



STUDIES IN ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

Published under the auspices of
the Society for the Study of Islamic Philosophy and Science

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AND SCIENCE

Edited by George F. Hourani

State University of New York Press
Albany, 1975

¹¹ MSS Leiden 1339, Rabat 481, Naples 287, Madrid 5009. M. Levey and S. S. Souryal, "The Introduction to the *Kitāb al-Mustaʿīn* of ibn Biklārish." *Janus* 55 (1968): 134–66.

¹² M. Levey, *Substitutes According to Pythagoras, al-Rāzī, and Māsarjawaih* (in press); cf. M. Levey, *Medical History*, VII, 176–82 (1963).

¹³ Max Meyerhof, ed. and trans., *The Book of the Ten Treatises on the Eye Ascribed to Hunain ibn Ishāq* (Cairo, 1928).

¹⁴ S.K. Hamarneh and G. Sonnedecker, *A Pharmaceutical View of Abulcasis al-Zahrāwī in Moorish Spain* (Leiden, 1963), pp. 77 ff.

¹⁵ M. Levey, *The Medical Formulary of al-Samarqandī* (Philadelphia, 1967) pp. 23–28.

¹⁶ For greater detail see M. Levey, *Early Arabic Pharmacology* (in press).

¹⁷ M. Levey, *al-Kindī*, p. 20.

¹⁸ M. Levey, *al-Samarqandī*, p. 27.

ARABIC AND THE CONCEPT OF BEING

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The problem of expressing the Greek concept of being in Arabic did not escape classical Islamic writers. But the discussion of this problem as an instance of the general question of the influence of grammar on the formation of philosophical concepts is to be found among some recent writers on Islam, although unfortunately there is hardly anything approaching a sustained treatment from this perspective.

A few quotations from two recent writers will bring into focus those distinctive features of the Arabic language which produce philosophical problems and at the same time will provide our analysis with a point of departure.

In his useful book *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian*,¹ Soheil Afnan identifies the problem for the Arabic translator of Greek metaphysics in these words: "the translator can easily find himself helpless."² This is generalized to all Semitic languages which are said to be "still (!) unable to express the thought adequately."³ Afnan attributes this to what he calls "the complete absence of the copula."⁴

Another writer, Professor Angus Graham, a linguist, in a stimulating article,⁵ singles out another, but related feature of Arabic, the sharp separation of the existential and predicative functions, a feature notably lacking in classical Greek.⁶

These two features, the absence of the copula and the existential-predicative separation, are supposed to have stood in the way of expressing the Greek concept of being adequately or accurately. And what is meant by this, in the words of Afnan, is the failure to express "the precise concept of being as distinct from existence."⁷ Professor Graham puts it this way: "because of the structure of the language, they (the Arabic translations of Aristotle) transform him at one stroke into a philosopher who talks sometimes about existence, sometimes about quiddity, *never about being*."⁸

Since the general topic of the concept of being in Arabic has so many facets and requires different specialities for its full and adequate treatment, my objective in the one brief attempt of this paper will have to be a very limited one. It is one sort of discussion fitting in with a number of others, dealing with one question among others.

I shall assume that the nature of the difficulty of expressing the Greek

concept of being in Arabic can be stated in more stringent or in less stringent terms. Now, it is not altogether clear what degree of stringency the two writers quoted would subscribe to since their comments are rather brief, although the language used tends towards the more stringent. So I shall go ahead, insofar as I can, and discuss possible claims without worrying over whether these claims have sponsors, or who the sponsors are. I shall examine the above noted features of the Arabic and clarify the nature of the difficulty, in order to determine what bearing those features have on that difficulty, and what degree of stringency is justified in the characterization of the difficulty. I shall maintain that the language-type differences between Greek and Arabic do not warrant a stringent diagnosis of the difficulty for Arabic. Perhaps enough clarifications will come about to compensate for the rather negative tenor of this conclusion. And while our discussion of the case of Arabic can be related to the general question of the influence of grammar on the formation of philosophical concepts, this general question will not be dealt with here. However, our effort may be presented as a case study for the general question, and a rejection of a stringent thesis for Arabic may well echo a readiness to reject such a thesis on the more general issue.

THE FIRST FEATURE

Absence of Copula

Let us examine the first feature. This may be called "the complete absence of the copula," in which case one would be talking about the natural language, as a "surface" grammarian would describe it. What is in mind here is the fact that Arabic grammatical syntax does not require any word to 'link' subject and complement, because none is needed. The case of a sentence with a verb is obvious, for any language. For the nominal sentence, however, the connection between subject and complement (*mubtada'* and *khavar*) is indicated by the convention of placing the two parts in the nominative case. No linking word is needed. But it is also possible to add certain words to a given nominal sentence and make the same predication, in the sense that the predicative construction is reestablished and the same complement is meant to apply to the same subject, although there may be a change of tense or emphasis. For example, to mention only some words in the natural language, the assertive particle *inna* which by itself may be translated as "indeed," "verily," "truly," when it is added to a nominal sentence, places the subject in the accusative case and the complement in the nominative. Its semantical function can be compared to the assertive or emphatic use of *esti* when the latter is not omitted and is suitably placed in the word order. *Kāna*, usually translated as "to be," is a verb, and can therefore have tense, but does not always. When it is the only verb in a sentence it can function either in a

predicative construction (the incomplete *kāna*), or in an absolute construction, and indicate occurrence or existence (the complete *kāna*). When it is used along with another verb it becomes auxiliary, and is no longer of interest to us here. Then there is a pronoun *huwa* (he, it; or *hiya* for the feminine) which in certain cases is grammatically required to intervene between subject and complement to prevent the latter from becoming a mere apposition. '*Allāhu l-khāliq*' (God the creator) needs completion. '*Allāhu huwa l-khāliq*' is a complete sentence, and it is the intervention of *huwa* that dispels the appositional relation and clearly establishes the predicative construction in a grammatically complete sentence.

These are some of the functions of *inna*, *kāna*, and *huwa*⁹ in the natural language which made them obvious candidates for the office of copula, when Arabic logicians who had been exposed to Greek decided to introduce the copulative device into their logical writings. It is clear that the logicians introduced a use for certain words which was not allowed for by the grammarian's description of the natural language. I shall leave to a separate discussion the question of how to characterize the status of the copula in Arabic in the light of the controversy between grammarian and logician.¹⁰

Fortunately our discussion here does not depend on resolving that controversy. So suppose we were to stay within the obvious sense which the grammarian has in mind about the absence of the copula in Arabic. What consequence can this have for the problem before us?

Of course the problem before us is not whether one can produce an Arabic sound and let it stand for the Greek sound *to on*. Nor is it the question of how to say *to on* in Arabic, as when one asks: how would you say "interesting" or "establishment" in Arabic? Nor is it the simple morphological question of whether one can form a word from a certain verb root. The problem as I shall formulate it is this. Since Greek and Arabic belong to different family types with respect to 'to be,'—and this is the difference that concerns us—does Arabic have the necessary linguistic equipment for the formation of a philosophical term (or terms) which shall be like *to on*, in two respects? First, semantically, so that the Arabic vocabulary shall have the meaning or meanings of *to on*; second, and this is a logical-semantical feature, so that it shall stand for a higher level concept which could range over its constituents in a variety of specific ways, depending on whether it is thought to name a class, or a property common to all that in some sense is, or analogically to embrace a family of different concepts.¹¹ (I suppose even when the term "being" is dismissed as a logical mistake, in that the term suggests a common thread of meaning when none exists, one can half seriously speak of its futile attempt to range, or of a semantically vacuous or frustrated ranging.)

The question immediately before us is whether the presence of a copula in Greek is a necessary condition for the formation of *to on*, and consequently

whether its absence in Arabic counts against the possibility of forming an equivalent term.

If we look at Greek, we find that the copulative function of *einai*, although present, is not highly developed for it is not syntactically necessary. Certainly it is not as developed as the 'to be' of the more modern Indo-European languages. But more importantly, one finds¹² that insofar as the uses of *einai* have bearing on the meanings of *to on* and *to einai*, it is primarily the *semantical*, not syntactical functions that are to the point. So if we are talking about the presence of the copula as a syntactical device, that is not a relevant condition, let alone its being a necessary condition.

Where there is a relevant grammatical characteristic of *einai*, it is morphological not syntactical. For example, Kahn takes the fact that *einai* has no aorist and no perfect, and the fact that all its tenses (present, imperfect, and future) are formed from the single present-durative stem which represents action as durative i.e., as a state which lasts or a process which develops in time—this durative aspect of *einai* is taken as possibly shedding some light on the classical contrast between being and becoming, in which being is the stable unchanging reality.¹³ My interest here is not in the merits of this connection, but in noting that this single instance, where the grammar of *einai* is relevant, concerns morphology, not syntax, and the copula is a syntactical device.

But perhaps what is meant is not the presence or absence of a copula as a syntactical device as such, i.e., as purely syntactical, but the presence in Greek and the absence in Arabic of a privileged verb such as *einai* which besides its copulative function (developed or not) has important semantical functions as well. And here one may want somehow to attribute or connect the privilege of performing the semantical functions to the privileged syntactical status.

If one were to maintain this, all that one can maintain is that, if a language has a copulative 'to be,' the semantical functions are likely to attach themselves to that singular syntactical device. This does not imply that the presence of the copula is a necessary condition for the development of those semantical functions for either Arabic or Greek. So, if a language does not have a copulative term, this does not mean that the semantical functions cannot develop and be performed by words, one or more, that in the grammar of that language are not copulas.

Thus in Arabic the functions of indicating that something exists or happens or is located, and of saying that X is such and such, and that it is the case that such and such, and similar to-be-type functions, can be performed by a variety of words, not one of which needs to be a copula in order to perform those functions. When Arabic logicians seized upon such words for use as copulas they selected those which had already been performing to-be-type

functions other than that of syntactical linking. They proceeded to invest those words with one more function: to act as link between subject and complement in any proposition logically considered. But it was the assigning of the copulative function that historically followed their semantical functions, and it was the presence of these semantical functions that made them good candidates for the formation of the concept of being in Arabic.

Nonsingularity of To Be

What has been called the absence of the copula in Arabic needs to be described in terms of a wider situation with respect to to-be-type words and their functions. The striking difference between Arabic, on the one hand, and Greek and the other Indo-European languages, on the other, is that in these languages there are several functions, syntactical and semantical, which are performed by the verb 'to be.' These functions can of course be performed in these languages without 'to be,' but this verb is more often and more typically used to perform those functions, so that 'to be' may be given a special or singular status in the assignment of credit for their combined performance.

In Arabic there is no single privileged device that combines similar or corresponding functions. Rather, as we noted earlier, the burden of performing these functions is shared by a number of words, differing in grammatical type. Of these only *kāna* is ordinarily given a dictionary meaning of "to be." Let us call this situation the nonsingularity of 'to be' in Arabic, or the absence of a single and privileged to-be-type device.

Each one of the Arabic to-be-type words has yielded a candidate for an equivalent of the Greek, *to on*, in one or another or all its senses. The question now is what is the relevance of this nonsingularity of a to-be-type device in Arabic to the difficulty of expressing the concept of being as distinct from existence?

Let us first be clear about the ways in which being may be distinguished from existence. There are two sorts of ways. The first is one in which 'being' is in a logical sense a higher level concept than existence. (This is the logical feature of *to on*.) The concept of being, according to this distinction, ranges over a number of concepts of which existence may be one. This first way would be in evidence when someone was making comments about the logical status of the concept of being, or of the term "being." The second way in which 'being' can be distinguished from existence arises when some philosopher, as a metaphysician, asks the question: What is being? and proceeds to give his theory of being. One is here adopting one sense of "being" as the proper or primary sense (supplying the semantical aspect of *to on*), and it turns out that this is distinct from the meaning of existence. For example, the Greek rationalist tradition from Parmenides on (including Aristotle, of

course) emphasized the sense of being, the really real, what truly is, as the proper object of knowledge, what can be truly known. This is the 'collusion' between Greek epistemology and Greek ontology, a collusion which indeed defines any rationalist tradition. In the course of a study of Greek thought one could then note that this meaning of being is different from the concept of existence, say, as it developed in the Middle Ages. This contrast between being as what can be truly known and existence is a contrast of two concepts, as it were, at the same logical level, a contrast between sibling concepts.

Professor Kahn, in the article to which I have already referred, shows in an interesting and convincing way how this fundamental sense of being in Greek philosophy—as what can be truly known and truly said—reflects the primarily veridical sense of *einai*, 'to be' as to be the case, to be truly so. This veridical sense is not developed in Arabic in the uses of any of the to-be-type devices, nor, for that matter, in the English 'to be.' Now although we have here the case of a linguistic fact helping to shed light on the meaning of a philosophical concept, it is a case that seems to cut across family types, and has Greek, on the one hand, pitted against Arabic and English on the other (although this will be qualified later). Furthermore, this is a sort of linguistic difference that would not justify a stringent form of the thesis about the influence of the linguistic features of Arabic or English on the formation of philosophic concepts in either language (the matter of family-type differences aside for the moment).

One could say that, since the Greek *einai* had such and such a predominant sense, a correspondingly predominant sense of being was likely to develop. It was less likely to develop in that sense in English or Arabic. But this is not the same as saying that one could not express in those two languages the concept of being as what can be truly known and as distinct from existence.

How one specifies the nature of the relation between 'being' and its logical constituents will determine how one conceives the relation between the two ways of distinguishing 'being' from existence. If 'being' is thought to be analogical, then the second way of distinguishing becomes reabsorbed into the total picture of the first. Existence is here different from 'being' as what is truly known, but both are ways of being; existence is still part of the parent concept of being (despite the logical generation gap). If on the other hand "being" is the name of a class or a common property and is distinct from existence, then existence is 'expelled' once and for all from the notion of being. The same could be said if 'being' were considered a mistake. There is no higher sense of being which could reinclude it. In other words, only if one takes the analogical view of being can one distinguish being from existence in the two ways, and still keep existence among the concepts over which 'being' ranges.

For our discussion at this point we need to take for our model the analogical view of the concept of being. (Or one could take the view that it is a mistake. What we will say applies to both views equally.) For we are confronted with the historical and linguistic fact of an *einai* with many functions, from which developed a *to on* and *to einai* having more than one sense. And the question before us is whether the nonsingularity of any to-be-type device in Arabic stands in the way of expressing a concept of being which is distinguishable from existence in the first way we mentioned, namely, as a concept which could range over existence but would not be reduced to it.¹⁴ Is the nonsingularity of a to-be-type device in Arabic much to the point? I see the answer in the negative.

The relevant condition fulfilled in Greek, or in any of the other Indo-European languages, is not that there is one and no other 'to be' or to-be-type device, but that whatever the device, it should have *different* functions. The logical condition for an analogical sense (or the condition presupposed in dismissing it as a mistake) is: having more than one different function, and for the semantical functions this is ambiguity. And it is sufficient for this condition to be fulfilled *at least once*. It is not necessary that it be fulfilled *only once*. And the crucial difference between Arabic, on the one hand, and the Indo-European languages (including Greek), on the other, is not that the condition is fulfilled in the latter family of languages but not fulfilled in Arabic. Rather, the difference is that in the Indo-European languages one privileged device, the verb 'to be,' has the big contract. The condition is fulfilled in that special way only once. In Arabic, on the other hand, the business is shared by a number of devices, each of which is or can be multi-functioning in the requisite sense, though none is specially anointed. Thus in Arabic there is a variety of to-be-type words and a corresponding variety of words for the concept of being, while in the Indo-European languages there is a central 'to be' from which the word for the concept of being derives. My claim has been that this difference is not to the point, and consequently anyone who wishes to support the thesis, at least in stringent form, that different grammar-types stand in the way, or prevent the formation of equivalent philosophical vocabulary, will have to bypass the cases of Greek and Arabic and look elsewhere, at least as far as the concept of being is concerned.

THE SECOND FEATURE: EXISTENTIAL PREDICATIVE SEPARATION

We must now consider whether there are *specific* and crucial differences in the functions of the Greek and Arabic devices.¹⁵ Our new question no longer pertains to the number of functions, but to specific differences in those functions, and differences which reflect the different family types. We turn

to the second feature of Arabic: the sharp separation between the predicative and the existential functions.

It is often said in contrasting Greek and English that the existential-predicative distinction marks the 'is' but not the '*esti*.' But what is meant primarily about the Arabic separation is that predication, in other than the cases of the nominal sentence, can be expressed by one set of words (*inna*, *kāna*, *huwa*), while the usual way to indicate existence is with words formed from a different root, *wj d*. So unlike English, in the contrast with Greek, it is not a separation of functions for the same word, but an allotting of the different functions to different words. And this seems to be a more radical kind, that retains the distinction of linguistic family types. This, one might contend, makes the crucial difference since the Arabic separation yields terms for existence from the existential side, and terms for essence from the predicative side, with perhaps no promising linguistic resource for expressing the abstract 'being' which is not reducible to either essence or existence.¹⁶

Now it is true of other languages that one could perform the existential and predicative functions by resorting to a different vocabulary for each function. However, performing these functions with one term, say 'to be,' may be a more general practice in some languages than in others.

In Arabic, as we have maintained, each of the to-be-type words can perform (or was made to perform) both the predicative and the existential functions. Therefore, the sharp separation thesis cannot mean that in Arabic it would be impossible to indicate both functions by the same term. It would be accurate, however, to say that the separation by different vocabulary of those two functions is the more striking feature of Arabic, but then this is due to the nonsingularity of any of the to-be-type devices. In other words, as in many other languages, the functions of predicating and of indicating existence can be performed in Arabic in either of two ways: either by vocabulary deriving from different roots, or by some multifunctioning to-be-type device. What distinguishes Arabic is not that only the former takes place, but that the former is not overshadowed by some one dominating to-be-type word which combines the functions. Thus the second grammatical feature of our discussion, the existential-predicative separation, has to be stated in terms of the first feature, the nonsingularity of a 'to be.' Both are parts of the same picture.

The importance of underscoring such a link between the two features of Arabic is that this has a bearing on how one would state the thesis we are presently examining. For it would now be too stringent to say that such and such Arabic philosophers (e.g., al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā) could not escape making the ontological distinction between essence and existence because of the sharp separation—as we have explained it—of the predicative-existential functions.¹⁷ There are possibilities in the language that could have been

resorted to which fulfill the requisite logical condition for forming an abstract term for being.¹⁸

There remains one question of importance for our entire discussion, and especially relevant to the semantical feature of *to on*. How does one decide whether a given Arabic equivalent to *to on* is accurate or not, if, all previous considerations aside, it turns out that the meaning of this Arabic term is stipulated without regard to previous usage? The assumption of the view as we stated it, that the term for existence comes from the existential side and that for essence from the predicative side, seems to be that the meaning of the *to on* equivalent is ruled inaccurate on the basis of some ancestral linguistic fact such as etymology. But surely no one would say that the Arabic word for the telephone, *al-hāṭif*, is inaccurate on the grounds that it comes from the verb root *hatafa* which means to call loudly or shout, and one does not always shout when using the telephone. One would simply say that etymological affinity might be a useful guide for selecting a verb root from which to derive or coin a word, but that such ancestry is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for determining a stipulated meaning.

It would be instructive for us to examine briefly the Arabic translation of Aristotle's discussion of the senses of *to on* and *to einai* (*Metaphysics*, V, 7), and Ibn Rushd's commentary on it. In the Ishāq translation of the *Metaphysics*, V, 7, what is said there to have the various senses is "*al-huwiyyah*" which could be said to be derived from the copula *huwa*. In the language of the separation-of-functions thesis one could say that this derives from the copulative-essence side. On the other hand, Ibn Rushd in his commentary prefers the term "*al-mawjūd*" for the various senses, and this, it would be said, comes from the existential side. Between Ishāq the translator, and Ibn Rushd the philosopher-commentator we have two candidates for *to on*, reflecting the predicative-existential split.

However, it should be noted that regardless of their linguistic ancestry, each term, "*al-huwiyyah*" and "*al-mawjūd*," is proposed for *all* the senses distinguished by Aristotle (except for Ibn Rushd's once stated reservation that "*huwiyyah*" does not apply to the sense of 'It is true').¹⁹ Here there is obvious stipulation, and one would in this case be begging the question if one were to judge the new use as inaccurate on the ground that its root or its previous meaning is such and such. If Ibn Rushd tells us that he uses "*al-mawjūd*" to mean . . . , and he then gives the four senses of Aristotle, one could reply: you have distorted Aristotle, because "*al-mawjūd*" means "what exists." He will answer, as in fact he does,²⁰ that "for the populace"—i.e., the prevalent or common meaning—"al-mawjūd" means such and such, and this is its meaning as etymologically derived ('*mushtāq*'), but in philosophy it means . . . (and he would refer to the four senses of Aristotle). These are its meanings in the context of translation ('*ism manqūl*').²¹

That Ibn Rushd said this, and therefore was himself aware of the stipulative situation, fulfills one essential condition of stipulated meaning—namely, that the stipulator shall have intended the word to be used in such and such a sense. For even if Ibn Rushd used “*al-mawjūd*” for Aristotle’s four senses, he might still have misunderstood Aristotle and thought that the Greek philosopher was speaking about different sorts of existence. We needed to know that Ibn Rushd himself was aware that he was departing from common usage.

This saves us from having to be in the position of engineering a way out for the stipulating Arabic translator or philosopher, when the matter depends not on *our* being aware of what it is to stipulate, but on its being historically the case that some Arabic translator or philosopher was himself aware of what he was doing.

NOTES

¹ Soheil Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian* (Leiden: Brill, 1964).

² Ibid., p.29

³ Ibid., p.30

⁴ Ibid., p.29

⁵ Angus Graham, “‘Being’ in Linguistics and Philosophy”, *Foundations of Language* 1 (1965): 223–31

⁶ Ibid., p.223

⁷ Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology*, p.29.

⁸ Graham, “Being,” p.226; italics in the original.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of these and other to-be-type words see this author’s “Arabic and ‘To Be’,” in *The Verb ‘Be’ and Its Synonyms*, ed. John W.M. Verhaar, vol. 4, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969), pp. 112–25.

¹⁰ “Logic Versus Grammar and the Arabic Language,” read at the Fourth International Congress on Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science, held in Bucharest, Roumania, 29 August–4 September 1971.

¹¹ The thesis about Arabic could take the following form: that the necessary conditions for expressing *to on* (with the two features) are not present in Arabic, and consequently one cannot express such a concept within the given structure of the language. Our contention is that such a thesis would be false, for the necessary conditions are present in Arabic, as we shall see.

¹² See the excellent article by Charles Kahn, “The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being,” *Foundations of Language*, 2 (1966): 245–66.

¹³ Kahn, “The Greek Verb,” 254.

¹⁴ This pertains to the logical feature of *to on*.

¹⁵ This is relevant to the semantical aspect of *to on*.

¹⁶ See Graham, “‘Being,’” pp.225, 227.

¹⁷ “It is a misplaced compliment to credit al-Fārābī . . . and Ibn Sīnā . . . with the discovery of the ontological difference between essence and existence; it was impossible for an Arab [this must mean Arabic writer, for al-Fārābī was a Turk and Ibn Sīnā a Persian] to confuse them.” Graham, “‘Being,’” p.227.

¹⁸ Of words in the natural language *kāna* would be my choice in spite of the sense of becoming in one of its forms (*kawn*). See article by this author n. 9 above, pp.114–118.

¹⁹ See his *Compendio de Metafísica*, ed. Carlos Quiroz-Rodriguez (Madrid, 1919), p.13.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ We are not here necessarily endorsing either Ishāq’s or Ibn Rushd’s translation of *to on*. Our preference would be for *kaynūnah*, but that is another matter.