



Huwiyya هوية (identity, substance, essence, existence)

Huwiyya is an abstract noun from the pronoun *huwa* (he), and comes directly from the lexicon of Hellenistic learning. It has also been suggested that it is a loan-word based on the Syriac *hāywā*.¹ The relationship between *huwiyya* and *mawǧūd*, and which should be used for the same Greek word, constituted a significant dilemma for Arabic translators of Greek philosophical texts. Indeed, Ibn Rushd's (d. 595/ 1198) "overwhelming interest" was "in the difference between 'mawǧūd' or 'huwiyya' which signifies the essence of the thing and the 'mawǧūd' or 'huwiyya' which signifies the true. ... Should they use 'mawǧūd', despite its misleading paronymous form, or coin a new word and say 'huwiyya'?"²

First appearing as a cameo in the works of Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī's (d. 259/ 873) circle,³ there is a close association between *huwiyya* and the abstract noun *anniyya* as both are translations for the Greek terms *on* ("being") and *einai* ("to be").⁴ *Huwiyya*, nonetheless, is also employed by these early translators as an antonym for "otherness."⁵ Adamson suggests that *huwiyya* is most commonly used to denote *on* whereas *anniyya* is mainly reserved for *einai*.⁶ Yet, there are cases when the converse is also true. The interchangeability between the terms suggests that the difference between them was not sufficiently delineated.⁷ Indeed, Abū Nasr al-Fārābī (d. 339/ 950) resolutely declares the two to be synonyms.⁸

In al-Kindī's circle, then, *huwiyya* and *anniyya* is used to refer to God, in terms of his existence, which is often presented with the ordinal adjective, *al-ūlā* (the first). This means the nature of God's existence is not expressed by the term, only its priorness to everything.⁹ However, there are also passages of the *Theology of Aristotle* translated by al-Kindī's circle that clearly deny that the First has being. The term, thus, is also applied to that which does have being first, which is the *intellect*.¹⁰ Adamson hypothesizes that:

... the Adaptor¹¹ is trying to hold on to the idea that God *is* being, though he is prepared to admit that God does not *have* being, perhaps thinking that this would imply that God has being as something external attributed to him.¹²

In this case, *huwiyya* (and *anniyya*) is "the immediate effect and proper effect of the First, with all things being indirect effects through the mediation of the intellect."¹³ There are other times, though, when it refers to the unknown-ness of God. We are told that His *huwiyya* is "not perceived in any way. He is the one whose name is unknown, to say nothing of His substance."¹⁴

Another connotation of *anniyya* and *huwiyya* used by this early theologian/translator is that it is an articulation of God's simplicity, meaning, "His being [is] nothing other than what it is" because

“if God had attributes distinct from His being, He would not be truly one.”¹⁵ Again, this is not an outright negation redolent of the hypertranscendentalism of the Mu’tazilites, for it is conceded that though God has no attributes because He is their cause, He is still connected to them in the way a cause is connected to the caused. In this sense, then, He does have attributes.¹⁶ Also, at other times, it seems positive attributes, at least in principle, can be said to be identical to God’s *huwiyya*.¹⁷

Al-Kindī himself further uses *huwiyya* to underscore the simplicity of God, that is to say, he equates God’s being to His simplicity. This means the primary difference, according to al-Kindī, is that God’s *huwiyya* does not have multiplicity, everything else, in contrast, does.¹⁸ The term *huwiyya*, thus, has the following early meanings:

1. It denotes God in terms of His priorness to everything else.
2. It is a term for the first thing to have being, that is, the intellect.
3. It connotes the unknown-ness of God, who cannot be apprehended by intellects.
4. It represents the positive attributes of God that are His being insofar as He is their cause, but are not He as He is one and simple.
5. It means the simplicity and unity of God, as opposed to the multiplicity of all other things.

By al-Fārābī’s time, *huwiyya* was already very much part of the philosophical lexicon, which is why the late philosopher, Ibn Rushd, is somewhat of an outlier in seeking to explain the term.¹⁹ Al-Fārābī, without feeling the need to elucidate the term, makes an important distinction between *māhiyya* and *huwiyya*: the former connotes conceptual essence, and the latter, an individual, existing manifestation of that essence,²⁰ such as man, and Fred who is *a* man. He also distinguishes between mental and extra-mental (that is, proper) existence, with *huwiyya* being employed for the latter. The only example where there is no distinction between *māhiyya* and *huwiyya*, according to al-Fārābī, is in God. This is because every essence needs an external stimulus to bring it into existence, notwithstanding God.²¹

Huwiyya seems to be a term of extraordinary versatility. In the *Liber de Causis*, it is applied to the whole gamut of beings, from God, the first Being, to pure intelligences, to beings with sensible existence.²² Indeed, in Ibn Rushd’s commentary of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, it is “said to assume as many meanings as Aristotle has categories.”²³ Moreover, according to Ibn Rushd, not only may *huwiyya* be used for substances and accidents, it may also denote both the essence of a thing, and whether it is true, that is, actual, or existing. In both cases, the word is the same, but the meaning very different.²⁴ A.M. Goichon identifies eleven uses for *huwiyya* in *Lexique de la langue philosophique d’Ibn Sīnā*,²⁵ the primary denotation being “a concrete being considered universally.”²⁶ Ibn Sīnā expounds much on the distinction between *māhiyya* and *huwiyya* initially presented by al-Fārābī,²⁷ and the term clearly plays a pivotal role in his philosophy.

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Further Reading

Lala, Ismail. *Knowing God: Ibn 'Arabī and 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī's Metaphysics of the Divine*. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

¹ Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, 219, ft. 30; Olga Lizzini, “Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna,” 117.

² Stephen Menn, “Fārābī in the Reception of Avicenna’s Metaphysics: Averroes against Avicenna on Being and Unity,” 62. See Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al- Hallāj*, 3:8. See also Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic*, 5-9. The aim of the present work, as stated, is not to sketch the historical evolution of the term. F. E. Peters provides a good overview of the terms that entered the Arabic language from Greek in relation to Ibn ‘Arabī. See F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs*, 214. It is also not my purpose to scrutinize whether this term belonged to philosophy or theology (*kalām*), or whether there was even a distinction between the two disciplines in the respective eras of Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Qāshānī. Certainly, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) stated that “by his time, works on *Kalām* and works on *Falsafa* appeared to be no longer distinguishable” (A. I. Sabra, “*Kalām* Atomism as an Alternative Philosophy to Hellenizing *Falsafa*,” 203. See also A. I. Sabra, “The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam,” where the significance of this circumstance is analyzed in terms of astronomy.) In this study, I will concentrate on an analysis of thought, ideas and intellectual methods, though this endeavour, naturally, cannot be entirely extricated from the historical context.

³ Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, 125.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161. Joel Kraemer declares that the two are used simply to express “*that he exists*,” there being no difference between them whatsoever. (Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam*, 216.)

⁸ Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, 126.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹ This is most likely to be Ibn Nā’ima al-Ḥimsī, according to Adamson. (See Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, 176-77.)

¹² Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “*Huwiyya*.” The term had become such a staple of the philosophical tradition by the middle of the 4th/10th century that its primary connotations were taken for granted by philosophers. Ibn Rushd, for the purpose of thoroughness, it seems, sought to define it first before deploying it.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ian Richard Netton, *Allāh Transcendent*, 110.

²² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. “*Huwiyya*.”

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lizzini, “Wuğūd-Mawğūd/Existence-Existent in Avicenna,” 117.