn*

“When we say, ‘He [was] and there was not anything with him’ (*huwa wa lā shay'a ma'ahū*), we negate both beings and nonbeing and thus we put them all in the category of the originated.”⁵⁸

As I have discussed in Chapter 4, al-Nasafī might have received the expression *lā shay ma'ahu* (there was not anything with him) either from the hadith collection that began circulating among Muslim theologians of various backgrounds as early as the 9th century, or from Arabic Neoplatonic sources. Al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa l-Niḥal* and *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonius* attribute this apophatic expression to Arabus Empedocles.⁵⁹ Al-Nasafī reads the expression as a categorical negative construction (*lā al-nāfiya lil-jins*). Thus, he denies the accompaniment or co-existence of *shay'*—covering not only what is but also what is not—with the originator in eternity. This would come to mean that all beings and nonbeings should be included within the class of the originated (*mubda'*). However, the major problem al-Kirmānī calls into question here is that the application of the transcendent-making negative particle (*lā*) to *shay'* (thing) would designate the transcendent God, while, on the other hand, al-Nasafī includes

⁵⁸ Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 202:3-6

⁵⁹ Al-Shahrastānī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm, *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Fahmī Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 379-380: “*wa lā anna shay'an kāna ma'ahu; fa-abda'a al-shay'a al-basīṭ alladhī huwa awwal al-basīṭ al-ma'qūl, wa huwa al-'unṣur al-awwal....wa huwa mubdi' al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' al-'aqlī wa al-fikrī wa al-wahmī.*”

Ulrich Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios: ein Beitrag zur Neuplatonischen Überlieferung im Islam* (Stuttgart : Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner Wiesbaden, 1989), pp. 36, 37, 38, p. 36: (7) *fa-huwa huwa wa lā shay'a ma'ahu*; p. 37: (5:3): *wa-lā anna shay'an kāna ma'ahu*; pp.37-38 (4:5-7): *fa-abda'a al-shay' al-basīṭ alladhī huwa awwal al-basīṭ al-ma'qūl wa huwa al-'unṣur al-awwal; thumma kaththara al-ashyā' al-mabsūṭa min dhālika al-mubda' al-basīṭ al-wāḥid al-awwal; thumma kawwana al-murakkabāt min al-mabsūṭāt; wa huwa mubdi' al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' al-'aqlī wa al-fikrī wa al-wahmī*; p. 38 (5:14-15): *fa lammā šāra hādhā hākadhā lam yajuz lil-mantiq an yašifa al-bārī jalla wa 'alā illā šifatan wāḥidatan faqat wa-dhālika an yaqūla innahu huwa wa lā shay'a min hādhīhi al-'awālim murakkabun wa lā-basīṭun* (15) *fa-idhā qāla huwa wa lā-shay'a fa-qad nafā al-shay' wa al-lā-shay' wa-ṣayyarahumā mubda'ayni wa nafā kulla šūratin basītatīn aw murakkabatīn ma'a al-huwiyya wa-ṣayyara kulla shay'in mubda'an wa-huwa 'illatun faqat.*

the same expression *lā-shay'* under the category of the originated. This would not be acceptable to him.

In the tenth chapter of *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, al-Kirmānī basically proposes that al-Nasafī's concept of *lā-shay'* could have no room within the Neoplatonic-Ismaili hierarchy of being, let alone included in the category of the originated. al-Nasafī's *lā-shay'* faces three fundamental problems:

1. The concept of *lā-shay'* as defined by al-Nasafī would mean the impossible (*al-muḥāl*), which is why it cannot be an object of God's origination. As discussed above, al-Nasafī elaborates on the concept with the expression "whether they be objects of the Intellect (*'aqlī*), imaginary (*wahmī*), intelligible (*fikrī*), or logical (*manṭiqī*)." Al-Kirmānī interprets this sentence as amounting to saying the impossible.
2. *Lā-shay'* would ruin the Neoplatonic hierarchical system of being in all three possible cases, namely the origination of *lā-shay'* before the Intellect, or after it, or simultaneously together with it.
3. It is theologically impossible to employ the transcendent-making negative particle *lā* for anything other than God. As al-Kirmānī has discussed in **T7**, *lā-shay'* would not designate but God himself as he is beyond all categories of being—either it be physical or spiritual. He uses the phrase *ghayr shay'* interchangeably with *lā-shay'*.⁶⁰ The other case

⁶⁰Al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*, eds. Hunzai and Landolt, p. 213:10-12; Especially when he discusses the impossibility of an ontological separation of the word (*kalima*, cf. the act of origination and the command) from the intellect, he once explains the expression *ghayr shay'* as designating a transcendent God, beyond all attributes by which only the categories of things can be characterized.

in which al-Kirmānī finds fault with al-Nasafī’s apophatic language can be observed in **T9**. He argues that the quality of unspeakability belongs only to God.

The last critique is worth further discussion. Throughout the tenth chapter of *al-Riyāḍ*, al-Kirmānī targets not only al-Nasafī but also al-Sijistānī over his criticism of the former. In fact, we do find any expression supporting al-Sijistānī’s two-fold negation according to which not only God but also the act of origination (**Formulation II**) and spiritual beings (**Formulation I**) would be defined in meontological terms.⁶¹ It is likely that al-Sijistānī’s perspective has already been informed by al-Nasafī’s concept of *lā-shay* apparently corresponding to one-fold negation, though its depiction as a direct object of divine origination may be exposed to a metaphysical problem that al-Kirmānī has rightly expressed. By treating *lā-shay*’ (non-being) as equivalent of God (**T7**), al-Kirmānī seems to disprove of al-Sijistānī’s second formula (e.g., Neither is he being, nor he is non-being (*lā-huwa*) because *lā-huwa* on the second part would be equal to saying that “nor he is himself.” If we lead his remarks in **T9** to their conclusion, one might be tempted to claim that al-Kirmānī even declares **Formulation I** invalid as well because in this case, he allots the quality of *un*-speakability and being *un*-qualified to God.

Indeed, al-Kirmānī’s position in *al-Riyāḍ* is incompatible with that of al-Sijistānī, specifically when he insistently reiterates that transcendent-making negative words (e.g., *lā*, *ghayr*; cf. *alpha-privative*) belong only to God. Since even the Intellect is included within the categories of being, no negation would deserve it. Moreover, his approach here in this work also seems to contradict the one in his most comprehensive work *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*. With regard to double negation, he remains far more loyal to al-Sijistānī in his *Rāḥat* than in his *al-Riyāḍ*, which

⁶¹ See n.9

will be discussed below. In the Second Enclosure (*al-sūr al-thānī*), al-Kirmānī lays emphasis on apophatic patterns by describing God in negative terms. The unspeakability and incomprehensibility of God is stressed; even the Intellect cannot comprehend or sense his essence.⁶² He denies God's corporality and attributes.⁶³ God is beyond two basic ontological categories of being: *jawhar* (substance) and *'araḍ* (accident).⁶⁴ In the fourth and fifth sections of the chapter, al-Kirmānī maintains that God has neither form (*ṣūra*) and matter (*mādda*) nor opponent/opposite (*didd*) and equivalent (*mithl*).⁶⁵ Thus, he strips God of all logical and philosophical categories in line with al-Sijistānī.

In the seventh section, al-Kirmānī pays special significance to the theological superiority of apophasis (*ṭarīq al-nafy*) over kataphasis (*ṭarīq al-ithbāt*). He argues that the profession of the unity of God through affirmation of attributes only leads towards anthropomorphism (*tahsbīh*), comparison of God with creatures (*tamthīl*), and setting limits on God (*taḥdīd*).⁶⁶ The only way to escape from these problems would rather be to have recourse to the *via negativa*, which consists in stripping all determinations and predicates of the transcendent God. It is only through negation that one could show his unique oneness. He writes:

T10: *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148:6-9: *innanā idhā qulnā 'ind al-ithbāt min ṭarīq al-nafy huwa lā hādhā wa lā hādhā wa lā hādhā wa lā hādhā, wa kāna kullu hādhā alladhī nafaynāhu mimmā huwa mawjūdun fī al-khilqa, fa-qad thabata bihi mā lam ta'ti al-ṣifa 'alayh, wa bāyana jamī' al-mawjūdāt bi-mā nafaynā an yakūna huwa ta'ālā.*

⁶² See al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 144-146; pp. 135-138

⁶³ *Idem*, p. 135-138

⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 131-132

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 139-143

⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 147-148

“If we say, in affirming God in a negative way, that he is not this, nor this, nor this, nor this considering that each ‘this’ that we refer to and which we deny of him is present in creation, it will be established that he is transcendent (*huwa ta‘ālā*) insofar as no attribute applies to him and he is distinct from all existents in terms of all we negate of him.”⁶⁷

In this specific context, he enters into polemic with intellectuals of his time (*muta‘aqqilūn*), and wishes to advocate the merits of apophasis against them. He responds to their accusation of a form of atheism (*ta‘tīl*), which, De Smet defines, “*vide Dieu de tout contenu positif pour en faire une notion abstraite*” (which empties God of all positive content to make it an abstract notion).⁶⁸ In al-Kirmānī’s opinion, *ta‘tīl* is a denial of God’s transcendent being (*huwa al-nafy nahw al-huwiyya al-muta‘āliya*) rather than a denial of attributes. He states that without adding the excluded part of the profession of Islam (*illā huwa*), *ta‘tīl* would mean either *lā huwa* (there is no he) or *lā ilāh* (there is no god). The *via negativa* through use of the negative particle (*ḥarf lā*), his argument continues, aims at attributes without denying his transcendent being (*fa-ammā ḥarfū lā fa-yatawajjahu fi‘luhu nahwa al-ṣifāt li-nafyihā min dūn al-huwiyya subḥānahu*).⁶⁹ As a result, al-Kirmānī maintains that all we negate of God is attributes not his transcendent being (*huwiyya*). Would al-Sijistānī’s uncompromising negation of God’s *huwiyya* designate any sort of atheism?

Al-Kirmānī’s comments on the function of the negative particle (*ḥarf lā*) in *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* is in parallel with the one in *Riyāḍ*. In both works he argues that only God would deserve it. This particle can be compared to the Greek *alpha-στερητικόν*, which was often employed in

⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 148:6-9

⁶⁸ D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l’intellect*, p. 76

⁶⁹ al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148

Neoplatonic-Christian negative theology to express the absence or lack of a certain quality.⁷⁰

Accordingly, al-Kirmānī establishes that the negative particle plays the role of negating of God both attributes (*ṣifāt*) and existential beings qualified by attributes (*mawṣūfāt*) that are not due him, thereby showing the absence of these attributes in him.⁷¹ This would also mean nothing other than affirming something that is beyond being qualified by attributes (*fā-huwa ṯābun limā huwa ghayru mawṣūf*), which is God's *huwiyya* (being).

In the 7th section of the second chapter of his *Rāḥat*, Al-Kirmānī devotes a single comment to the doctrine of double negation on which he remains silent in his *Riyāḍ* and even inexplicitly criticizes. He writes,

T11: *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148: *Fa al-ṣifāt hiya al-mu‘aṭṭala al-manfiyya lā huwiyya subḥānahu. Wa dhālika mithlu qawlinā fī allāh subḥānahu awwalan bi-“annahū lā mawṣūfun” alladhī šara fī ‘lu “ḥarf lā” muwajjahan naḥw al-ṣifāt wa al-mawṣūfāt min al-ajsām li-nafyihā ‘anh [huwa] subḥānahu al-mushāru ilayh bi-qawlinā “innahū”; wa al-mushār ilayh thābitun wa al-ṣifāt hiya al-mu‘aṭṭala al-manfiyya. wa mithlu qawlinā thāniyan bi-“annahū ta ‘ālā wa lā huwa wa lā-mawṣūfun” al-jārī majrā qawlinā al-awwal fī al-nafy ‘an al-huwiyya al-muta ‘āliya subḥānahā mā huwa ghayr al-manfi awwalan bi-qawlinā “lā mawṣūfun”*

“It is not *huwiyya* (identity), but only attributes that are stripped and negated of God the most high (*al-mu‘aṭṭala al-manfiyya*). This is like our asserting of God, first, that he is *not* qualified (*lā mawṣūf*). The particle *lā* in this expression aims at attributes and corporeal beings qualified by them so as to negate them of the one referred to as *innahu* (that he *is*). The one pointed to by *hu* (e.g., God) is certain (*thābit*), but attributes are deprived and negated of him. This is also like our predicating of him that he is *not* non-qualified (*wa-lā huwa lā-mawṣūf*), which functions the same as the first in terms of negating of God's transcendent *huwiyya* (identity) that which has not been negated by the first expression non-qualified (*lā-mawṣūf*)”⁷²

⁷⁰ Daniel Jugrin, *Negation and Knowledge of God: Neoplatonism and Christianity* (Beau Bassin : Scholars Press, 2017), p. 49

⁷¹ al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 149-150; 157

⁷² al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148

Al-Kirmānī's formulation of double negation, e.g., *huwa lā mawṣūf wa lā huwa lā-mawṣūf* (He is neither qualified nor non-qualified) is in tune with al-Sijistānī's second formulation. With the first negation, e.g., *not* qualified, God is placed beyond all physical beings and their attributes. Accordingly, he further emphasizes that the first negation must be supported by a second negation, i.e., *not* not-qualified. This second negation serves to strip of God the qualities of spiritual beings like the Intellect. Thus, al-Kirmānī firmly puts them within meontological categories by delineating them as being beyond being qualified by bodies and their attributes. His description of spiritual beings in meontological-negative terms here in *Rāḥat al-'Aql* is obviously in conflict with his polemical perspective in *Riyāḍ*, where he blames al-Nasafī for ascribing the quality of unspeakability and being qualified to something other than God. As I will discuss more below, al-Kirmānī further differs from al-Sijistānī as regards the use of *huwiyya* for God.

In sum, al-Kirmānī, in general, pursues al-Sijistānī's framework of apophasis. Primarily, he turns to such negative expressions like *lā* and *ghayr* as a kind of apophatic linguistic strategy. Here and there, he uses them in order to deprive God of attributes and existential beings, thereby intending to declare his transcendence and otherness. Since, in *al-Riyāḍ*, he takes *lā-shay'* as equal to stating God, he indirectly refuses to admit al-Sijistānī's second formulation in which *lā'-shay'* would correspond to the act of origination. Particularly here in *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, he proceeds along al-Sijistānī's hierarchical system of negation called double negation (**Formulation I**). He stipulates the use of a two-fold negation as an ideal form of *tawḥīd* (the unity of God). God is beyond both qualities of physical and spiritual beings. He describes spiritual beings in meontological/negative terms in *Rāḥat*, and therefore, he tends to attribute a negative particle to them as an indication of their transcendence and beyondness with regard to physical beings. But,

this is clearly discordant with his perspective in *al-Riyād*, where he criticizes al-Nasafī for attributing the quality of unspeakability and being non-qualified to something other than God. With his polemical comments in *al-Riyād* (especially T9), al-Kirmānī seems to have abandoned his early position in *Rāḥat al-‘Aql* where he points out that the negative particle is applicable to express not only God’s transcendence but also that of spiritual beings.

One last controversy between al-Kirmānī and al-Sijistānī lies in the question of whether the notion of *huwiyya* could be kataphatically attributed to God. Affirmed of God in the profession of Islam, *lā ilāha illā huwa* (There is no god but he), *huwiyya* designates the being or identity of God. As discussed in Chapter 5, al-Sijistānī argues in *al-Yanābi‘* that God (i.e., the Originator) has no *huwiyya*. It seems that on his below assumption, al-Kirmānī enters in polemic with him. He writes:

T12: *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 151-152: *Fa-naqūlu: inna l-wujūd min al-ṣifāt, wa-l-qā’ilu bi-anna l-muta‘ālī subḥānahu yastahiqqu an yūṣafa bihi ḥaḥiqatan mūjibun bi-qawlihi inna lahu subḥānahu wujūd al-dhāt al-muta‘āliya subḥānallāh ta‘ālā allatī tūṣafu bil-wujūd awwalan, wa-ḥādhihi al-ṣifa allatī hiya al-wujūdu thāniyan.*

“We say that existence is one of the attributes. As for someone who asserts that the transcendent God is really entitled to being qualified by it, he confirms by this assertion that God’s transcendent identity has existence. His identity would be qualified by existence *ab aeterno* (*awwalan*) and by this attribute [of existence] after creation [*thāniyan*].”⁷³

Here in this quote, al-Kirmānī makes an apparent distinction between two senses of being: (1) being as an attribute and (2) being as an indication of the presence of a reality. He rejects the first sense; God in fact transcends the attribute of being. But nevertheless, he gives support to the kataphatic expression of God by affirming the existence of God in reference to his identity. In

⁷³ al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-‘Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, pp. 151-152

this passage, his major concern was, it seems to me, to rescue from accusations of *ta 'īl* towards the Ismailis (a form of atheism) that he articulates in the same context. Other Muslim sects like Zaydis and Sunnis also attacked the Ismaili account of double negation for emptying God of all positive content to the extent of holding some sort of atheism (*ibtāl/ta 'īl*). Al-Kirmānī reformulates the al-Sijistānīan doctrine of double negation as such: “It is not *huwiyya* (being), but only attributes that are stripped and negated of God” (*fa-al-ṣifāt hiya al-mu'aṭṭala al-manfiyya lā al-huwiyya subḥānahu*).⁷⁴ Al-Kirmānī’s perspective goes in line with ancient Greek philosophers as well, who are quoted in Graeco-Arabicum works to have stated, “There was not anything in eternity but only his being” (V.1, Empedocles: *Lam tazal huwiyyatuhu faqaṭ*; XII.36-37, Socrates: *bal innamā hunāka huwiyyatun faqaṭ/bal hiya huwiyyatun faqaṭ*) and “He was he and there was not anything with him” (IV:6, Xenophanes: *fa-huwa huwa wa-lā shay'a ma'ahu*).⁷⁵

6.4. Conclusion to the chapter

In this chapter, I argued that in *al-Riyād*, al-Kirmānī revises and develops his previous position in *Rāḥat al-'Aql*. In the latter, he evidently espouses al-Sijistānī’s first formulation of double negation. Accordingly, he defends the use of negative particles for spiritual beings in addition to God. As such, he argues for the transcendence of God as well as spiritual beings. But in *al-Riyād*, al-Kirmānī remains silent about double negation. In an intra-textual setting, where

⁷⁴ al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, ed. M. Ghālib, p. 148

⁷⁵ Rudolph, ed. *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios*, pp. 36-37; 48. See also al-Shahrazūrī, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, *Tārīkh al-Ḥukamā'* ed. Shuwayrib, pp. 83-84 (reference to Empedocles): “*fa-laysa lil-mantiq idhan an yaṣifa al-bārī ta'ālā illā ṣifatan wāḥidatan wa-dhālika annahū huwa wa lā shay'a min hādhihi al-'awālimi*.” Also, al-Qiftī, *Tārīkh al-Ḥukamā'*, ed. Julius Lippert (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1903), p. 16

he attacks al-Nasafi's description of non-being (*lā-shay'*) as an object of divine origination, al-Kirmānī holds that the negated form of *shay'*, that is, *lā-shay'*, would indicate nothing other than the negation of all existential beings, which, from his apophatic point of view, would be equal to confirming God himself. In **T7**, where he argues that *lā-shay'* would not designate but God himself, he invalidates al-Sijistānī's second formulation of double negation.⁷⁶ But in **T9**, he nullifies the second formulation because he allocates the quality of *un*-speakability and being *un*-qualified to God alone, thereby excluding spiritual beings from the sphere of transcendence. I further sought to bring up al-Kirmānī's justification of the ascription of *huwiyya* to God. Unlike al-Sijistānī, who proposes that God has no *huwiyya*, al-Kirmānī deems it appropriate to employ the concept of *huwiyya* for God in the sense of "being" as a sign of the presence of a reality, not in the sense of "being" as an attribute. With this shift in the apophatic structure of the Ismaili doctrine, he might have aimed to avoid accusations of atheism (*ta'fīl*) directed by the Sunnis and Zaydis towards the Ismailis. He stresses that it is not *huwiyya* (being), but only attributes, that are stripped and negated of God (*fa-al-ṣifāt hiya al-mu'aṭṭala al-manfiyya, lā al-huwiyya subḥānahu*). In this regard, al-Kirmānī's viewpoint is in rapport with the opinions of pseudo-pre-Socratic philosophers as presented in the Arabic Pseudo-Ammonius.

⁷⁶ See n.9

CONCLUSION TO PART II

In this part, I discussed the meontological account of God developed by the Ismaili authors of the 10th century Fatimid period, namely al-Nasafī (d. 943), al-Sijistānī (d. 971) and al-Kirmānī (d. 1021). They constructed their perspective through frequent resort to such ontological and linguistic categories as being, nonbeing and negation. Especially after al-Nasafī borrowed these categories from Neoplatonic apophatic tradition of late antiquity, the Ismailis began to speak of God in meontological terms. Al-Nasafī presented an argument in favor of double negation by stripping of God not only category of being but also category of nonbeing. But, as I have argued in Chapter 4, his attempt to develop double negation failed because his view of God (*mubdi'*) as the originator of these two distinct categories ruins the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being. It is precisely at odds with the principle that from one only one proceeds. Al-Sijistānī was the first Ismaili author to develop the doctrine of double negation in its full scope. The *via negativa* he suggested is expressed in the form “God is not **X** and not **non-X**,” with **X** and **non-X** corresponding to two categories of reality. One important finding of Chapter 5 is that he offers two distinct formulations. In **Formulation I**, he intends to deprive of God not only physical beings (**X**), but also spiritual beings whether the Intellect or the Soul (**non-X**). This version of double negation is shaped by his resort to descriptive categories. So, God is neither qualified (*mawṣūf*), limited (*maḥdūd*), and visible (*mar'ī*), as is the case with physical beings, nor non-qualified (*ghayr mawṣūf*), non-limited (*ghayr maḥdūd*), and non-visible (*ghayr mar'ī*), as is the case with spiritual beings. There is another form of double negation. Since al-Sijistānī proposes the idea of the act of origination (*ibdā'*) as an intermediary principle between God and the Intellect, he aims to strip God of it as well. So, what **Formulation II** offers is that God transcends not only categories of being whether physical or spiritual (**X**), but also the act of

origination (**non-X**) of a *non*-existential character. In his philosophy, the act of origination is transcendent above and other than all categories of being including the Intellect and the Soul. Therefore, al-Sijistānī defines it in meontological terms and stresses that God should be negated even of the act of origination. In his expression of this second formulation, he always has recourse to such me/ontological categories like *huwiyya* vs. *lā-huwiyya* and *shay'iyya* vs. *lā-shay'iyya*.

Another crucial Ismaili author was al-Kirmānī. In *Rāḥat al-'Aql*, he embraced the first formulation of al-Sijistānī's double negation. But the subtle changes he made to the Neoplatonic-Ismaili hierarchy of being did not allow him to accept al-Sijistānī's second formulation. Al-Kirmānī refused to admit the intermediary role of the act of origination. He argued that the act of origination and the Intellect are indeed two different names of one and the same reality. His polemical arguments in *al-Riyāḍ* further led him to invalidate the first formulation as well. In **T9** (Chapter 6), he allocated the quality of *un*-speakability and being *un*-qualified to God alone, which would amount to denying the transcendence of spiritual beings. In a more polemical context in which the Ismailis faced frequent accusations of atheism (*ta'īl*), al-Kirmānī felt forced to find way to a kataphatic path of knowing God. He favored the employment of *huwiyya*, though he adds it have only a metaphorical import and do not constitute an essential aspect of the divine essence. In this respect, he precisely diverges from al-Sijistānī who holds that God does not even have *huwiyya*. Al-Kirmānī makes an evident distinction between two senses of being (*huwiyya*): (1) being as an attribute and (2) being as an indication of the presence of a reality. He confirms the second. But he refuses to accept the first; God indeed transcends the attribute of being. He states that “it is not *huwiyya* (being), but only attributes that are stripped and negated of God” (*fa-al-ṣifāt hiya al-mu'aṭṭala al-manfiyya lā al-huwiyya subḥānahu*).

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the doctrine of double negation lies in the hierarchical structure of double negation. What is higher up in the hierarchical system of being has a more meontological-negational strength: the more intense degree of nonbeing or negation a thing has, the higher, the more perfect, and the more certain it is. So then, the negated is ontologically higher and more effective than the non-negated, and likewise, the double-negated is higher than the one-fold negated. Thus, double negation exhibits a sort of hierarchical system with three fundamental divisions: the non-negated (physical beings), the one-fold negated (the act of origination or spiritual beings), and the twofold-negated (the originator). This being the case, this meontological hierarchy of being is in conflict with the ontotheological system of being that flourished in medieval Islam. According to the latter, the more intense a being is, the higher and the more perfect it is.

This chapter has made three fundamental points concerning the Ismaili *via negativa*. **First**, our authors sought to reconstruct the doctrine through frequent reference to such me/ontological concepts like *huwiyya* vs. *lā-huwiyya*, *shay'* vs. *lā-shay'*, *ays* vs. *lā-ays/lays*, *aysiyya* vs. *laysiyya*, *huwa* vs. *lā-huwa*, and *mawjūd/ma'dūm*, which they borrowed from the Islamic philosophical-theological tradition. For this reason, I explored in some detail the crucial role of these concepts in their formulation of the doctrine. **Second**, as it has generally been assumed, these authors are not uniform in their approach to apophasis. I provided an extensive critical discussion of each author's position. To them we can further add Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934), who wrote *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ* for the correction of al-Nasafī's views. He also offers a distinctive form of double negation in his attempt to deny divine attributes of God. His apophatic expression follows almost the same syntactic pattern of "*lā...wa lā*" (neither...nor; The Originator is not X and is not non-X), thereby negating of God both the attributes of spiritual

beings (e.g., intellect and soul) and those of all other beings (*aysiyyāt*). In form his apophatic statement resembles al-Sijistānī’s **Formulation I**, on the predicate side of which he puts spiritual vs. physical beings. One major difference between his perspective and that of al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmanī (esp. *Rāḥat al’Aql*) is that he speaks of spiritual beings in a kataphatic way, while the other two hold an apophatic mode of speaking about them. Al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī take spiritual beings as a negated category of being with regard to *non*-negated physical beings, thus showing their transcendence and otherness. But unlike them, al-Rāzī places spiritual beings into the *non*-negated category of being by qualifying the intellect as perfection (*tamām*) and the soul as perfect (*tāmm*).¹ As a result, he does not follow the hierarchical structure of double negation as we have seen in al-Sijistānī.

Finally, I attempted to show the role negation (*nafy*) plays in the Ismaili doctrine of *tawḥīd*. Numerous studies have so far been carried out in search for some association between Ismaili faith and Neoplatonism. But their focus was largely restricted to determining Neoplatonic ontological categories that were handed down to the Ismaili community—such as hierarchy of principles (the One, Nous, and Psyche). It is certain however that we have a missing piece of the puzzle to comprehend the Ismaili apophatic language properly, which is the logico-linguistic structure of apophatic statements expressed in their original language, that is, the Greek

¹ Al-Rāzī’s apophatic idiom is “we can **neither** say that It [the originator] is perfect, **nor** that he is **not**-perfect, **nor** that the originator is perfection, **nor** that he is **not**-perfection (*fa-lā naqūlu innahū tāmm, wa lā innahu tamām; wa lā innahu lā-tamām wa lā innahū lā-tāmm*). He makes a clear distinction between the concepts of perfection (*tamām*) and perfect (*tāmm*). He associates perfection with the intellect, which he sporadically calls *al-awwal* (the First) and *al-mubda’ al-awwal* (the First Originated Being). It is united with the act of origination (*ibdā’*), which is also perfection. Al-Rāzī relates perfect, a lower level of perfection in the active participle form, with the Soul, which he entitles *al-thānī* (the Second) or *al-munba’ith* (the Emanated). Thus, according to him, the Originator transcends not only the intellect, which is linked with the concept of perfection, and all beings other than the intellect, which is taken as im-perfection. But It is also beyond the soul, which is perfect, and all beings other than the soul, which is im-perfect. See Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ*. eds. Ḥasan Manūchihr and Mahdī Muḥaqqiq (Tehran: Mu’assasa-i Muṭāla’āt-i Islāmī-yi Dāneshgāh-i Tehran/McGill University, 1383/2004), p. 36-37

language. Inspired by modern studies on Neoplatonic Greek apophasis, I paid attention to the function of negation in the Ismaili double negation.

The adversaries of the Ismailis criticize them from a linguistic point of view. The Zaydī al-Mu'ayyad Billāh states:

[2] On account of their ignorance and excessive foolishness they do not actually know what experts in language (*ahl al-lisān*) hold, namely that the negation of negation would entail affirmation (*nafy al-nafy yaqtadī al-ithbāt*)...²

It is due to its divergence from the logico-linguistic rules of the conventional Arabic language that al-Mu'ayyad Billāh finds the Ismaili double negative theology problematic and invalid. He claims that even if from a linguistic perspective someone explores the semantic structure of double negation, s/he would consider it nonsense and contradictory as its first part designates negation and its second part, e.g., negation of negation, indicates affirmation. He concludes that the Ismailis' real intention would not be but to hold a denial of God as existent (*ta'ṭīl, mu'aṭṭila*). Similar lines of criticism as expressed in [2] are also carried on by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), founded upon the logical argument that the negation of two contradictory statements (*salb al-naqīdayn*), that is, the simultaneous negation of being and nonbeing, is like what Aristotle describes as impossible, the conjunction of two contradictories (*jam' al-naqīdayn*).³ These traditions, namely the Zaydites and Ibn Taymiyya and his followers, analyze and castigate the Ismaili doctrine of double negation based on Aristotle's ontological and

² Eva-Maria Lika, *Proofs of Prophecy and the Refutation of the Ismā'īliyya: the Kitāb Ithbāt Nubuwwat al-Nabī by the Zaydī al-Mu'ayyad bi-Ilāh al-Hārūnī* (d. 411/1020), pp. 2:16-3:3 (Arabic)

³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah*, eds. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim al-Āṣimī al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī and his son Muḥammad ([al-Riyād]: Maṭābi' al-Riyād, 1961 or 1962-1966 or 1967), Vol. 3, pp. 7-8; Al-Dhahabī, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Uthmān, *Kitāb al-'Arsh*, ed. Muḥammad ibn Khalīfa al-Tamīmī (Madina: al-Jāmi'at al-Islāmiyya, 2003), vol.1, pp. 87-88

logical categories as well as the philosophical-theological assumptions *ahl al-lisān* (experts in Arabic language) made about negation of . By thinking it is a deviation from linguistic norms, the adversaries of double negation seem to have either shown unawareness of Neoplatonic apophatic patterns or ignored them. Indeed, the negative method by which the Ismaili writers formulate their account of *tanzīh* (transcendence), i.e., God is neither thus or no-thus, is intimately associated with the apophatic tradition of Greek philosophy.

The Ismailis frequently highlighted the inadequacy of all logical and linguistic categories to comprehend and express God. Thus, they associate “God’s *not-Being* thus and no-thus” with his incomprehensibility and unspeakability. They might not be aware of how the close link between reality, language, and thought provided the framework for their understanding of negative phrases as ontic and epistemic processes. But the way they express their apophatic statements is totally congruent with the logico-linguistic structure of the Greek apophatic statements. As Mortley has argued, the relation in question was familiar to Greek philosophers since Parmenides:

“...Parmenides does perceive the difficulties for predication involved in the idea of not-Being. This undoubtedly lies behind Plato’s remarks about the unspeakability of not-Being in the *Sophist*, since Being is thought to be that which sustains language, or that which is somehow its medium. Not-Being, on this model, fails to engender language. It is impossible that language should embrace not-Being, spring from it.”⁴

Parmenides was the first Greek philosopher to take notice of how the structure of reality as expressed by the logic of predication correlates with language and thought. He states:

οὔτε γὰρ ἄν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδν...οὔτε φράσαις (Fragment 2.7)

⁴ Mortley, *From Word to Silence, 1: The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Bonn : Hanstein, 1986) p. 126

For neither could you know what truly is not,
Nor could you declare it.

Thus, not-Being, according to Parmenides, does not pave the way for utterance and knowledge. Mortley stresses that apophatic discourse since its emergence is founded upon this logico-linguistic structure of the Greek language. As Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873) has informed, Galen's *Compendia* was translated and known in Arabic. It is likely that the Ismaili writers were aware of Parmenidean apophatic language via this path.⁵ With regard to double negation, De Smet also draws attention to the striking parallels between the Ismaili writers and Proclus in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*.⁶

⁵ Dimitri Gutas, "Platon. Tradition arabe," In *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, ed. Richard Goulet (Paris : Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1989-2012), Vol. Va, pp. 851 and 854. For a discussion of al-Fārābī's familiarity with Parmenides, see Damien Janos, "Al-Fārābī's (d. 950) *On the One and Oneness*: Some Preliminary Remarks on Its Structure, Contents, and Theological Implications," in *The Oxford handbook of Islamic philosophy*, eds. Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 103-110 and Rosabel Pauline Ansari, "The Ambiguity of 'Being' in Arabic and Islamic Philosophy" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2020), pp. 210-245

⁶ D. De Smet, *La quiétude de l'intellect néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l'oeuvre de Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe-XIe s.)* (Leuven : Uitgeverij Peeters en Departement Oosterse Studies, 1995), p. 80-81

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