

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent

## From Aristotle's *Ousia* to Ibn Sina's *Jawhar*

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There is a shift in the meaning of *substance* from *ousia* in Aristotle to *jawhar* in Ibn Sina. This change of meaning is not just something linguistic. It is due to two different views concerning substance in two different worlds, i.e., the Greek and the Muslim worlds.

The Greek Aristotelian world is a world of *ousias* that are actually existent. For Aristotle, to be is to be existent. But the Qur'anic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* led Farabi, and Ibn Sina following him, to interpret Aristotle's prime mover as God, the Creator and Necessary Being, in relation to which other beings were interpreted as contingent beings. Thus the famous thesis of the distinction of essence and existence appeared in a definite form in Farabi and was elaborated in detail in Ibn Sina.

Based on this view, unprecedented philosophical ideas appeared among the Muslim Aristotelian philosophers. The dichotomy of essence and existence in each *jawhar* led Ibn Rushd to conclude (wrongly) that in Ibn Sina's view existence is an accident added to essence in the way an ordinary accident like whiteness qualifies a substance.

Ibn Rushd's understanding of Ibn Sina's thesis is a misunderstanding that influenced the medieval philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, and modern philosophers, such as Descartes and Kant, as well. This paper deals with the origin and the later development of this thesis and its developed articulation by Ibn Sina.

The true Aristotelian name for being is substance (*ousia*). Aristotle has reduced the question of what being is to what substance (*ousia*) is. His own words are clear enough. In his *Metaphysics*, he says: "And indeed the question which both now and of old, has always been raised and always been the subject of doubt, viz. what being is, is just the question, what is substance (*ousia*)".<sup>1</sup> The word *ousia* is derived from the Greek verb *einai* meaning "to be". Although there is a difference between *ousia* and being,

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle 1984, Vol. 2, 1624

Aristotle's *ousia* has kept its linguistical and ontological relation with the notion of Being.

When we enter into the Islamic Aristotelian world, things completely differ. The term coined in Islamic philosophy as an equivalent for Greek *ousia* is *jawhar*. *Jawhar* is originally a Persian word, pronounced *gawhar*, meaning a precious thing. As it appears from its original meaning, the word *jawhar*, contrary to *ousia*, has no relation with Arabic word *wujud* and Persian word *hasti*, both meaning being, or existence. Farabi who uses this term for Aristotle's *ousia* explains why this meaning of the term does not appear in Greek.<sup>2</sup> He explicitly distinguishes between a substance (*jawhar*) and an existent (*mawjud*).

Following Farabi, Ibn Sina's usage of this term is based on a clear separation of *jawhar* (substance) from being, essence and existence, a separation associated with his explicit formula of the distinction between essence and existence as we see it later.

In his analysis of substance, Ibn Sina makes a distinction between first substance, i.e., a particular, second substance, i.e., a species, and third substance, i.e., a genus. In this division, *jawhar* is primarily regarded as first substance, and is one of the ten categories. It could, however, never be held as the first and true instance of being qua being in the way Aristotle thought it to be, because being qua being in Ibn Sina is a general idea that covers the concept of all categories including substance.

Thus the primary meaning of substance in Ibn Sina is "the subject (*hypokeimenon*) of accidents which contains its own reason," the individual subject of predication. Every actual subject is a substance because it can be regarded as standing under (in Latin *sub* means under and *stare*, to stand) accidents.

In his *Categories*, Aristotle regards substance as the first category of the ten categories. Finding a connection between Aristotle's metaphysical definition of substance (*ousia*) and his logical definition (*hypokeimenon*) is not easy. This difficulty increases to such an extent that some of his commentators believe that there are disagreements about the concept of substance in Aristotle's works.

When we turn to Ibn Sina, the doctrine becomes more specific. Ibn Sina clearly asserts that the study of the categories belongs to logic. As a result the concept of substance as the first category is basically discussed in his logic.

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<sup>2</sup> Alfarabi 1986, 97-105.

As we have seen, the ontology of Aristotle is in fact an *ousiology* based on the meaning of being as *ousia*. In contrast to this, Ibn Sina's ontology is based on his idea of the distinction between essence and existence, which has influenced all his metaphysical thought.

The second part of this paper deals with this important subject, especially its effect on the concept of substance and accident.

The distinction between essence and existence is undoubtedly one of the most basic philosophical principles in Islamic Philosophy. Through Islamic philosophy, it has even affected the history of Western philosophy in the period of Scholasticism and its influence can still be seen in modern philosophy.

Although Farabi was the first philosopher to introduce this distinction to Islamic philosophy in a definite form, in the course of Western philosophy it usually has been attributed to Avicenna. Historically speaking, the idea can be traced back to Aristotle. In some of his works, Aristotle makes a distinction between "what a thing is" and "that it is". For example, in his *Posterior Analytics*, he says: "But what a man is and that a man is are different."<sup>3</sup> More pointedly, we see this fact in the same work when he says: "The things we seek are equal in number to those we understand. We seek four things: the fact [that it is], the reason why, if it is, what it is."<sup>4</sup> In clarifying the last two things, he says: "And [after] knowing that it is, we seek what it is."<sup>5</sup> However, this distinction for Aristotle is a logical one, not an ontological distinction.

The Greek Aristotelian world does not allow this idea to enter into it as an ontological distinction. It was a world of *ousias* that were actually existent. It is not a world of which it is possible to think that a substance might not exist. For Aristotle, to be is to be existent. In such a metaphysical system there is no place for the distinction of essence and existence, for essences that do not exist are from the beginning excluded. This is why in Greek literature including Aristotle's writings there is nothing to express an opposition of essence to existence.

In a passage of the fourth book of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle himself expressly states that in substance (*ousia*), essence, existence and unity are completely unified with one another. He says: "One man and a man is the same thing and an existent man and a man are the same thing."<sup>6</sup> Aristotle

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle 1984, Vol. 1, 152.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle 1984, Vol. 2, 1003.

indicates that when he speaks of the identification of these three, he does not mean the identification at the conceptual level. They are different at the conceptual level. He is concerned with real unity of them.

This conception of beings left no room for Muslim Aristotelians with their Qur'anic doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*; so, led by Farabi, and Ibn Sina following him, they interpreted Aristotle's prime mover as God, the Creator.

In his opus magnum, *Shifa*, Ibn Sina distinguishes between two kinds of agents: (1) agent according to the metaphysicians or divine philosophers, and (2) agent according to naturalists or the natural philosophers. The first group, by whom he means philosophers such as Aristotle and himself, believe that the agent is not only the source and origin of change and movement but also the origin of existence and the bestower of it by way of bringing a thing out from non-existence to existence. Ibn Sina says that contrary to the first group, the second group, i.e., the natural philosophers, by whom he mostly meant early Greek philosophers, believe that an agent is only the bestower of movement and not existence. An agent is that which sets in motion what already exists from one state to another.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the important distinction Ibn Sina makes between these two kinds of agents, he puts Aristotle in the first group and as a result interprets the prime mover of Aristotle as the creating God, the bestower of existence and the Necessary Being, in relation to which the world is interpreted as contingent, being created by Him. One of the main consequences of this interpretation is the unprecedented division of beings into three kinds: (1) necessary, (2) possible, and (3) impossible.

The concepts of necessity, which is by definition "the negation of the possibility of negation," and possibility, which is defined as "the negation of the necessity of negation," are two important concepts in Aristotelian modal logic.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle believed that these two concepts are properties of the relation between subject and predicate. Due to his idea of being (*ousia*), Aristotle did not consider these concepts to have ontological value, and they were treated as purely logical.

For Ibn Sina, however, because of his idea of beings as created by God, God has to be the necessary being in order to add existence to the essences of the creatures, which are mere possible entities (*ens possibile*). In this way, Ibn Sina entered this new division of beings into his ontology.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn Sina 1985, 257.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle 1984, Vol.1, 35-36.

The main opponent of Ibn Sina's idea of the distinction of essence and existence is the famous Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd. In his whole philosophical career, Ibn Rushd tried to be a faithful commentator on Aristotle. As the commentator par excellence of the Greek Aristotle, Ibn Rushd criticized sharply the way Ibn Sina tried to harmonize Aristotle's philosophy with his own religious thought. Ibn Rushd feared that theological interpretations of philosophy would destroy both religion and philosophy. Theologians should not attempt to demonstrate. They should preach to the common people. As for philosophers, they should understand that a religious belief can not assume a philosophical meaning. For this reason, in his famous book *Tahafut Al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)* which is mainly intended to reply to the arguments Ghazali made against Ibn Sina in his book *Tahafut al-Falasifah (The Incoherence of the Philosophers)*, Ibn Rushd is even more critical of Ibn Sina than he is of Ghazali. He holds that Ibn Sina deviated from true Aristotelean thought, especially in his ontology.

Contrary to Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd believes in the "identification of essence and existence." For him, like Aristotle, being is primarily the existent, substance. It is not something added to essence. It should be noted that by essence he did not mean the essence of a horse qua horse.<sup>9</sup> What he intended was that the essence of this particular horse is its existence as this horse. Thus, as a faithful follower of Aristotle, Ibn Rushd returns to the denial of the idea of any distinction between essence and existence. This denial leads Ibn Rushd to criticize Ibn Sina again and again for his doctrine of the accidentality of existence, which Ibn Rushd thought to be a consequence of that distinction.

He says: "Ghazali based his discussion on the doctrine of Avicenna, and this is a false doctrine, for Avicenna believed that existence is something additional to the essence outside the soul and is like an accident of the essence". After trying to demonstrate his claim, he again argues against Avicenna and says: "The theory that existence is an addition to the quiddity and that the existent in its essence does not subsist by it—and this is the theory of Avicenna—is a most erroneous theory, for this would imply that the term 'existence' signified an accident outside the soul common to the ten categories".<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> It must be recalled that this [identification] is not the same sort of identification permitted for God and denied for other things by Farabi and Ibn Sina. That concerned the inclusion or exclusion of existence in what x is, qua x." Shahadi 1982, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Rushd 1978, 180.

The view expressed by Ibn Rushd is due to a misunderstanding of Ibn Sina. There are different meanings of *accident* and *accidental* in the logic of Ibn Sina's, which Ibn Rushd failed to take into serious consideration. In his famous book *Najat*,<sup>11</sup> Ibn Sina clearly points out the importance of these different sorts of accident. He says: "Sometimes a confusion is made between the different meanings of accident." In Ibn Sina's logic, one needs to distinguish between the accidents of the *Categories* and those of the *Isagoge*. We might say that *categorical accidents* are those that are predicated of a subject or need to be in a subject, and they are contrasted with substance, which is defined as that which is neither in nor predicated of a subject. On the other hand, there are what we might call *isagogic accidents*; these include all predicables that do not derive from the nature of that to which they apply. The quality of having a human shape (not *being human*, which is a secondary substance) is a categorical accident of Socrates, but is not one of his isagogic accidents, since it derives from his nature. Being snub-nosed is both a categorical and isagogic accident of Socrates. Existence is not a categorical accident, because it is not a quality, quantity, relation, or member of any of the other Aristotelian categories; although it is an isagogic accident, because its application to a thing does not derive from the thing's nature. Ibn Rushd rejects Ibn Sina's view of existence as an accident because it is not a categorical accident, while the only sense in which Ibn Sina would assert the accidentality of existence is that of an isagogic accident.

In the *Categories*, an accident is a mode of being that inheres in some other being, such as the mode of the existence of the redness in an a substance like an apple. In contrast with accident, *jawhar* or substance (*hypokeimenon*) means the subject of accidents, which contains its own reason or quiddity. Ibn Sina's attitude on the nature of substance, as one can see its later development in medieval speculation, turned strongly on the distinction between substance and (categorical) accident. Thus, the factor of being independent of other things came to be stressed as one of the distinguishing characteristics of substance.

The other important meaning of accident in Ibn Sina's logic is accident as discussed in the *Isagoge*. The *Isagoge* of the famous Neo-Platonic philosopher, Porphyry, established its own tradition of glosses and commentaries and became important in the development of Aristotelian logic in Islam. Porphyry originally intended his *Isagoge* to be an introduction to the *Categories* of Aristotle. It deals with important terms later called predica-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibn Sina 1986, 12.

bles or universals. These universals are genus, species, difference, property and common accident.

The famous example of genus is “animal”; of species, “man”; of difference, “rational”; of property, “capable of laughing”; of accident, “white”, “black”, and “sitting”. Of these five predicables the first three, i.e., genus, species and difference are essential, yet their essentiality is relative. The term *essential* is used here by Ibn Sina to refer to the constituents of the essence or quiddity; that is, to that which cannot be removed from the essence, without at the same time, leaving the essence other than what it is. Examples are “animal” and “rational” for “human being”. As Shams Inati explains:

Ibn Sina emphasizes that and “essential” in the sense of “constituent” should not be confused with “essence”. The former is an indispensable part of the essence, while the latter is the totality of such parts.<sup>12</sup>

The two remaining universals, i.e., property and the common accident, are accidental. This means that they are not constituents of the essence. However, there is a distinction between them: property is a concomitant accident. It necessarily attaches to the essence—by virtue of the essence—yet without being a constituent of the essence. An example of this is “capacity for laughter” for the human being. The common accident is a separable accident. It differs from the concomitant accident in that it can be eliminated from the conception of the essence. An example of this is whiteness for a white thing.

Ibn Sina makes a very important remark about the meaning of accident in the following passage. He says:

[T]he late logicians believe that this accident is the accident which is the opposite of substance. But this accident is not of that kind at all. Rather, the meaning of this accident is the accidental.<sup>13</sup>

By accidental, Ibn Sina means isagogic accident. Here the notion of the isagogic accident is used by Ibn Sina in this context in some ways similar to the Kantian thesis according to which “being is obviously not a real predicate”.<sup>14</sup> Reality, as Heidegger mentions,<sup>15</sup> means for Kant the same as

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<sup>12</sup> Shams Inati 1984, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ibn Sina, *Isharat*, vol. 1, 198; Inati translation, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A598/B626.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger 1988, 34.

German *Sachheit*, thinghood, and it corresponds to the medieval *essentia*. Hence, his thesis goes back to the distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* elaborated in medieval ontology. That is real which belongs to a *res*, to a thing, to its inherent or essential content, its quiddity or whatness. By his famous thesis, Kant means that the existence of an existent does not affect the what, the reality, or the suchness of the being. He therewith denies the minor premise of the ontological argument—that existence belongs to God's essence, that is, to his reality. Kant concludes that existence does not at all belong to the concept of a thing and it is something accidental to it.

Finally, I will give a brief account of the impact of this idea on the development of subsequent philosophy.

The Avicennean idea of the distinction of essence (*essentia*) and existence (*existentia*) has become a critical part of the philosophical tradition both in the Islamic world and in European Scholasticism. It has been the origin of many philosophical problems. One of the most important of these problems can be formulated briefly by using the terms *essentialism* and *existentialism*, where, precisely speaking, these terms are used to address the question of which of the two is fundamentally real, i.e., has a corresponding reality in the outside world, essence or existence?

In the development of philosophy in Islam, Ibn Rushd's philosophy and his arguments against Ibn Sina were not taken into consideration. The metaphysics of being in Islamic philosophy is based on the distinction of essence and existence. Ibn Rushd, however, had learned from Aristotle that being and substance are one. Thus contrary to the common view of the other Muslim philosophers, his ontology was based on a kind of *ousiology* or *jawharology* which had no place in Islamic philosophy. As to the question of essentialism or existentialism, the course of Islamic philosophy led to the distinctive existentialism of the great Muslim philosopher, Mulla Sadra.

Concerning to the Scholastic philosophers, it was generally accepted by them that although in God essence and existence are identical, they had different views about the nature of the distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* in creatures. If a real distinction between them is not maintained, it would be impossible to explain how the being of creatures differ from God's.

Thomas Aquinas inherited Ibn Rushd's interpretation of this distinction together with the criticism made by Ibn Rushd against Ibn Sina. Since that time such an understanding of Ibn Sina has become common in Western philosophy. In contrast to Islamic philosophy, Ibn Rushd had a great effect



on the development of scholastic and modern philosophy. He left two important theses: (1) the thesis of the accidentality of existence derived from his misunderstanding of Ibn Sina; (2) the thesis of *ousiology* or *jawharology* as the basis of a true ontology derived from his understanding of Aristotle.

His first thesis was strongly opposed by Thomas Aquinas. The concept of *actus essendi* (the act of being) of Thomas Aquinas shows that he favored existentialism. Ibn Rushd's second thesis, his *ousiology*, had no impact on Christian Medieval philosophy. However, his *ousiology* helped to establish new systems of philosophy on the basis of his concept of substance (*jawhar*) as it can be seen in the works of the great modern philosophers such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. These substance-based systems of philosophy are very much in harmony with the idea of essentialism.

This is one of the basic differences between modern Western philosophy and the later Islamic philosophy that developed in Iran. Modern Western philosophy was influenced by Ibn Rushd's misinterpretation of the essence/existence difference in Ibn Sina, and this resulted in a tendency toward essentialism. In Iran, on the other hand, Mulla Sadra interpreted Ibn Sina as believing in the primacy of existence over essence, and all subsequent Islamic philosophy in Iran thus displayed a proclivity toward existentialism.

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