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The Translation

The translation was begun in 1992 as a collaborative effort by Azim Sarvdalir and Muhammad Legenhausen and has been supported by the Baqir al-'Ulum Foundation and later by its successor, the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute. The learning made possible through cooperative translation with native speakers of both languages warrants further attention.

Each of the translators benefited enormously by the work of the other. The result far exceeds what could be expected by summing the separate talents of the translators. This is not to boast of any brilliance for the final product. This translation was undertaken as a learning process.

Our aim has been to produce an accurate translation in a relatively fluent style of academic English that can be of service to the beginning student of Islamic philosophy. For this reason, all technical terms have been transliterated in parentheses beside the English terms coined to represent them.

Finding a useful English expression has often been difficult. Sometimes the nearest equivalent English word has a somewhat different sense than the Arabic or Farsi term, and a proper understanding of the text turns upon the difference. Sometimes distinct Arabic terms come closest to a single English word, as there are good reasons for translating both dhat and mahiyyah as "essence".

While other more experienced translators have used "essence" and "quiddity" respectively for these two terms, I have shunned "quiddity" because it is not used in philosophy in English, while "essence" is used by English speaking philosophers, but in different contexts for what the Muslim philosopher would express by one or the other of the Arabic terms.

I began by translating both as "essence" with the Arabic in parentheses, but this made the passages in which both terms occur nearly unintelligible if one read only the English. Finally, William Chittick's suggestion to use "whatness" for mahiyyah has been adopted (leading to the use of "whatish" for mahuwi).[1] This makes for an artificial English, but it is less confusing, and once one gets accustomed to it, the literal affinity of "whatness" to the Arabic mahuwiyyah seems to convey its sense better than other suggestions. "Essence" has been retained for dhat (and "essential" for dhati) although this also leads to divergence from contemporary philosophical usage.

In Islamic philosophy, the essential (dhati) is that pertaining to the entity in question, intrinsically, in itself, while in contemporary English philosophical usage, essential properties are those the entity must have to retain its identity or to exist as what it is. On the other hand, we have often found that a single Arabic or Persian word has various meanings which must be translated by different English terms, as the notorious i'tibari, which can be used to indicate that something is subordinate, or that it is a mere respect, or that it lacks entified ('ayni) reality, or that it pertains to value rather than fact, and there are other meanings.

Here the term is translated as respectival, unless another meaning is clearly indicated, in which case the Arabic is transliterated. These observations belie the reliability of back-translation as an adequate test of accuracy. We have often found that in order to make the author's point clear, we have to phrase a sentence in such a way that if the English were translated back into Farsi, the result would be different from the original. Near synonymy in translation is not a symmetric relation.

Starting with Lesson 11, on epistemology, this translation first appeared serialized in Al-Tawhid, beginning with Vol. XI, Nos. 3 & 4, 1414/1994, p. 96f. We are grateful for the sensitive editing of Ali Quli Qara'i, although we accept responsibility for the infelicities and inconsistencies that remain.

1. William C. Chittick, The Self-Disclosure of God (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. xx.

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