

Article

Ibn ‘Arabī and the Theologization of Aristotelian Hylomorphism

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Abstract: The works of Aristotle left an indelible impression on Arabic philosophy after the translation movement. While many philosophers accepted the works of the revered First Teacher (*Al-Mu‘allim al-awwal*), as Aristotle was designated, others sought to reformulate his ideas in accordance with their own priorities. One such thinker is the hugely influential mystical theorist, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), who agrees with Aristotle that all existents are hylomorphic compounds made from the combination of form with matter that comes from prime matter, or *hyle* (*hayūlā*), which he frequently uses interchangeably with ‘substance’ (*jawhar*). He claims that prime matter or substance accepts all forms (*ṣuwar*), but he theologizes these terms as he believes all things are loci of divine manifestation. Ibn ‘Arabī thus situates Aristotelian hylomorphism within the framework of his own metaphysics. He proceeds to equate the universal *hayūlā* with the primordial ‘cloud’ (*amā*), mentioned in prophetic traditions, from which all things in the different levels of existence derive because of the existentiating divine breath. When it comes to the sensible world in particular, Ibn ‘Arabī employs the Qur’anic term of ‘dust’ (*habā*) to denote prime matter that serves as the basis of sensible hylomorphic compounds. This study conducts close textual content analysis to demonstrate the way in which Ibn ‘Arabī theologizes Aristotelian hylomorphism to expound his conception of the different realms of existence.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabī; hylomorphism; prime matter; form; substance



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1. Introduction

It is a matter of scholarly consensus that Aristotle exerted an incredibly powerful influence on Islamic philosophy specifically, and medieval Islamic thought more generally (Alwishah and Hayes 2015). This study does not propose to investigate the myriad ways in which this titan of philosophy, ‘often revered in the Islamic world as the “First Teacher/Philosopher” (*al-mu‘allim al-awwal*)’ (Alwishah and Hayes 2015, p. 1), influenced the Arabic tradition. The goal of this study is far more modest. It scrutinizes how Aristotle’s hylomorphism was adopted and then theologized by arguably the most influential proponent of speculative Sufism in Islamic intellectual thought, Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Knysh 1999; Landau 2008; Dagli 2016).

Hylomorphism is the metaphysical view of Aristotle that substances are made up of matter and form. The matter/form distinction is too familiar and well known as to require exposition. Suffice it to say that the idea permeated the intellectual milieu of Andalusia and had a powerful influence on Ibn ‘Arabī (‘Afifi 1963, p. 405; Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703; Rosenthal 1988, p. 28). Nevertheless, Ibn ‘Arabī does not simply adopt this view; he fundamentally alters it and carries out a total theologization of it by drawing on Qur’anic terms and prophetic traditions and explicating them through hylomorphism. The next section explores just how he achieves this.

2. Ibn ‘Arabī and Hylomorphism

Su‘ād al-Ḥakīm writes in her magisterial lexicon of Ibn ‘Arabī’s nomenclature that the mystic agrees with Aristotle by affirming that substances are hylomorphic compounds

and so he ‘distinguishes between form (*ṣūra*) and prime matter (*hayūlā*), or between body and soul’ (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703). Nevertheless, since in Ibn ‘Arabī’s theological ontology all things are loci of divine manifestation because they are representations of God’s ‘most beautiful Names’ (*Al-Asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) that are delineated in the Qur’an (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, vol. 1, pp. 48–49), he applies this principle to ‘all levels of existence’ (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703). This means that not only are the primary substances in the sensible realm hylomorphic compounds, but so are the immaterial substances in the pre-sensible realms of divine manifestation (Chittick 1982). However, the pre-sensible realms are pervaded by a different kind of prime matter (Izutsu 1983, pp. 133–34). This means that all loci of the knowable aspect of God are manifested as hylomorphic compounds (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703). In this sense, since the forms in which the divine Names of God are manifested are the actualization of their potentiality to be manifested, they represent the outer aspect (*zāhir*) of God, commensurate with His divine Name ‘The Manifest’ (*Al-zāhir*) (Qur’an 57:3), while prime matter represents their potentiality to be manifested and thus are representations of the inner, hidden aspect (*bāṭin*) of God, intimated by His divine Name, ‘The Hidden’ (*Al-Bāṭin*) (Qur’an 57:3) (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703).

Ibn ‘Arabī elaborates on the nature of the relationship between prime matter and the divine Names in the *Fuṣūṣ* when he says,

The possessor of spiritual realization (*ṣāhib al-tahqīq*) sees multiplicity (*kathra*) in the One, just as they know that the meanings of the divine Names (*Al-Asmā’ al-ilāhiyya*), even though their realities are different and many, are of one essence (*‘ayn wāḥid*). This is therefore multiplicity comprehended in the One of essence (*Wāḥid al-‘ayn*), so in manifestation (*tajallī*) it is multiplicity witnessed in one essence, just as prime matter (*hayūlā*) takes on the outline (*ḥadd*) of every form (*ṣūra*), and it [i.e., prime matter], despite the multiplicity and differences of its forms, in reality comes from one substance (*jawhar*), which is its prime matter (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 124–25).

Ibn ‘Arabī draws a parallel between prime matter taking on any form and the single essence of God taking on the manifestations of the divine Names in reality. In both cases, says Ibn ‘Arabī, the essence is the same, whether it is prime matter or the divine essence that constitutes reality, but they are manifested and comprehended in multiple forms. Mu’ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300?), whose commentary of the *Fuṣūṣ* is one of the most important early commentaries as Richard Todd points out (Todd 2014, p. 23), makes it clear that according to Ibn ‘Arabī, all the divine Names have the same source just as all forms have prime matter as their basis,

In the opinion of the people of spiritual unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*) . . . there is no ‘otherness’ (*ghayriyya*) in reality due to the one essence being seen and manifested in forms that resemble one another and are never ending in their multiplicity, just as that which is shown as the Powerful (*Al-Qādir*), the Creator (*Al-Khāliq*), the Provider (*Al-Razzāq*) is only Allah. For He is the Provider, the Powerful, the Creator, but the different forms of manifestation are in terms of His power, creative ability, and provision, so all agree that the One named is the same (Al-Jandī 2007, p. 391).

It is significant that Ibn ‘Arabī mentions both things that are manifested and things that are comprehended in the above passage from the *Fuṣūṣ*. This could mean that he refers to the things in the sensible world that have perceptible existence as well as those that do not, or it could mean that he refers to both of these in addition to those things that are immaterial in the pre-sensible realms of existence. Ḥakīm, Toshihiko Izutsu, and Henry Corbin point out that Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the latter as he does not restrict the manifestation of the divine Names to the sensible world; rather, he applies it to all pre-sensible realms and all levels of existence (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 703; Izutsu 1983, p. 134; Corbin 2008). In fact, Nūr al-Dīn al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492), who was ‘a pre-eminent poet-theologian from the school of Ibn ‘Arabī’ (Rizvi 2006, p. 59), categorically states that the concept of prime matter

for the mystic is ‘more general’ than it is ‘in the terminology of the philosophers’ (*iṣṭilāḥ al-ḥukamā*) because it is not restricted to the sensible world as it is for the philosophers (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 293). Dawūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350), whose commentary on the *Fuṣūṣ* was among the most widely read from the time it was written (Chittick 2007b, p. 518), and who was instrumental in ‘helping popularize and disseminate some of the more difficult teachings of the *Fuṣūṣ* commentators who preceded him’ (Rustom 2005, pp. 54–55), expatiates on this issue. He writes that what is meant by prime matter in this passage is ‘the universal prime matter’ (*al-hayūlā al-kullīyya*) which ‘accepts all the spiritual (*rūḥāniyya*) and physical (*jismāniyya*) forms of existents’ in all realms of existence (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 790).

These commentators thus agree that for Ibn ‘Arabī, prime matter is the source of ‘matter’ both in the physical world and the non-physical worlds. However, the pre-sensible realms require a different kind of prime matter (see Section 3). Qayṣarī elaborates that this means prime matter is comprehended in the forms of existent beings just as the divine essence is comprehended in the forms of existents (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 790). Since all levels of existence are manifestations of the divine Names of God, not just the sensible world, all existents in those realms as well as the sensible one are loci of divine manifestation and are hylomorphic compounds of divine matter and the form of the Names they are manifesting. In this sense, Ibn ‘Arabī remains faithful to Aristotle because even though Aristotle states that the most perspicuous examples of primary substances are things that are perceptible by the senses, he allows that they can be things that are not perceptible as well (Cohen 2020).

Ibn ‘Arabī states that all things in all levels of existence are manifestations of the divine essence constituted in the forms of the divine Names in the same way as prime matter takes on the ‘outline’ or physical boundaries of all forms. He continues that all this comes from one substance, or *jawhar*, which satisfies Aristotle’s criterion of independence (Aristotle 1984). However, at the end of the aforementioned passage of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn ‘Arabī claims that this substance is prime matter, which means Ibn ‘Arabī identifies substance with prime matter when Aristotle seems to reject this because even though prime matter appears as though it satisfies the criterion for independence because it is self-subsisting, it is nevertheless dependent on the form in which it is manifested and so it cannot meet the requirement of separability that a substance must have (Aristotle 1984; Cohen 2020). Qayṣarī concurs that in Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics, prime matter and substance are interchangeable, and he himself uses them in the same way (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 790).

A key expositor of Ibn ‘Arabī’s technical nomenclature, ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413?), clarifies that Ibn ‘Arabī identifies prime matter with substance as well as other things (Al-Jurjānī 1845, p. 83). This represents somewhat of a break from Aristotle as for him, a substance is truly independent and prime matter is not, as stated. Arguably the most influential promulgator of Ibn ‘Arabī’s concepts and technical terms, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī (d. 736/1335?) (Al-Qāsimī n.d.; Lala 2019) explains that substances in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophical outlook denote the things that remain constant and never change, whether they are physical or not (Al-Qāshānī 1992, p. 43). They are thus the immutable things on which all other things depend, which is more-or-less consistent with Aristotle’s definition of it because all things in the *Categories* are predicated on the substances in one way or another (Aristotle 1984). This means that Ibn ‘Arabī agrees with some aspects of Aristotle’s definition of a substance while rejecting others.

For Ibn ‘Arabī, then, the divine substance is the divine essence that is the cause of all levels of reality. This, again, is concordant with Aristotle’s delineation of substances as the causes and starting points of all things (Aristotle 1984; Cohen 2020). Ibn ‘Arabī explains that although substances are the causes of all things in all levels of existence, ultimately, it is the divine substance that is the cause and starting point of everything. Ibn ‘Arabī calls this divine substance ‘the substance of substances’ (*jawhar al-jawāhir*) (Al-Ḥakīm 1981, p. 297). He writes that this is also known as ‘the reality of realities’ (*ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā’iq*) because it is the cause of, and also pervades, all levels of existence. He writes that the substance of substances

is the reality of realities of the cosmos in its entirety . . . which is manifested eternally and temporally. So if you say this thing is the cosmos, you are correct; and if you say it is the God, the Eternal, be He praised, you are correct . . . for it is everything and includes temporality and eternity. And it becomes numerous through the multiplicity of existent beings, but it is not divided through multiple beings . . . so you can name it [all the] realities that it comprises (Ibn ‘Arabī 1918, pp. 16–19).

In the sense that the divine substance is the cause and starting point of all levels of reality, and because primary substances are the things in reality, the term ‘substance’ is eternal and temporal. It is eternal if it denotes the divine substance that is the cause of all reality, and it is temporal if it refers to a primary substance in sensible reality or something in the pre-sensible realms (Chittick 2007a, p. 506). The divine substance, says Ibn ‘Arabī, thus ‘becomes numerous through the multiplicity of existent beings, but it is not divided through multiple beings’. Ibn ‘Arabī is careful to underscore that just because the divine essence or divine substance is manifested in innumerable primary substances in different levels of reality, it does not mean that God’s simplicity is violated in any way. This emphasis on divine simplicity, again, demonstrates influences of Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophical forbears, especially Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. 279/873), the first peripatetic philosopher, known as the ‘philosopher of the Arabs’ in order to ‘emphasize his noble lineage’ (Adamson 2016, p. 26), who goes to great lengths to highlight that within divine oneness is implicit divine simplicity (Al-Kindī 1948), and the ubiquitous Abū ‘Alī ibn Sīnā (d. 429/1037), whose influence on Ibn ‘Arabī has been emphasized by recent scholarship (Lala and Alwazzan 2023a, 2023b), and who defends divine simplicity on the grounds of God’s necessary existence (McGinnis 2022, pp. 98–101).

Ibn ‘Arabī is explicit that substance is prime matter when he writes that the connection the substance of substances or the reality of realities has with the cosmos is

like the connection (*nisba*) a piece of wood (*khashaba*) has to a chair, or a chest (*tābūt*), or a pulpit (*minbar*), or a mahmal . . ., so take this connection and do not think that there is any diminution (*nuqs*) in it like it is thought that there is diminution in the wood by the separation of an inkwell (*maḥbara*) from it . . . so name this thing . . . prime matter (Ibn ‘Arabī 1918, pp. 16–19).

Things that are made from a piece of wood, like a chair, or a chest, or a pulpit, or a mahmal, are actualizations of the potentiality of the wood to be those things. The influential mystic, ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), who was well versed in both exoteric and esoteric sciences, and was an important promulgator of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas (Sukkar 2014; Pagani 2022), concurs that Ibn ‘Arabī does indeed view substance as prime matter. In imitation of Ibn ‘Arabī, he says that prime matter is ‘the matter (*mādda*) from which things are made, like wood for a door, a bedstead, a box, a key, a large bowl (*qaṣ’a*), a chair, and other things’ but all these forms, he adds, both ‘perceptible and intellectual forms (*ṣuwar maḥsūsa wa ma’qūla*) are maintained by the existence of God, the Exalted’ (Al-Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 33).

Ibn ‘Arabī cautions against viewing these things as the amount of wood that is subtracted from a piece of wood because an inkwell or any other thing is made from it. On the contrary, the inkwell or the chair actualizes the potential of the wood. The philosophical interpreter of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas, Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahā’imī (d. 835/1432) (Chittick 2007b, p. 520), agrees with his forebear and articulates that prime matter is the underlying matter that subsists through formal changes in hylomorphic compounds (Al-Mahā’imī 2007, p. 354). This means that it is misguided to deem prime matter to increase or decrease with the emergence of hylomorphic compounds; it is more accurate to view prime matter as pure potentiality that is actualized by the combination with forms. The pre-modern Ḥanafī commentator of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Muṣṭafā ibn Sulaymān Bālī Zādeh (d. 1069/1659), declares that Ibn ‘Arabī views hylomorphic compounds as actualizations of potentialities, like a seed that has the potentiality of a tree within it (Bālī Zādeh 2003, p. 173).

In this passage, then, Ibn ‘Arabī is unequivocal that prime matter is the wood to the hylomorphic compounds of the chair or pulpit, etc. It therefore seems that Ibn ‘Arabī agrees with Aristotle that a substance is independent and separable, and that it is the starting point and cause of things in different levels of existence. He also states that all things in the cosmos depend on the divine substance for their existence. However, he intimates that prime matter, which is the undifferentiated matter that becomes the four elements in the sublunar world and combines with all the forms of things to make hylomorphic compounds (Izutsu 1983, p. 134), is also substance. Prime matter, thus, seems to satisfy the requirements for independence and separability for Ibn ‘Arabī whereas that is not the case for Aristotle, as mentioned.

However, perhaps the most important difference between Aristotle and Ibn ‘Arabī is that since the Sufi asserts that all levels of existence are only manifestation of God’s divine Names, substance, prime matter, and the forms of existents are all divine. It is the divine substance that is the cause and starting point of existence. It is prime matter that is the divine substrate that underlies all things in the sensible realm, and a different kind of prime matter that underlies all things in the pre-sensible worlds. And it is the form of the divine Names that are manifested in the pre-sensible and the sensible worlds (Ibn ‘Arabī 1918, pp. 16–19; Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, pp. 124–25). In this way, Ibn ‘Arabī carries out a thorough theologization of Aristotle’s hylomorphism. Perhaps even more significant is the activation of prime matter, and what allows it to combine with forms in the pre-sensible and sensible worlds. Ibn ‘Arabī attributes this impetus to the ‘breath of the Compassionate’ (*nafas al-Raḥmān*).

3. The Breath of the Compassionate and Prime Matter

Ibn ‘Arabī writes that hylomorphic compounds are created when prime matter combines with forms in the sensible world. This happens when the ‘breath of the Compassionate’ pervades prime matter and allows it to actualize its potentiality to become hylomorphic compounds that are loci of divine manifestation. This means that not only are the hylomorphic compounds divine, but the impetus for their generation is also divine. Ibn ‘Arabī writes,

Nature (*ṭabī‘a*) comes before things that emanate from it in forms. And in reality, nature is only the ‘breath of the Compassionate’, for in it are introduced (*infataḥat*) the forms of the cosmos (*ṣuwar al-‘ālam*), both its higher and lower ones, due to the diffusion (*sarayān*) of the breath in the prime substance (*al-jawhar al-hayūlānī*), particularly in the realm of physical bodies (*‘ālam al-ajrām*). As for its [i.e., the breath] diffusion to bring forth luminous spirits (*al-arwāḥ al-nūriyya*) and accidents (*a’rāḍ*), that is due to another kind of diffusion (Ibn ‘Arabī 2002, p. 219).

There are many things of interest in this short passage from the most important and most comprehensive chapter of the *Fuṣūṣ*: the chapter of Muḥammad. This is because this chapter has the clearest exposition of unity and multiplicity in the entire work, as intimated by Ibn ‘Arabī’s principal disciple (Elmore 1997; Todd 2014), Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) (Al-Qūnawī 2013, p. 117). Ibn ‘Arabī explains that it is the existentiating breath of the Compassionate that introduces both the higher and lower forms of the sensible world and pervades prime matter thereby allowing the potentiality of prime matter to combine with the forms of the physical world and generate hylomorphic compounds that are loci of divine manifestation. Ibn ‘Arabī identifies an all-pervading mercy here that brings all things into existence because it is the breath from the divine Name, the Compassionate, that brings forth all existence (Nettler 1978; Murata 1992; Hirtenstein 1999; Lala 2020).

Ibn ‘Arabī says that the higher and lower forms of the sensible world are generated when the existentiating mercy of the divine breath is spread over prime matter. Mahā’imī explains that the higher forms are the ‘spiritual’ (*rūḥānī*) forms that exist in the sensible world but do not have perceptible existence, like the soul. He juxtaposes this with the lower forms, which are those things that do have perceptible existence; in other words, ‘bodies

and their accidents and faculties' (Al-Mahā'imī 2007, p. 699). Qayṣarī is also of this opinion (Al-Qayṣarī 1955, p. 1175).

Ibn 'Arabī continues that it is when the breath of the Compassionate pervades prime matter that the hylomorphic compounds, which are loci of divine manifestation, are generated. He emphasizes that this is particularly the case in 'the realm of physical bodies'. By stating this, Ibn 'Arabī intimates that there is a different kind of prime matter in the pre-sensible realms that constitutes pure potentiality and which the forms of immaterial beings actualize. Qāshānī, in his most detailed lexicon of Ibn 'Arabī's nomenclature, *Laṭā'if al-i'lām*, concurs with this. He explicates that the term 'prime matter' (*hayūlā*) only refers to the sensible world and the 'physical forms' (*ṣuwar jismiyya*) that are generated from prime matter. Whereas the term 'prime matter of prime matters' (*hayūlā al-hayūlayāt*) is what 'the people of spiritual realization (*muḥaqqiqūn*) use to refer to the reality of realities', which is 'the inner (*bāṭin*) aspect of every divine reality (*ḥaqīqa ilāhiyya*)', so it is 'the inner aspect of every concealed thing' (Al-Qāshānī 2005, p. 698). These 'concealed things' are imperceptible beings in pre-phenomenal realms of existence. Ibn 'Arabī expresses the same sentiment when he declares that another kind of prime matter is pervaded by the existentiating divine breath and results in the actualization of immaterial hylomorphic compounds in the pre-sensible realms of existence. Mahā'imī clarifies that this is because the hylomorphic compounds in the pre-sensible realms 'are free from [physical] matter' (Al-Mahā'imī 2007, p. 700).

It is also noteworthy that Ibn 'Arabī employs the term 'the prime substance' (*al-jawhar al-hayūlānī*) when referring to prime matter, thereby underscoring that he views prime matter and substance as interchangeable. Commentators of the *Fuṣūṣ* affirm that this is what Ibn 'Arabī means. Jāmī, for instance, defines 'prime substance' as that which 'accepts physical forms' (*ṣuwar jismāniyya*), which is the same definition as that of prime matter (Al-Jāmī 2009, p. 519). Mahā'imī gives a virtually identical definition to this (Al-Mahā'imī 2007, p. 699). In the same vein, Bālī Zādeh states that prime substance is prime matter for physical things (Bālī Zādeh 2003, pp. 318–19). Nābulusī puts it even more categorically when he states that prime substance is the basis of the four elements in the physical world, which is precisely what prime matter is (Al-Nābulusī 2008, vol. 2, p. 443).

This means that in Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, prime matter is most explicitly the undifferentiated basis of the four elements in the sensible world. Yet, there is also another kind of prime matter that is responsible for the emergence of immaterial hylomorphic compounds in the pre-sensible realms. Ibn 'Arabī employs the term prime matter for both of these, and he also adopts the term 'prime substance' as a synonym for prime matter since he views them as interchangeable. In addition, Ibn 'Arabī effects a complete theologization of these aspects of hylomorphism because he asserts that the cause of matter and form combining is the breath of the Compassionate in the pre-sensible and sensible realms, and also because the result of this combination—the hylomorphic compounds, whether they are perceptible to the senses or not—are all loci of divine manifestation. But he does not stop there. In order to fully integrate his outlook into orthodox Islamic thought, he states that the breath of the Compassionate is also the 'cloud' (*'amā'*), mentioned in the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīths*). In this way, he expresses ideas in terms that are prophetic (and Qur'anic) (see Sections 4 and 5), thereby offering all of his metaphysics as nothing but exegesis of these texts (Nettler 2012, pp. 13–16).

4. The Breath of the Compassionate and the Cloud

Ibn 'Arabī draws on the prophetic tradition in which Prophet Muḥammad was asked, 'O Messenger of God! Where was our Lord before He created His creation?' To this, Prophet Muḥammad replied, 'He was in the cloud (*'amā'*), no air (*hawā'*) was under Him, nor was air above Him' (Ibn Mājah n.d., vol. 1, p. 64; Al-Tirmidhī 1975, vol. 5, p. 288; Ibn Ḥibbān 1988, vol. 14, p. 9; Al-Ṭabarānī 1994, vol. 19, p. 207; Al-Ṭayālīsī 1999, vol. 2, p. 418; Ibn Ḥanbal 2001, vol. 26, p. 108). This tradition has confounded many commentators. Muḥammad Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī (d. 1927), described as 'one of the most distinguished Is-

lamic scholars of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent' (Osman 2001, p. 1), simply writes that the best thing to do is leave the interpretation of this tradition to God (Kashmīrī 2004, vol. 4, p. 276). The Persian scholar, Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), who was famed for his expertise in 'all branches of the Islamic Sciences (*al-'Ulūm al-Islāmiyya*)' (Ibrahim 1979, p. 311), writes in his commentary that this tradition is essentially beyond the ken of human understanding, but Prophet Muḥammad just employed the cloud as a metaphor to denote an absolute vacuum (*khalā*), which is 'an expression (*'ibāra*) for non-corporeality (*'adam al-jism*)' as it would be more comprehensible for his interlocutor (Al-Bayḍāwī 2012, vol. 3, p. 455). Edward Lane writes that it comes from the same root as blindness (*'—m—y*) because 'it means anything that the intellectual faculties cannot perceive, and to the definition of which the describer cannot attain' (Lane 2003, vol. 5, p. 2161).

Ibn 'Arabī, however, does not subscribe to the notion of the tradition's inscrutability, instead writing that the cloud was 'the first receptacle (*ẓarf*) to accept the "being-ness" (*kaynūna*) of God' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 310). He explains elsewhere that this means that the cloud was the first creation, or the first differentiation of the divine in the form of creation, saying, 'it was the first locus of divine manifestation (*mazhar ilāhī*) in which He was manifested' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d., vol. 1, p. 148). The cloud, therefore, is the first recipient of the breath of the Compassionate that acts as a gateway to the emergence of hylomorphic compounds, as Ibn 'Arabī alludes to when he remarks that God 'created them [i.e., all existent beings] in the cloud, and it is the breath of the Compassionate' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d., vol. 3, p. 465). He elaborates on this elsewhere when he says the following,

The origination of this cloud was from the breath of the Compassionate . . . so all existent beings (*mawjūdāt*) are manifested in the cloud by [the divine command] 'Be!' or by the hand of the divine or by the His two hands except the cloud itself, for its emergence was specifically by the breath . . . and the basis of that command was love (*ḥubb*) . . . as has been reported [that God declared,] 'I was a treasure and I was not known, so I wanted (*aḥbabt*) to be known', so through this love the breathing came into being and the breath was manifested and so it was the cloud (Ibn 'Arabī n.d., vol. 3, p. 430).

Ibn 'Arabī explains that the breath of the Compassionate brings forth the cloud because it is the first recipient of the mercy of existention, or the love that God had to see Himself in something other than Himself (Nettler 1978; Murata 1992; Lala and Alwazzan 2023a). The basis of this is the prophetic tradition in which God declares His 'yearning' to be known as He is a 'hidden treasure' (*kanz makhfiyy*). Even though the hugely significant and 'innately combative scholar', Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) (El-Tobgui 2020, p. 1), who 'was particularly well grounded in *ḥadīth*' (El-Tobgui 2020, p. 80), classified this tradition as 'false' (*bāṭil*) (Al-Ṣan'ānī 2011, vol. 2, p. 359), Mullā 'Alī Qārī (d. 1014/1605?), who was also 'a renowned scholar and commentator [of *ḥadīth*]' (Alavi 1983, p. 73), states that it is indeed a tradition of Prophet Muḥammad despite the fact that the wording is not entirely accurate (Qārī 2002, vol. 1, p. 199). Ibn 'Arabī, who himself was an expert in prophetic traditions (Brown 2017, p. 190), acknowledges that it is 'a tradition that is sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) on the basis of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) [only], and it is not proven through transmission from the Messenger of God, peace be upon him' (Ibn 'Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 399). This showcases Ibn 'Arabī's propensity to reclassify the reliability of prophetic traditions based on his spiritual unveiling, or esoteric knowledge (Lala 2022).

It was the divine desire to be known, as the prophetic tradition states, which resulted in the breath of the Compassionate, and the effect of the breath was to produce the cloud. All hylomorphic compounds in all realms of reality are then further differentiations of the divine in the cloud and come into being through other channels that are delineated in the Qur'an. These include the creative command 'Be!' that is mentioned in Q16:40, in which God declares, 'Whenever we intend something, we say only 'Be!' and it is'. Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), whose commentary of the Qur'an is regarded as the pinnacle of polyvalent exegesis (Calder 1993, p. 110), asserts that this means all existents in the world are products of the divine creative command, including the actions of humankind because

‘most of our actions occur against our aims and intentions’, so if they are not directed by the divine will that issues the creative command, then they would appear without any purpose (Al-Qurṭubī 1964, vol. 10, p. 106).

There are other things that are created by God’s ‘hand’ in the cloud, or by both His ‘hands’, says Ibn ‘Arabī. In this, he agrees with his exoteric counterparts. It is reported in the compilations of traditions and commentaries of the Qur’an that the companion of Prophet Muḥammad, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar (d. 74/693), son of the second caliph, said, ‘God created four things with His “hand”: the Throne (*al-‘arsh*), Ādam, the Pen (*al-qalam*), and Eden, then He commanded the rest of His creation, “Be!” and it was’ (Al-Hākīm 1990, vol. 2, p. 349; Al-Qinnawjī 1992, vol. 5, p. 15; Al-Sam‘ānī 1997, vol. 6, p. 265; Al-Ṭabarī 2000, vol. 21, p. 239; Al-Lālikā‘ī 2003, vol. 3, p. 477; Al-Tha‘labī 2015, vol. 22, p. 573). These four things, therefore, are singled out and are created separately to the rest of the creation that is brought forth through the divine creative command.

Ibn ‘Arabī also differentiates between those things created by God’s ‘hand’, and those things created by His ‘two hands’. Only Ādam is given the distinction of being created by the two ‘hands’ of God, as explicitly stated in Q38:75 when God asks Satan, ‘O Satan, what prevented you from prostrating before that which I created with my own two hands?’ Most scholars agree that the designation of ‘two hands’ when referring to the creation of Ādam is metaphorical (Al-Maḥḥarī 1992, vol. 8, p. 192), and denotes the privileged position Ādam holds in the creational hierarchy (Al-Qurṭubī 1964, vol. 15, p. 228). The Ottoman era judge and exegete, Abu’l-Thanā’ al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), whose diverse educational background from ‘the traditionalist al-Musillī, the Salafī al-Suwaydī, and the Sufi revivalist Khalid al-Naqshbandī’ gives his commentary an outlook that imbibes all these traditions (Nafī 2002, p. 474), writes that the reason Ādam is singled out for creation with ‘two hands’, is to emphasize the divine creative power that is displayed in his creation, or because of the comprehensive nature of Ādam who embodies both the angelic and the animalistic aspects of creation since ‘the actions of angels are carried out by him, as if they are the effects of the right hand, and the actions of animals are committed by him, as if they are the effects of the left’ (Al-Ālūsī 1994, vol. 12, p. 216).

Ibn ‘Arabī explains that all the existents, notwithstanding those with the privileged rank of being created by the ‘hand/s’ of God, are generated by the creative command of ‘Be!’ He agrees with the exegetical tradition in this regard. Nevertheless, he asserts that this creative command only brings forth existents in the cloud. Therefore, the cloud is already in existence before the command is issued. This, he clarifies, is because the cloud itself is the result of the breath of the Compassionate. The ontological hierarchy that Ibn ‘Arabī sets up, therefore, is one in which the divine wants to be known in a creational other, which issues forth the existentiating mercy that takes the form of the breath of the Compassionate, which itself takes the form of the cloud in which all existents are created through the divine creative command or, in the case of favored creations, through the hand/s of God.

This means that the cloud is the starting point and cause of things in the different levels of existence, which is Ibn ‘Arabī’s definition for substance as he agrees with Aristotle in this regard. Ibn ‘Arabī makes this clear when he asserts,

The cloud was the substance of the cosmos (*jawhar al-‘ālam*), so it accepted all the forms, souls, and natures (*ṭabā‘ī*) of the cosmos ... thus the cloud is from His breath, and the forms that are expressed from it in the cosmos are from the word, ‘Be!’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 3, p. 420).

The cloud is the substance in the sense that it is the starting point and the cause of all existents in the different levels of reality, since it is the first differentiation of the divine. It also ‘accepted all forms ... of the cosmos’ and so it is prime matter because all the forms in the cosmos ‘are expressed from it’ through the divine creative command. Ibn ‘Arabī articulates this even more perspicuously when he proclaims that ‘God, the Exalted, introduced the forms of everything besides Himself from the cosmos in the cloud’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 310). The exception of ‘besides Himself’ requires some explanation because it has already been mentioned that all existents are loci of

divine manifestation. Ibn ‘Arabī wishes to underscore that even though all hylomorphic compounds are manifestations of God’s most beautiful Names, they are not as God is in His absolute essence, which is beyond comprehension let alone manifestation (Lala 2019). The absolute essence of God is thus not manifested in the cloud or in any other form of creation. Prime matter, therefore, accepts all the forms of the divine Names of God—not the apophatic divine essence—and this results in hylomorphic compounds in all levels of existence. Ibn ‘Arabī also employs the Qur’anic term ‘dust’ (*habā’*) to refer to the prime matter that accepts the forms of the divine Names and uses it synonymously with substance.

5. Prime Matter and Dust (*habā’*)

The term ‘dust’ (*habā’*) is mentioned twice in the Qur’an. In Q25:23 when God warns, *And we shall turn to those deeds that they committed, and we shall make them into scattered dust (habā’ manthur)*, and in Q56:6 when God declares that He will pound the mountains into ‘scattered dust’ at the end of time. ‘Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), more known for his works on the intersection of political theory and Islamic jurisprudence (Calder 1986, p. 44), writes in his somewhat overlooked work on Qur’anic exegesis that there are five meanings of the term ‘*habā’*’:

1. It is the dust raised by a riding animal (*rahj al-dābba*).
2. It is the particles that are like dust seen in rays of sunlight (*shi’ā’ al-shams*) when it comes through an aperture (*kuwwa*).
3. It is what the wind scatters of the dry leaves of trees.
4. It is a meat broth/gravy.
5. It is ashes (*ramād*) (Al-Māwardī n.d., vol. 4, p. 141).

Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), whose important contribution to the genre of Qur’anic exegesis is only recently being recognized (Saleh 2016), adds that it could also mean the dust on clothes (Al-Māturīdī 2005, vol. 8, p. 19).

While the Qur’an uses *habā’* to connote both the deeds of evildoers coming to nothing and the pulverization of the mountains at the end of days, Ibn ‘Arabī focuses on the latter denotation only and deems *habā’* to be the prime matter that accepts the forms of the divine Names, in the same way as dust is the minute building block of the mountains and the physical world more generally. He writes that the *habā’* is that in which God ‘introduces the forms of the bodies of the cosmos’ (*ajsām al-‘ālam*) (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 130). It is thus the matter to which the forms of existents combine. He goes on to assert that the *habā’* was

the first thing through the existence of which darkness was manifest, so it is a dark substance (*jawhar muzlim*) in which transparent bodies (*ajsām shaffāfa*) and other things were manifest. So every darkness in the cosmos is from the substance (*jawhar*) of the *habā’*, which is prime matter (*hayūlā*) (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, pp. 647–48).

The first differentiation of the divine in creation is the *habā’*, which is the substance and prime matter that combines with all forms in the cosmos and creates hylomorphic compounds. This passage demonstrates again that Ibn ‘Arabī uses the terms ‘substance’ (*jawhar*) and ‘prime matter’ (*hayūlā*) interchangeably. He explains that even this dark substance that is the basis of hylomorphic compounds, particularly in the physical world, is still predicated on, and accepts, divine light (*nūr ilāhī*). In fact, it is constituted from divine light; therefore, even darkness is based on light, and all things in the cosmos are from the light of God. He writes that the basis (*aṣl*) of natural bodies (*ajsām ṭabī‘iyya*)

is from light. This is why if humankind knows how all the dense (*kathīfa*), dark (*ẓulmāniyya*) bodies become pure, and are made transparent with light—which is its source—like glass when it is pure from dirt and sand, and becomes transparent, . . . [they would realize] that this is only because the source of all existents is God, and His Name, ‘Light of the heavens (which is what is above) and the earth (which is what is below)’ (Ibn ‘Arabī n.d., vol. 2, p. 647).

All hylomorphic compounds in the sensible world are ‘dense’ (*kathīf*) and perceptible to the senses, as opposed to the ‘subtle’ (*latīf*) existents of the pre-sensible worlds (Powers 2004, p. 441). Ibn ‘Arabī explicates that even the dense and turbid hylomorphic compounds of the sensible world are still based on divine light in the same way as clear glass is created when dense and unclear sand is removed. The *habā’*, therefore, is the prime matter or the dark substance that accepts the forms of hylomorphic compounds in the sensible world, but is itself based on divine light. Ibn ‘Arabī’s exposition of the source of *habā’* is, yet again, Qur’anic as he predicates it on the famous Light Verse (Q24:35), in which God is described as ‘the Light of the heavens and the earth’. This means that the Aristotelian terms of prime matter and substance are converted to the Qur’anic term of *habā’*, which comes from the Qur’anic notion of God as the light of the heavens and the earth.

6. Conclusions

Ibn ‘Arabī accepts Aristotelian hylomorphism. He agrees that all primary substances in the world are hylomorphic compounds of matter and form in which matter ultimately comes from prime matter, or *hayūlā*. He parts ways with Aristotle when he identifies prime matter with substance, or *jawhar*. Nevertheless, it is in his thoroughgoing theologization of hylomorphism that he displays greatest independence from Aristotle. Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the divine substance is the cause and starting point of all existence. Prime matter, which is used interchangeably with substance, is the divine substrate that represents the potentiality of all things, and this potentiality is actualized if it combines with the forms of God’s Names. The stimulus for the forms of the divine Names to combine with divine prime matter is the breath of the Compassionate. The result of this divine breath of existentiation pervading divine prime matter is the ‘cloud’ that is mentioned in prophetic traditions. This cloud is the first recipient of the divine mercy of existentiation, or the product of God’s desire to see His Names manifested in creation. This happens at all levels of existence. However, when it comes to the perceptible world, prime matter and substance is referred to Ibn ‘Arabī by the Qur’anic term of ‘dust’ (*habā’*). It is this ‘dust’ that combines with all forms to create the hylomorphic compounds that are manifestations of the divine.

The foregoing demonstrates that Ibn ‘Arabī carries out a complete theologization of Aristotle’s concepts and ideas, and articulates them using concepts and terms from the Qur’an and prophetic traditions. While he disagrees with Aristotle on issues like the independence and separability of prime matter, it is in his complete theological reformulation and its articulation in Qur’anic and *ḥadīth*-derived nomenclature that he truly showcases his originality.

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