

# Qualified Univocity: *Māhiyyah* in the Light of *Wujūd*

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Examine well the penetration of the light of *wujūd* and the permeation of its rule in the totality of meanings through the totality of mental considerations and actual realities, to such an extent that the abstraction of quiddity from *wujūd* presupposes the *wujūd* of this quiddity.

*Mullā Ṣadrā*

In this state (of ecstasy) neither the jug is manifest nor the water. Consider well, and God knoweth best what is right.

*Rūmī*

*Bismi'LLāh al-rabmān al-rabīm*

**C**ertainly one of the most central and profound matters one can investigate is the nature of the relationship between the being of creatures and the being of God. It is often said that God exists, just as it is said that many other things exist. This being the case, it is only natural to then ask whether existence is predicated of everything other than God in the same manner in which it is predicated of God Himself. Such an inquiry of course has a well-established and long-standing history in the domains of philosophy and theology, and it goes without saying that the conclusions one arrives at have the greatest possible significance not only for individual spiritual aspirants but also for the religious communities they collectively comprise, hence the often impassioned controversy surrounding such issues of a fundamental metaphysical nature. Given the extensive historical manifestations in various traditional milieus of the subject in question, it will be necessary to limit the scope of the

present essay to just one of these manifestations, with the added objective of humbly shedding light on a certain obscurity that has arisen in our chosen context, namely that of Islamic philosophy. While perhaps no such obscurity exists for those well-versed in the relevant primary sources, we have noticed, through our own experience, that the same cannot be said for the lay person who would approach this field through the mediation of secondary literature composed in English with an eye toward understanding deeply one of its central problematics, i.e. the true nature of the relation of being or existence to quiddity or essence. It is here already that one can point to the heart of the problem, which is rooted in the ambiguity of the Arabic words *wujūd* and *māhiyyah*, to which the aforementioned English terms correspond. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has pointed out, the word *wujūd* admits of up to four distinct meanings in the Islamic philosophical tradition taken as a whole, and while *māhiyyah* refers conventionally to one of two basic meanings,<sup>1</sup> it in fact admits of an indefinite semantic gradation, as we hope will become clear.

Before proceeding it will be useful to make explicit the link between the two questions posed thus far. The first is the proper way of conceiving the attribute “existent” vis-à-vis all the possible subjects of which it can be predicated, most notably God and that which is other than God, and the second is whether *wujūd* or *māhiyyah* is ontologically prime. It was said above that the second question will serve as the particular lens through which the first question is viewed, just as it was alluded to that any obscurities plaguing the former will lead to potentially dangerous repercussions in the latter insofar as a given individual’s doctrinal orientation and thus ultimate success on the plane of method is shaped and in part determined by the study of Islamic metaphysics. That being said, we can now summarize the problem at hand as follows. Regarding the question of the univocity or equivocity of being, as it has been called, it is clear that if one affirms the former position, the danger of pantheism arises in proportion to the degree to which one fails to distinguish rigorously between the concepts of being and existence, since, to use philosophical language, the being of God is necessary, while the existence of creatures is contingent.<sup>2</sup> But if one affirms ontological equivocity with the intention of safeguarding the transcendence of

<sup>1</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present*, Albany, 2006, p. 66. This essay is dedicated to Dr. Nasr, to whom the author is profoundly indebted.

<sup>2</sup> We are hinting here at a technical usage for the terms being and existence, to be explained more fully in what follows, although the reader is likely already familiar with it.

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