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The Problem of Hylomorphism and Dualism in Avicenna: A Guide to Resolving Other Tensions

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Abstract
One of the greatest challenges posed to the student of Avicenna's psychology is whether he upholds a hylomorphic or dualistic conception of the soul. The hylomorphic position is the one espoused by Aristotle, in nuce that the soul is the entelecheia, or substantial form, of the body considered as matter. The dualistic position is that the soul is a separate substance that controls the body, itself also a substance. The goal of this essay is to determine the full complexity of Avicenna's position, by dissecting four of his great psychological works, each from a different point in his career: The Compendium on the Soul, The Origin and the Return, The De Anima from The Cure, and On the Rational Soul. Ultimately, we contend herein that the method we employ in solving this paper's central problem can serve as a guide to resolving other such problems in Avicenna's philosophy.

Keywords
Avicenna, Ibn Sina, Soul, Hylomorphism, Dualism, Aristotle, Plato, Middle Eastern Philosophy, Arabic Philosophy, Psychology, Medicine, History, Ann Moyer, Moyer, Ann, Humanities

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Independent Study
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I. Introduction

Avicenna (ibn-Sīnā) is often branded a Peripatetic,[1] sometimes with the qualification that he managed to synthesize onto an Aristotelian substrate a variety of other traditions, ranging from the Galenic medical, to the Neoplatonic cosmological, and the Islamic theological.[2] Generally, historians who make this observation follow upon it by praising Avicenna's systematic synthesis as the culmination and convergence of distinct traditions of philosophical commentary. For these historians, Avicenna was the highest iteration—but an iteration no less—in a long chain of synthesizing commentators.[3] The chain dates back to the third century AD to the first great commentator of Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and a little later to the founding of Neoplatonism by Ammonius Saccas and his disciples, Plotinus and Porphyry; with these men, we are told, arose the immediate concern of resolving first the tensions discretely inherent to Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies, and then those difficulties in reconciling the one with the other. Avicenna's place in the tradition occurs much later, only after Themistius inherited the Neoplatonists' synthesizing enterprise (fourth century AD); after another Ammonius, son of Hermeias, broke from the Neoplatonists and introduced a new hermeneutical method (sixth century AD); after the Christian Syriac translators brought such enterprise to the Arab-speaking world (eighth-ninth centuries AD); after ʾIsḥāq ibn-Ḥunayn and the al-Kindī circle contributed their Arabic translations (ninth century AD);

1 By many of his successors, most notably Al-Ghazālī, who criticized him for it in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-Falāsifaʾ*), as well as by modern scholars, preeminently Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*.
2 See Hall, "Interpreting Avicenna."
3 Wisnovsky, "Avicenna and the Avicennan Tradition," 97; Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 255-261; Hall, "Intellect, soul and body in Ibn Sīnā," 63-64.

and after al-Fārābi and the Baġdād Peripatetics picked all these elements up and worked them into their own syntheses (ninth-tenth centuries AD). We do not dispute that it is at this point, and under the influence of these many traditions, that Avicenna flourished; yet a few serious problems arise for attaining a more comprehensive understanding of Avicenna's philosophy when we simply categorize him as an iteration in a long chain. For while historians seem generally united in proclaiming the height of Avicenna's synthesizing genius, they are also quick to cast the many and frequent strains in his philosophy merely as necessary products of this same genius' obstinate synthesizing. In other words, for these historians, although Avicenna was the best synthesizer to have ever lived, his philosophy still strains because of the inherent incompatibility of sections from Aristotle, Plato, Galen and Islam. This last opinion is the one that we contest: while it does much to account for some of the probable origins of the difficulties in Avicenna, it does little to help us understand how his most original arguments hang together; rather, it proceeds from the presupposition that they *do not*. If this were the case, then it would mean that Avicenna was an excellent synthesizer—but a bad philosopher; and that, if so, in a world today where interest in systematic philosophical syntheses has ebbed, Avicenna's readership would probably be, at best, intellectually negligible.

What we propose here is to find alternative explanations to the frequent strains in Avicenna's philosophy. We do not doubt that the bulk of the Avicennan corpus reads as if it incorporates elements from preceding philosophical traditions into a remarkable systematic synthesis. What we do doubt is whether its strains are a result of this synthesis. Ultimately, our hope is that, if we were to reinterpret the causes of the corpus' many strains, we would better understand the strains themselves. To this effect, we posit

two extreme possibilities, both of which relate to Avicenna's independence as a thinker. The first is what most historians seem to presuppose, viz. that Avicenna's works were merely a rehashing of Aristotelian doctrines, incorporating tidbits from the other traditions; and that Avicenna was only independent to the extent in which he chose to interconnect these traditions, and in the original ways in which he attempted to resolve their inherent contradictions. The other possible extreme is that Avicenna was a fully independent thinker in his own right, who dressed his arguments in an Aristotelian language and incorporated the other traditions out of convenience, for reasons external to the philosophy (e.g. a desire to gain wider readership and acceptance, or the necessity of securing patronage); in other words, in this possible scenario his works would only effectively *read* like a synthesis, though it would only *incidentally be* a synthesis. Whether one of these possibilities is true, or close to the truth, is what we will examine below. The practical purpose these two extremes serve is to delimit the scope of our inquiry; they frame our guiding questions: whether Avicenna worked from the Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, Galenic and Islamic traditions to his ultimately original philosophical arguments, or from an already unique philosophy to a seemingly incorporative product. Crucially, these questions are not meant to set up a false dilemma: the "or" in the preceding sentence should be read inclusively. It is quite possible—indeed, it will be suggested—that the fact is somewhere in between the extremes.

Part of the difficulty in our investigation is the lack of work done on the Avicennan corpus as a whole. Dimitri Gutas remarked already in 1988 that critical editions of a good portion of the corpus are hard to come by even in Arabic, which has

not changed much to date;[4] translations into modern European languages are even scarcer. This is to the detriment of a large contingent of interested Western intellectual historians, who wish to study the development of Avicennism to better understand its contributions to European thought, but who are incapacitated by the language barrier.[5] Cognizant of this great impediment, Gutas published in 1988 the extremely useful *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, in which one may find, for the first time, translations of many sections of those works of Avicenna that have been often overlooked by scholars, but which are still important to the intellectual historian. As can be inferred from our notes, this paper is greatly indebted to Gutas' translations and commentaries and calls out for more of this kind of scholarship. Particularly troublesome to us is the fact that there has been little work done on the authenticity of most of the Avicennan corpus,[6] which can cripple a truly genetic reading. Though in recent years some work has begun to be done in this area,[7] there is still much to be desired. Lastly, Gutas also astutely observed that, although scholars are blessed with Avicenna's autobiography, this fact has made it seem as if any further biographical research were unnecessary, resulting in our present ignorance about many details of the philosopher's life and forcing us to take his autobiography often at face value.[8]

The present paper will attempt to make these problems more manageable by concentrating on one aspect of Avicenna's philosophy, namely psychology, and within it, on a particular point of tension. If our method guides us rightly, our hope is to propose at

4 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 1.
5 The present essay is a case-in-point; here we used whatever translations of Avicenna we could find into European languages; the result is that, notwithstanding our use of English, French, Portuguese, and Latin sources, we are limited in scope to less than a handful of Avicenna's psychological works.
6 McGinnis, "Introduction," ix.
7 See Reisman, "The Pseudo-Avicennan Corpus."
8 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 1.

the end a solution to this point of tension that could be translated so as to elucidate many of the other strains spread throughout the philosophical corpus. In other words, we are using psychology, and a specific difficulty with Avicenna's definition of the soul, as a sort of laboratory for determining a viable answer to the question of his independence; this insight, we claim, will aid in understanding how the whole of his philosophy hangs together. The reason we use psychology as our "test case" in particular is that it plays a very central role in providing cohesion to Avicenna's wider philosophy; Robert Hall, in fact, described it as the "spine of the system," forming a central hub that connects to cosmology, physiology, epistemology, metaphysics, thaumaturgy, theology and even ethics and political theory.[9] Gutas seconds this notion, saying that Avicenna's theoretical psychology "presents *in nuce*" his entire philosophical system.[10]

Both Hall's and Gutas' opinions are buttressed by the fact that psychology works itself into every one of Avicenna's major philosophical treatises. Of these, Avicenna's first oeuvre, *A Compendium on the Soul* (*Maqāla fī n-nafs*), was entirely psychological, as was his very last work, *On the Rational Soul* (*Risāla fī n-nafs an-nāṭiqa*). His cosmological treatise, *The Origin and the Return* (*Al-Mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād*), the first text in which we find his mature metaphysical and emanationist scheme, is divided into three parts, one of which features the soul, detailing its origination and permanence. The encyclopedic *The Cure* (*Kitāb aš-Šifāʾ*), written at the request of his disciples, possesses his longest psychological text. The shorter summa, *The Salvation* (*Kitāb an-Najāt*), mirrors the content and organization of *The Cure.* There is even the question of his lost work, *The Easterners* (*Kitāb al-Mašriqīyūn*), written in Iṣfahān later in his career (after

9 Hall, "Intellect, soul and body in Ibn Sīnā," 63.
10 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 72.

1024), of which all that we possess is the prologue. This book has been the cause of much debate, especially since Avicenna promises to disclose in it "the fundamental elements of *true* philosophy"[11]—about which all we can do is speculate. What we do know is that psychology is invoked already in *The Easterners*' prologue: Avicenna discusses in relative length his possessing more *intuition* than other philosophers, applying to himself a principal tenet of his psychology.[12] Lastly, it cannot go without mention that even in Avicenna's least theoretical and most practical work, the comprehensive *Canon of Medicine* (*al-Qānūn fī ṭ-ṭibb*), psychology figures in; although Avicenna warned his physician readers that theoretical psychology "lie[s] outside the province of the physician *qua* physician," he still had to work into this treatise—and *especially* this one—at least *some* account of the vital principle, even if in purely physical, often materialistic, and most certainly not metaphysical nor cosmological, terms.[13]

Ideally, we would look at each one of those works, map out all the areas in which the synthesis seems to strain too hard, where contradictions arise, and where, to solve these problems, Avicenna had to intervene with a new and original idea; and then, analyzing the differences regarding these points among the various texts, we would study the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of these treatises, so as to ultimately understand the causes of Avicenna's incorporative synthesizing, and, in so doing, understand also the extent of Avicenna's independence as a thinker. Such a method, however, is impractical in the short term and, we would dare say, impossible for a single

11 *The Easterners*, sec. Prologue §6.
12 *Intuition*, for Avicenna, is the ability to arrive at the middle term of a syllogism without having to work it out; it is the result of a connection of the human intellect to the heavenly Active Intellect, which is higher up on the emanationst scheme, closer to God.
13 Hall, "Intellect, soul and body in Ibn Sīnā," 72-73.

person. It would be more realistic to replicate this method in a much narrower scale, focusing on one or two texts from each principal period of Avicenna's life, and picking one representative area of tension, mapping out its changes (if any) throughout the different texts. Such is the method we employ herein. Should such labor bear good fruits, then perhaps this is a method we could suggest to our colleagues in the future. In the meantime, we have picked a single area of tension that promises to be telling; it is *fundamental* in the sense that it pervades the whole of Avicenna's psychology, and it is *essential* in the sense that it addresses quite explicitly the definition of the soul.

II. Fleshing out the difficulties

As the chosen area of tension is about the very essence of the soul, every reader of Avicenna's psychological works eventually has to come to grips with it. The problem is rooted in a disagreement with Aristotle regarding the generic definition of the soul: whereas Aristotle seems to define the soul in *De anima* II.1 as the substantial form of the body, Avicenna argues, in more than one place, that the soul is itself a substance, and, in the case of the rational soul, subsisting in itself separately from the body.[14] What makes the departure from Aristotle problematical is that Avicenna still incorporates, verbatim, Aristotle's generic definition of the soul into a variety of his treatises. In fact, Avicenna clearly states, in his principal psychological works, not only that the soul is the primary entelechy of the body, but particularly that it is also *a form*, implying that the relation between soul and body is that of form to matter (i.e. hylomorphism).[15] How can he, then,

14 *The Origin and the Return*, III.10; *The Cure: De anima*, I.III; *The Salvation*, II.VI.XII-XIII; *On the Rational Soul*, §5.
15 *A Compendium on the Soul*, 2; *The Cure: De anima*, I.I.

in the same treatises in which he provides that very definition, also argue that the soul is a substance, and in the case of the rational soul, not just a substance, but a separate and self-subsistent one? And, more importantly: what were his motivations? This section will deal with the first question, while the second is reserved to the next one.

The treatises we have chosen to investigate to answer these questions are: (I) from Avicenna's early period, the *Compendium on the Soul;* (II) from his middle period, *The Origin and the Return* and (III) the psychological part (*De anima*) of *The Cure*; and (IV) from his late period his very last work *On the Rational Soul.* In terms of format, the contrast between these works is vast: the *Compendium* is a short dedicatory treatise; *The Origin and the Return* is an idiosyncratic collection of three treatises, each containing short, paragraph-long chapters; *The Cure* is long and encyclopedic, fleshing out in detail even the most minor considerations; and *On the Rational Soul* is the shortest, reading much like a hurried and cursory summary. Curiously, however, in terms of their psychological content, these treatises differ only with regard to quantity, not substance; that is, they only differ with regard to how much of Avicenna's doctrines fit into each, not the content of those doctrines. As we look to these samples from the Avicennan corpus to better understand the tension between the soul's self-subsistent substantiality and its place in hylomorphism, one thing becomes apparent: what was an apparently "weak" tension in the *Compendium* becomes almost irresolvable in the later works, starting with *The Origin and the Return*. This difference is important, as it tells of the consistency of Avicenna's philosophy, a fundamental piece to the puzzle of his ultimate independence as a thinker.

1. *Compendium on the Soul*

In the *Compendium* Chapter 2 Avicenna explicitly states that "the soul is a form, and forms are realized perfections (*entelecheia*)." *Compendium* Chapter 9, however, is entirely a proof of the rational soul's immateriality and substantiality.[16] Avicenna's proof seems to be a conflation of Aristotle's argument in *De anima* III.5, viz. that the potential intellect does not function through a bodily organ, with the one in III.6, viz. that the intellect can only think of indivisible things if those things are necessarily true (if they can be false, Aristotle posits, then they are divisible). Aristotle does not draw the conclusion in either of these passages that the soul is a substance; inferring such a conclusion from these arguments is Avicenna's own, original addition. Avicenna's claim here, however, is not entirely incompatible with Aristotle's position; notice that in *Compendium* Chapter 9 Avicenna is not arguing that the rational soul is *subsistent through itself.* Furthermore, other arguments that we find in his later works—that the soul is perpetual, for instance—which arguments would lead us to infer his belief in a self-subsistent soul, are entirely absent from the *Compendium*. So long as there is room to believe that Avicenna was speaking of the soul as a substance, but *immanent to and dependent upon a subject, the body, for its existence*, then there is *some room* for reconciliation with Aristotle's position. After all, in *De anima* II.1 Aristotle uses the phrase, "the soul must be a *substance* in the sense of the form of a natural body," which rings of Avicenna's earlier usage of the word "form" in *Compendium* Chapter 2. That

16 Van Dyck translated it "essentiality" rather than "substantiality." Strictly speaking, *essence* and *substance* have different meanings in the Peripatetic tradition. The original word that Van Dyck translated as "essence" is *jawhar*; this term figures in various other works by Avicenna, and it is usually translated as "substance" for nuanced philosophical reasons that do not merit discussion here. The Arabic word usually understood as "essence" is *ḏat*. For further reference, see the very useful Arabic-Portuguese glossary in Iskandar, *A origem e o retorno*, 265-282.

previous phrase, however, is not to imply that Aristotle believes that the soul is a substance *per se subsistens*, just as we cannot draw this inference from the *Compendium.* Rather, that phrase from *De anima* II.1 seems to imply that the soul, insofar as it gives being to the body, is *immanently* a substance, or that it is a substance when taken *in conjunction* with the body. It is in this light that we interpret Aristotle's later assertion, still in II.1, that "we can dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as though we were to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, or generally the matter of a thing *and that of which it is the matter*" (that is, the form—emphasis added). As such, although Avicenna leaves much unsaid in *Compendium*, part of the benefit of his doing so is that it gives us room to reconcile his statement that the soul is a form with his other claim that it is a substance. However, the fact that this is ambiguous, aside from making it a point of contention, does not resolve the tension.

2. *The Origin and the Return*

The tension manifests itself very differently in *The Origin and the Return*, where it is arguably transformed into a contradiction. In this treatise, we find a chapter (III.10) devoted to refuting "those who defend that the rational soul is an inseparable perfection." Avicenna is, in fact, responding to arguments against the soul's separate existence and self-subsistence, a position he espouses more overtly in Chapter III.6. The objections to which he responds are telling in themselves: The first objection paints Avicenna's position with much the similar colors that Plato uses in his description of how the soul governs the body. If the soul were a separate substance—the objection goes—then it

would govern the body much like a captain governs a ship;[17] this would imply that, just as a captain enters and exits a ship, so would the soul be capable of entering and exiting the body. Avicenna responds by rejecting the objection as a false analogy, and, in so doing, interestingly dissociating himself from Plato.[18] Avicenna is more hesitant, however to dissociate himself from Aristotle. This is clear from his response to the second objection. This objection is entirely on hylomorphic, and therefore Aristotelian, grounds:

> "If the soul existed separately from the body, no living thing, much less a human, would be united with it as form does to matter."[19]

This is, in fact, a rephrasing of the tension that has, thus far, guided the entirety of this present paper, namely, that it is impossible to hold that the soul is separate and self-subsistent, while also holding that it is a form in the sense in which Aristotle uses the word. However, Avicenna's response still seems like an attempt to reconcile his position with that of Aristotle. First, unlike the dismissal of the previous objection, Avicenna actually credits this objection with a response. Second, the framework he uses to resolve the objection is, at least in terminology, Aristotelian. Ultimately, Avicenna's response validates the objection, but at the same time it creates a new distinction, and all this distinction does is explain the objection away. In a nutshell, Avicenna argues that, while it may be true that the soul is not united to the body as form is to matter, it is united in the sense that, insofar as it is a substance, it can only perfect itself (i.e. attain a certain level of completion) when attached to *a particular matter*, that has the *capacity* to receive it.

17 Aristotle in *De anima*, II.1 uses precisely this same analogy, which he rules out; commentators like Thomas Aquinas (*Sententia libri De anima*, lib. 2. l. 2 n. 9) have generally interpreted Aristotle to be replying directly to Plato in this section, and rejecting his position.
18 Plato espoused a clearly dualistic psychology in the *Timaeus* and most notably in the *Phaedo*.
19 All the translations from the Portuguese are our own.

Therefore, Avicenna attempts to detangle the difficulty by making the unity of soul to body not simply incidental, but in fact causally rooted in the dispositions of each substance (i.e. of the body to receive the soul and of the soul to perfect itself on that body). This, however, does not resolve the contradiction: how can the soul be simultaneously a self-subsistent substance and a form attached to a body?

3. *De anima* from *The Cure*

Avicenna gives the subject more of a satisfactory treatment in the *De anima* of *The Cure*, but he is still unable to resolve the difficulty. Right in Chapter I of the first book of *De anima*, Avicenna says the soul "is a form," and, perhaps to be more conciliatory to Aristotle, "as if a form." Perhaps the latter is an issue of Avendauth's Latin translation, and it would be useful if the original Arabic were consulted. Regardless, further down the page Avicenna gives an account of the soul that is less accommodating; in fact, it seems to contradict his response to the objections posed in *The Origin and the Return* III.10, since he says "the soul can be called 'form' when considered in relation to the matter in which it exists, and an animal or vegetative substance is constituted from *both matter and form*."[20] This suggests, then, that Avicenna is embracing a hylomorphic view of the soul, painting animals and plants as composite substances, that is, composed of *both* matter and form, body *and* soul. Here, then, Avicenna seems to be giving a generic definition of the soul that would encompass the rational soul. A little later on, however, in this same chapter, Avicenna adds that when he calls the soul a form, he is not talking about the rational soul; in fact, he specifically changes terminology, switching

20 Emphasis added. Reading the antecedents of *ex quibus utrisque* to be *forma* and *materia*. All the translations from the Latin are ours.

from "form" to "perfection," so as to be more inclusive of the rational soul:

> "When we say, in teaching about the soul, that it is itself a perfection, we mean to give to 'perfection' more than just the meaning of the word 'soul,' and, even more than this, we mean to indicate that 'perfection' comprehends all the species of soul whatsoever, which is necessary [so as to include] the soul separate from matter [i.e. the rational soul]."

But the topic is not dropped altogether; Avicenna continues to employ the word "form" liberally, predicating it of soul, which he also calls substance. Further down this chapter, Avicenna, at last, addresses precisely this issue. He posits a hypothetical objector, who says to him, "When I say, '*the soul is a substance*,' that is, '*the soul is a form*,' I do not say this from a more general meaning of the word 'form,' but I take 'substance' to have the *same* meaning as 'form.'" And yet, just as Avicenna explained away the objection in *The Origin and the Return*, he also shoos this one off: "There is nothing in that." The hypothetical objector, however, was not all in vain; in the very same paragraph, Avicenna sees himself obliged to finally clarify what he means by "form" in this context: "that which does not exist in a subject in any way," which is simply a restatement of one of Aristotle's definitions of substance.[21] In other words, it seems that here Avicenna is using "form" strictly in *this* sense of "substance." This seems to be confirmed by Chapter III, which is devoted entirely to proving that soul falls into the Aristotelian category of Substance. One line from this chapter summarizes Avicenna's position well: "Therefore, the soul is a substance, because it is a form that does not exist in a subject." This line would make it seem as if Avicenna were agreeing with the likes of Thomas Aquinas in considering the soul a substantial form; but, upon closer inspection, what Avicenna is really doing is different, since he is clearly predicating "substance" of

21 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.8.

"form." In other words, it seems that here Avicenna attempted to resolve his difficulty by employing "form" analogically, or, even, equivocally, that is, deprived of the original Aristotelian sense of a principle immanent to matter, and concentrating solely on the sense it shares with substance. This is the pattern visible throughout the rest of *The Cure*'s *De Anima*. Avicenna keeping the word "form" in this context is suggestive; we will consider his reasons for doing so in the next full section.

4. *On the Rational Soul*

Unlike *The Cure*, Avicenna's last work, *On the Rational Soul*, is the least accommodating. In §5 we see quite explicitly that "the rational soul is a substance subsisting in itself, and is imprinted neither in a human body nor in any other corporeal entity." What is more telling is that Avicenna adds, in the same section, that the soul "has a certain association with the human body as long as the person is alive, but this association is not like the relation of a thing to its receptacle; it is, rather, like *the relation of a wielder of an instrument to the instrument*" (emphasis added). This is clearly the position of a dualist: instead of conceiving of the body's actuality (*entelecheia*) as coming from a supervening principle (i.e. form), he conceives it as coming from another substance, as an instrument has actuality when it is being used by its wielder.[22] When we juxtapose this with Avicenna's remark in §10 regarding the status of the soul after death, we return to the tension between form and self-subsistent substance. There, Avicenna calls the soul a form and he curiously brands the body "a receptacle," a noteworthy departure from the more traditional and Aristotelian "matter." This could be interpreted as

22 Although Aquinas, in *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, sec. 6, is addressing the Averroists, his explanation of how a body can acquire actuality from something other than form is particularly useful.

indication of how Avicenna is finally coming to terms with the fact that his theory of the soul has little resemblance left to hylomorphism; and that, by calling the soul "form" and the body "matter," he would just be confusing things further. Alternatively, this phenomenon might be an indication of the fact that Avicenna, at this point in his career, had little reason to *appear* Aristotelian. Whatever the reason, which we will be examining in the next section, Avicenna qualifies his choice of words as if precisely admitting that he has little hylomorphism left in his philosophy: he says in §10 that he does not mean "receptacle" in the sense of it being filled spatially by some occupant, but rather in the sense of it being filled by something else's *activity*. This implies that he uses "form" in the sense of it being the *principle* of that activity, which is stricter than the Aristotelian sense. For Aristotle, form is not only a principle of activity, but it is also primarily a principle of *being* to the matter it supervenes; for Avicenna, the only sense of "form" that was worthy of being imported into his philosophy was Aristotle's secondary and ancillary one. That this sense of "form" may be clearer, if we map it on to the analogy of the instrument and the wielder, the body is the instrument, and the form (the soul) is the wielder.[23] The question this raises is why Avicenna would wish to replace "matter" with "receptacle" but maintain "form" for "soul." Although the first would finally suggest a distancing from hylomorphism, the second seems to imply an attachment to it that he is still unable to shake off, even in this work, his last one.

23 Avicenna does not address what would be the logical extension of this: that if every principle of activity is a form, then a horse pulling a wagon is the form of wagon, just as a combustion which started a fire would be the form of fire, both of which propositions are absurd.

III. Why include hylomorphism, and why not?

We see in the prologue of the *Compendium* that Avicenna wrote it as a dedication to a prince, whom we find in his autobiography to be the Sāmānid sulṭān Nūḥ ibn-Manṣūr. Avicenna was around sixten years-old at the time of composition (ca. 996); he was living in Buḫārā, the capital of the soon-to-crumble Sāmānid empire. In the autobiography we are told of how, when Avicenna was eighteen, he, having already mastered medicine as well as a variety of other disciplines, and, having started to make a name for himself among physicians because he frequently read and studied with them, was summoned to help cure ibn-Manṣūr, who had to succumbed to a rare disease.[24] Perhaps the fact that he came to the attention of the physicians in the first place was because he had submitted the *Compendium* to ibn-Manṣūr four years before. Regardless, this event not only brought Avicenna to the sulṭān's attention, but awarded him the right to study the rare books in the prince's library, many of which were Greek in provenance,[25] transmitted to the Arab world through the Christian Syriac tradition and the Arabic translations of ʾIsḥāq ibn-Ḥunayn and al-Kindī's circle. Since Avicenna only gained access to the library after he completed the *Compendium*, the rare books he saw there did not in fact have an impact on his writing. He had, however, by that point, already intensively studied "all the parts of philosophy."[26] The *Compendium* was precisely a product of such intense study, and is widely considered to be Avicenna's maiden work.[27]

24 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 35.
25 Ibid., 37.
26 Ibid., 27.
27 Van Dyck, *A Compendium on the Soul*, sec. Preface

We are told in the autobiography that Avicenna was assigned an administrative post with the sulṭān just around the time of his father's death;[28] although Avicenna does not supply the year, the translator, William Gohlman, citing Avicenna's disciple ibn-Funduq,[29] believes it was around 1002, some four years after the *Compendium* was written; the dating suggests that the work could have assisted in capturing the attention of the court physicians but also of the Sāmānids themselves. It makes sense that it would, since this seems to have been Avicenna's intention in the first place: he had wished to present ibn-Manṣūr with a gift that would be, in his own words, "of all presents, the one he [would] appreciate most."[30] In a very practical level, therefore, this treatise was the medium in which Avicenna had chosen to show off his talents to the prince; as such, Avicenna would, in all probability, want to work in those aspects of his philosophy that would make him look the most appealing, while also excluding the ones that would raise any question concerning his intellectual or even religious integrity.

In this light, we can begin to understand why the treatise is the most accommodating to the tension between the soul's purported hylomorphism and its self-subsistent substantiality: Avicenna was trying to keep the polemics to a minimum. Moreover, we later learn in *On the Rational Soul*, in which Avicenna makes a brief mention of the *Compendium*, that he crafted the treatise as a "research" paper,[31] meant to be reflective of—*not* in conflict with—what was then the state of philosophy inherited from the Greeks (*falsafa*). The *Compendium* was not, in other words, meant to be original. In fact, if we compare the *Compendium* to the much more thorough *De anima*

28 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 41.
29 Ibid., 124.
30 *A Compendium on the Soul*, sec. Prologue.
31 *On the Rational Soul*, §11.

from *The Cure*, we find that the sections not included in the former were precisely those that, insofar as they were original, were therefore neither uncontroversial nor reflective of the current state of *falsafa*. These missing sections are: the doctrine of the perfected "holy soul" (which explains prophecy), the argument for the temporal origination of the soul, the denial of the soul's ability to transmigrate, and, more importantly, the argument for the immortality of the soul. When juxtaposed to this list, Avicenna's decision to include the argument for the soul's substantiality in Chapter 9 seems like a serious anomaly; yet his unwillingness to go much farther, that is, his hesitance to brand the soul, at this point, as self-subsistent, perhaps indicates that Chapter 9 was included only as a matter of interpretative clarification. As we have seen in Section II.1, the arguments in Chapter 9 were also not wholly irreconcilable with Aristotle's position.

In fact, far from an anomaly, the arguments in Chapter 9 of the *Compendium* actually foreshadow the overt espousal of dualism that we first see in Chapter III.6 of *The Origin and the Return*. In this treatise, Avicenna incorporates most of the elements from the *Compendium* into a much wider Neoplatonic emanationist scheme. Aristotle's active intellect, for instance, originally just the *nous poietikos* abiding in each individual person, is transformed to correspond to the lowest of the Neoplatonists' celestial intellects.[32] The reason why Avicenna would make these accretions is still the matter under inspection. We can start to form an answer to this question by considering the very first sentence of *The Origin and the Return*:

> "In this treatise I wish to show the truth of what one finds among the Peripatetics and what they arrived at concerning the origin and the return so as to gain favor

32 *The Origin and the Return*, chap. III.5.

with the shaykh Abū-Aḥmad ibn-Muḥammad ibn-Ibrāhīm al-Fārisī."[33]

Avicenna admits here that he wrote the treatise for a very practical purpose, which remits to the *Compendium*: just as that treatise was written back in 998 to please a sulṭān, ibn-Manṣūr, so was *The Origin and the Return* written in around 1012-1014 to please a shaykh, al-Fārisī. The method employed in each work was also essentially the same: to show off a talent in exposing and commenting on Peripatetic philosophy. The difference is that, while the *Compendium* was intended to be a summary of the Peripatetics' *psychology*, Avicenna purported to make *The Origin and the Return* an exposition of what he thought was their *cosmology*. This difference makes it clearer why Avicenna would have included elements from Neoplatonism to begin with: in so doing, he was simply reflecting what was then already customary among expositors of *falsafa*. Such a pervasive culture of integrating Neoplatonism into Aristotelianism was partially due to authorship misattributions traceable to the translation processes. Ever since al-Kindī, for instance, translated and reorganized Plotinus' *Enneads,* giving it the new title *The Theology of Aristotle,* much of the Arab world bought into the false notion that Aristotle himself had held Plotinus' views. Still, although this fact helps us understand why Avicenna would include Neoplatonism in a work purporting to be an exposition of "Peripatetic" cosmology, the question remains as to why Avicenna would make original accretions to an already-established philosophical and interpretative tradition. Previous synthesizers like al-Fārābi had successfully incorporated Neoplatonism into Aristotelianism without having to recur, for instance, to arguments of the soul's self-

33 Ibid., sec. Prologue.

subsistent substantiality.[34]

The history surrounding the composition of *The Origin and the Return* suggests a few alternative answers. First, there is the fact that—like the *Compendium*—this treatise was a dedication, this time to a shaykh, al-Fārisī. Unlike the sulṭān ibn-Manṣūr, however, who figures in a variety of historical accounts, we actually know very little about al-Fārisī.[35] All the records we have about the man are the ones that Avicenna's closest disciple, Abū-ʿUbayd al-Juzjānī, provides in his biography of Avicenna: first, that al-Fārisī was an "amateur of [these] philosophical sciences," i.e. the ones included in *The Origin and the Return*; second, that Avicenna was ultimately successful in securing al-Fārisī's patronage, since the man gave him a house.[36] Our present ignorance concerning al-Fārisī's life is admittedly an obstacle to understanding why Avicenna would seek the favor of that man in particular. We can still, however, extrapolate an answer based on a few suggestive facts: For one, we are left with the title "shaykh," which was was used back then (as it is now) as a form of respect meaning roughly "wise elder." Avicenna's calling al-Fārisī a "shaykh" perhaps hints at the fact that the man had a certain amount of influence within the local intellectual, if not political, communities. It seems that access to the latter was specifically what Avicenna sought; after all, he did write the treatise just after a calamitous period in his life, in which he was expelled from Buḫārā and forced to move from city to city. In fact, Avicenna's stay in Jurjān, al-Fārisī's city, was a rare moment of quietude for him: by 1005, some 7 years before *The Origin and the Return* was written, the Qarāḫānid Turks had overrun the Sāmānids in Buḫārā. With this,

34 See al-Fārābi, *L'épître Sur L'intellect (Al-Risāla Fī'l-ʿAql)*
35 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 126 n54; Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 98 n1.
36 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 98

Avicenna had effectively lost the protection gained during the sultanate of ibn-Manṣūr. Since Avicenna had previously held a high post in the sulṭān's administration, he likely found little or no favor with the occupying Turks. As a matter of fact, we know from the autobiography that the reason he moved to Jurjān in the first place was to be under the protection of Amīr Qābūs, then the ruler of the province. Before Avicenna got there, however, the amīr was seized and thrown in jail.[37] The safety of Jurjān, therefore, was at best uncertain. In fact, we know that shortly after moving to Jurjān Avicenna relocated to Dihistān, where he stayed for an equally short period, possibly because he was taken seriously ill; from there he moved back to Jurjān, where, if al-Fārisī's patronage meant anything, Avicenna was probably more well-connected. It does not seem unreasonable, then, that *The Origin and the Return* should have been written to attract the attention of potential intellectual sponsors and political protectors. Shaykh al-Fārisī might have been the gateway to these men, or he might have been one himself (he did, after all, give Avicenna a place to live). We also know that by the time Avicenna had met his disciple al-Juzjānī (ca. 1012), he was employed by Sulṭān Ziyārid Qābūs of Jurjān, implying he did eventually capture the attention of the local political elite, either through the intermediation of al-Fārisī or through some other means.[38] Either way, this would suggest that Avicenna's purpose in *The Origin and the Return*, which was a dedicatory work like the *Compendium*, was to please; and that, just as Avicenna was wary of new and potentially polemical ideas in the earlier *Compendium*, so would he want to be cautious in this later treatise.

This was not, however, what Avicenna did. Rather, he starkly departed in *The*

37 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 43
38 *The Cure*, al-Juzjānī's Introduction §2; Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 60 n3

Origin and the Return from the careful "research" method employed in the *Compendium.* In fact, whereas in the latter Avicenna avoided polemics, in the former he included many of the polemical parts that we later see in *The Cure*[39]—among which we class Avicenna's overt espousal of dualism. This is admittedly surprising; our surprise is only tempered by the fact that he was not all reckless: in *The Origin and the Return,* as afterwards in *The Cure,* Avicenna diligently refuted objections in an attempt to show how his conclusions were both sounder and had more explanatory power than those of his objectors.[40] This new method is perhaps a sign that Avicenna, by this point thirty-two years old, was growing more intellectually mature and secure. At a point in his life in which there was so much to threaten his well-being, it would seem logical that he would want to find physical security by employing the talent about which he felt most secure. It would therefore seem unreasonable that he would go out on a limb making potentially dangerous novel claims—unless he were confident that these innovations were buttressed by a strong foundation.

A hypothesis as to the purpose such innovations served is that they would set Avicenna apart from other potential competitors, and, if persuasive, would do much to enrich the learning of such an "amateur of [the philosophical] sciences" as al-Fārisī. Furthermore, Avicenna's sense of intellectual security must not have developed in a vacuum. In fact, we know that by this point Avicenna had already garnered a certain reputation for being a great intellectual; so much is implied by the verses that al-Juzjānī recited to him on the occasion of his return to Jurjān:

39 Listed at the top of page 18.
40 An example of which we analyzed in section II.2.

> "*When I became great*, no country could hold me;
> When my price went up, I lacked a buyer" (emphasis added).[41]

Avicenna therefore had a name to live up to; merely regurgitating Neoplatonic cosmology and Aristotelian psychology would not suffice to put him on a plain any higher than that of the many other expositors of his time, which is why he included the original accretions. We have direct evidence, in fact, that Avicenna included these novel claims into his work precisely to distinguish it from that of competing expositors. One such piece of evidence is a letter that Avicenna wrote to a disciple, a certain Kiyā. In the letter Avicenna makes particular mention of a group of intellectual rivals based in Baġdād,[42] whom he accuses of "disagreement, obtuseness, and wavering […] on the subject of the soul and the intellects," branding them "simple-minded."[43] His particular point of contention with them is that they lacked an understanding of the fundamental principles underlying Aristotle's psychology. These principles, we are told, are to be inferred from the *Physics*; importantly, however, they are not manifest in themselves. Rather, Aristotle supposedly "concealed" them; Avicenna's principal problem with the Baġdādīs is precisely that they had thus far been unable to reveal these hidden principles. The effect of this is that they "approached the house from the rear instead of the [front] door," that is, they built their entire interpretation of Aristotle on a stack of cards, on flimsy

41 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 43.

42 Although the letter was written in 1036, one year before Avicenna's death (that is, many years after the writing of *The Origin and the Return* in around 1012), it alludes to a group of Baġdādī expositors who, according to Gutas, were Nestorian Christians, and among whom was a certain famous writer Abū-l-Farraj Ibn-aṭ-Ṭayyib. We learn from Richard Walzer that this man was a disciple of the Arabic translator and expositor Al-Ḥasan ibn-Suwār (fl. 942-after 1017). The Baġdād Nestorians were therefore active during the entirety of Avicenna's lifetime.
See particularly Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 60 n1; Walzer, "New Light on the Arabic Translations of Aristotle," 102

43 Avicenna, "Letter to Kiyā," quoted in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 60

superficialities rather than deep first principles.[44] Elucidating these hidden first principles is just the task that Avicenna sets for himself in *The Origin and the Return,* and it is precisely through this that he would seek to distinguish himself. The last paragraph of the treatise's preface seems to suggest as much:

> "In these [three] parts *I intend to clarify what [the Peripatetics] have left obscure, to reveal what they have hidden and concealed, to gather what they have dispersed, to unfold what they have summarized into few words*, to the best of the limited capacity of a person beset by many difficulties: the age of scholarship is becoming extinct, concern with the objects of philosophy is diminishing and turned towards other pursuits, and hatred is turned against those who labor for unveiling a part of Truth. Moreover, eagerness and energy are exhausted from the minds of those who have suffered and been the subjects of so many trials of this age as I have been. But God is our recourse, for with Him are power and might!" (emphasis added).[45]

That the self-subsistent substantiality of the soul is one of these things that the Peripatetics "have left obscure" is once again evinced by the letter to Kiyā. One of Avicenna's qualms with the Baġdādīs is that they left out a fundamental principle from their exposition of Aristotle's *De anima*, namely, that "the thing in which the universal intelligibles are conceived is indivisible."[46] This is essentially that same argument we saw in Chapter 9 of the *Compendium*; it is from this argument that Avicenna, back then, already deduced the soul's substantiality. But in the letter to Kiyā he makes it clear that his interpretation did not stop there. Rather, he derives from the argument of indivisibility what he could not make explicit in the *Compendium*: that the soul is *per se subsistens*. Ultimately, then, this is a conclusion that Avicenna infers from "what they [the Peripatetics] have hidden and concealed." That Avicenna, therefore, should have included

44 Ibid.
45 *The Origin and the Return*, sec. Preface.
46 Avicenna, "Letter to Kiyā," quoted in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 61

this novel claim in a work as early in his career as the *The Origin and the Return,* would set him leagues apart from the Baġdādī expositors, and thereby might have given him an aura of a singular and unmatched understanding of Aristotle that would merit him the much needed patronage of any true "amateur of the philosophical sciences." It would not be surprising, therefore, that it was only a little after *The Origin and the Return* was finished and copies were made that Avicenna started garnering sufficient attention from intellectuals from lands near and far as to award him the companionship of a cohort of promising disciples, the most notorious of which was Abū-ʿUbayd al-Juzjānī.

It was supposedly for these disciples that Avicenna wrote his philosophical *magnum opus*, *The Cure*. His motivation to do so was apparently their frequent entreaties to collect his works into a single treatise. Al-Juzjānī composed an introduction to *The Cure* in which he details this fact: apparently he and other disciples[47] were gathered with Avicenna in Jurjān and were lamenting the fact that their master had scarcely kept copies of his past work for them to consult, upon which pretext they requested that he would write them a new, comprehensive work including all areas of his philosophy.[48] Avicenna was at first hesitant but agreed upon the condition that they would not demand from him that he should stick to the *ipsissima verba* of the texts of *falsafa*.[49] This was an important precondition, as Avicenna's brief period of quietude in Jurjān soon came to an end with even more political turmoil, precluding access to the Aristotelian corpus. Some of the events that followed are very colorful, and it is all the more impressive that Avicenna should have continued writing such a massive and encyclopedic work as *The Cure*

47 Ibid., 41 n8
48 *The Cure*, sec. al-Juzjānī's Introduction §3
49 Ibid.; Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 41 n9

throughout all these events. For a while Avicenna had relative security to do this, since he even took up another administrative post (besides the one he had with Sulṭān Ziyārid Qābūs) with the sulṭān of nearby Rayy, Majd ad-Dawla.[50] This proved, however, a bad mistake, as this new sulṭān was soon toppled by the invading forces of Amīr Šams-ad-Dawla, forcing Avicenna to move again.[51] It is from this period onwards that he had infrequent access to primary sources. By this point he had been able to start work on the physical and logical parts of *The Cure* with access to Aristotle,[52] but as we will see below this soon came to an end.

Since Avicenna was forced to move, he went this time to Hamaḏān, the capital of the invading kingdom. What is quite impressive is how, by this point, Avicenna had become very good in capturing the attention of potential patrons. Even in a completely new environment, not to say a heretofore hostile country, Avicenna also managed to quickly climb the ranks, working his way into this amir's administration, and up higher than he had ever done before.[53] This came at a cost to his writing, however, as his new "occupation was distressful" and "a waste of our [Avicenna's and al-Juzjānī's] time."[54] This new occupation was the vizierate, which he was awarded after he treated the amīr of a colic, but which was "distressful" because it nearly cost him his life: Avicenna was not much of a military commander, though he was obliged to be one in his new capacity, which resulted in his troops mutinying against him, demanding his execution.[55] Though

50 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 49
51 Ibid., 51.
52 *The Cure: De anima*, sec. al-Juzjānī's Introduction §2.
53 Apparently Avicenna was aided by a certain benefactress named Kaḏabānūyah, but what principally catapulted him to preeminence was the very practical utility that he offered the amīr: experienced as he was in medicine, he treated the sovereign of a deadly disease, much like he had done in the episode of ibn-Manṣūr. See *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 53
54 *The Cure: De anima*, sec. al-Juzjānī's Introduction §3
55 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 53.

the amīr refused, Avicenna was sent to jail, but eventually called back as the king relapsed again into disease. Treating the amīr a second time awarded Avicenna not only his freedom but the vizierate again.[56] During this period he went back to work on *The Cure*, composing the mathematical parts and writing more of the physics, still with access to Aristotle (he had not yet begun, however, the psychological parts).[57] During this interval of relative security was also when he finished the first book of *The Canon of Medicine*; yet, as was the pattern with Avicenna's life, this period too soon came to an end as the amīr died of the colic while on campaign. This time, however, Avicenna's security was not immediately threatened, since the amīr's successor and the courts wanted him to stay on as vizier. Avicenna's plans, though, were elsewhere: he decided to go into voluntary exile, partially because he wanted to support another, contending king, and partially because he wanted to rid himself of his "distressful" bureaucratic duties.[58] It was in this period that he finished the Physics of *The Cure*, writing particularly the psychological parts; he also quite prolifically composed the entire metaphysical part. Al-Juzjānī recounts he did this in less than twenty days, but, more importantly, without access to any sources.[59]

If al-Juzjānī's account is true, it means that Avicenna wrote the entire *De anima* of *The Cure* based *only* on his own original ideas and on what he had committed to memory from Aristotle and the commentary traditions. This has the momentous implication that Avicenna's purpose by this point, at least in the *De anima* and in the Metaphysics of *The Cure*, was not simply to *expose* Aristotle, nor to *extract* the "concealed" fundamental

56 Ibid.
57 *The Cure,* sec. Prologue §5
58 Avicenna, *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 57
59 *The Cure*, sec. al-Juzjānī's Introduction §4

principles from Aristotle's terse and often cryptic accounts of corollary principles, but rather to describe the fundamental principles in themselves, regardless of all the hermeneutical and historical baggage. This helps explain why the psychological parts of *The Cure* are such a drastic departure from hylomorphism, much less accommodating than the *Compendium* and *The Origin and the Return*: Avicenna's project, here, was not to be an Aristotelian fundamentalist but a fundamentals fundamentalist. Thus the first sentence from the prologue to the entire *The Cure*:

> "Our purpose in this book, which we hope that time will allow us to complete, and that success granted by God will attend us in its composition, *is to set down in it the gist of the Fundamental Principles which we have Ascertained*—both the Fundamental Principles contained in the philosophical sciences attributed to the ancients and based on methodical and Verified theoretical analysis, *and the Fundamental Principles Discovered by [a series of] insights cooperatively attaining the truth which was diligently pursued for a long time*—until it finally results in a straightforward compendium upon which most opinions will agree and which will help remove the veils of fanciful notions" (emphasis added).[60]

Notice that Avicenna describes here two methods of attaining the fundamental principles: the first, through explication of what the ancients wrote; the second, through a separate process, which entails "discovery" by "insights." Since Avicenna did not have Aristotle in front of him when writing *The Cure*'s *De anima*, the method employed therein must have been the second. Curiously, however, even if Avicenna was not using Aristotle, he still retained the latter's vocabulary (though not his semantics). We can only speculate as to why he would do so, but it seems logical that he would want to keep a language understood by his audience, who were in this case his disciples, and who were used to the very peculiar jargon of *falsafa*. Moreover, even if *The Cure*'s *De anima* was written without an explication of Aristotle's texts, there were sections in *The Cure*, particularly

60 Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 50.

the Logic and sthe earlier parts of the Physics, that still closely reflected the commentary traditions. As such, Avicenna would need a common language for all *The Cure*, which is why terms like "form," "matter," "substance," and "perfection" are to be found throughout all the multiple parts of this truly encyclopedic work. At the same time, keeping a single common language for the whole of *The Cure* would have required a deal semantic gymnastics, especially when Avicenna's independently discovered fundamental principles conflicted with those already established in the commentary tradition. It is of no wonder, therefore, that by the time Avicenna got around to writing the *De anima*, that is, the sixth and last book of *The Cure*'s Physics, his usage of "form" and "substance" only fit Aristotle's language materially, but in fact had substantially departed from it in meaning. This should help explain his analogical use of the words that we described in Section II.3 above.

Avicenna in his last treatise *On the Rational Soul* had none of the aforementioned reasons for keeping a strict adherence to Aristotle's language: unlike *The Cure*, this was a short and cursory summary of his psychology, and psychology alone; it was not explicitly written for his disciples; nor was it a dedicatory piece like the *Compendium* or *The Origin and the Return*. In fact, we have nothing that directly points to *why* he wrote it. The treatise's last paragraph, however, provides a few telling clues:

> "This then is what we wished to mention on this occasion in explanation of this divine word [i.e. the rational soul]. As for the demonstrative proof establishing that the rational soul is a substance, subsists by itself, is free of any corporeality, is not imprinted on any corporeal entity, survives after the death of the human body, and whether its condition after death is one of blessing or punishment, it involves a long and elaborate investigation and can be brought to light only after numerous premisses have been mentioned. As a matter of fact, I happened to write at the beginning of my career forty years ago a summary treatise setting forth the knowledge about the soul and related matters by following the method of those

> who engage in philosophy through research; whoever wishes to find out about the soul should study this treatise because *it is appropriate for students who do research*. But God Almighty, 'guides whomsoever He will' to the way of *those who engage in philosophy through direct experience*—may He put us and you in the latter group!" (emphasis added).[61]

Avicenna is saying here that *On the Rational Soul* is not a collection of proofs; in fact, he points to the *Compendium* those students who might like to read such proofs. These are the students "who do research," i.e. those who *read* other people's proofs or expositions of the truth. It is the last sentence, however, that suggests to whom Avicenna really was writing, and the concluding prayer is a clear indication of how he was biased towards *this* group; yet who were they? He tells us they are students "who engage in philosophy through direct experience." Now, since he pits these people against the ones who do research, we know it excludes those students who attain philosophical truths through proofs. Does that mean, then, that the students in question are the ones who work things out for themselves? Or does the meaning of the phrase hinge on the word "experience," implying some sort of mysticism? Scholars like Seyyed Nasr have defended the last position.[62] We will contend in the next section that, though there are elements in Avicenna's philosophy that might seem mystical, the explanation for them is in fact more mundane. Meanwhile, we are left with the task of explaining why Avicenna was less accommodating to hylomorphism in *On the Rational Soul* than in any of the other works we have considered herein. In a very specific sense, the reason we propose remits to the one we suggested in our discussion of *The Cure*: Avicenna here seems to want to maintain a position of "fundamentals fundamentalism;" in other words, he here seems

61 Avicenna, *On the Rational Soul*, §11
62 Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*.

more concerned with expounding fundamental principals than with strictly adhering to the constrictive language of the Aristotelian commentary tradition. The difference is that the hurdles that kept him attached to a superficially hylomorphic language in *The Cure*'s *De anima* were no longer present for him when he was writing *On the Rational Soul*—which would explain why he stopped calling the body "matter" and instead settled on the much less hylomorphic "receptacle." Since the treatise intentionally reads much more like a dogmatic list of facts than a presentation of proofs, Avicenna was under no obligation to try to work in, or even address, conflicting positions. Indeed, it would seem odd in the context of this treatise—which is so short and cursory—if he did.

IV. Avicenna's independence of thought

To this point, we have argued for four key claims relating to the tension between Avicenna's apparently hylomorphic definition of the soul on the one hand, and his dualistic conception of it on the other: (i) that although the inspected psychological works differ in terms of language and terminology, in terms of the material they expose they only differ with regard to quantity, not substance; (ii) that Avicenna was not able, in any of the treatises we have inspected, to satisfactorily reconcile his dualistic view of the soul with the traditional hylomorphic one, nor vindicate this latter one over the former; (iii) that this tension grew progressively more severe over time, Avicenna coming to embrace dualism more overtly; (iv) that the presence of hylomorphism in each of the inspected works, as well as the degree of such presence, can be strongly explained in each case by circumstantial, non-philosophical, historical reasons. The question now turns to Avicenna's independence as a thinker, which we framed by two possible extremes in our

Introduction: the first, that Avicenna was merely an iteration in a long chain, an intellectual heir to a variety of preceding philosophical traditions, the doctrines of which formed the substance of his incidentally original philosophy; the second, that he was an independent thinker in his own right, discovering the principles of his philosophy mostly by himself, which principles he would then dress in the language of preceding traditions for reasons external to the system. Here, we will contend that the truth, though not negating the first extreme, approaches more the second one. We infer this claim from the conclusions we have enumerated above and from additional primary material: our conclusions all point towards the second extreme, which tendency we will try to support and confirm by Avicenna's own account of his role and method as a philosopher.

Our conclusions complement one another; if we take them together, we can infer a further set of conclusions. First, if Avicenna was truly unsuccessful in incorporating hylomorphism into his psychology (ii), and if his psychological works really only differ with regard to the quantity, not substance, of their arguments (i), then it should follow either that Avicenna was a poor philosopher from the start, never really understanding the strain in his philosophy with regard to hylomorphism; or, that he never really espoused the doctrine to begin with. We have found reasons that strongly justify the second, reasons not particularly philosophical, but instead, practical (iv). These circumstantial reasons also explain why Avicenna grew progressively less accommodating to dualism over time (iii). In fact, if Avicenna never really did uphold hylomorphism, but included it in his philosophy for reasons external to it, then the most faithful reflection of his views are to be found precisely in the works that are less accommodating to hylomorphic terminology. Among the works we have inspected, we can single out both the *De anima*

from *The Cure* and *On the Rational Soul*, since in the first Avicenna only used Aristotle's words but not their meanings (cf. page 29), and in the second, he even dropped the words altogether (cf. page 31). Since these are also his most original works, containing arguments that, to this point in the commentary traditions, were never previously upheld (such as the argument for the prophetic "holy soul"); and since, as we have argued, Avicenna's position on these matters never really alters substantially, but is only more *manifested* in these later works; then it follows that Avicenna was an original thinker from the start, which means he arrived at many of his most groundbreaking conclusions independently from the commentary traditions. This does not mean, however, that Avicenna was wholly unaffected by the commentary traditions, as the second extreme would hold. Rather, we here contend—and primary source materials seem to point this way as well, as we will discuss below—that as regards the *first principles* of his philosophy (such as the self-subsistent substantiality of the soul), Avicenna established them on his own. He was, however, admittedly guided by the commentary traditions, and he did, in fact, incorporate on top of these first principles a series of corollary claims (such as Aristotle's divisions of the soul), which he patently inherited from his predecessors.

Avicenna's discussion of his philosophical method reinforces the conclusions of the previous paragraph. In the prologue to *The Cure*, he observes that there are certain "fundamental principles" which can be ascertained either by a "methodical and verified theoretical analysis" of what the ancients wrote, or by "insights cooperatively attaining the truth."[63] We saw a reflection of this later in *On the Rational Soul* when Avicenna

63 *The Cure*, sec. Prologue §1

distinguished between students who attain the truth by reading truths and those who attain it by discovering things through their own genius.[64] As we saw in that same passage, Avicenna aspired to be in the latter group; it was his *goal*, therefore, to be an independent thinker. Avicenna himself admits he did attain this independence of thought; in *The Cure*, for instance, he says: "I added some of the things which I perceived through my own reflection and whose validity I determined through my own theoretical analysis, especially in Physics and Metaphysics—and even in Logic."[65] In a letter to an unnamed disciple, Avicenna adds: "[God] has granted me an incessant certainty about fundamental principles which the seeker of salvation must without fail know, and a wide-ranging competence in subsequent areas."[66]

This last statement in particular would seem to warrant Seyyed Nasr's claim that Avicenna was not just a philosopher but a mystic. The fact, however, is that Avicenna had a complete theory—an elaborate explanatory framework, in fact—for the process by which philosophers attain the truth, which theory might be branded "mystical" because it does have in it an element of the supramundane, but which, insofar as it is an *explanatory framework*, is far from being mystical in the sense of "cryptic" or "occult." Avicenna develops this framework most fully in the *De anima* from *The Cure* and later in *The Salvation.* In a nutshell, he argues that knowledge is acquired analogously to the way in which conclusions are inferred from premises in Syllogistic Logic: just as a conclusion can only be inferred in a syllogism if there is a common middle term to the premises, so does knowledge proceed from the apprehended essence of things by means of such a

64 *On the Rational Soul*, §11
65 *The Cure*, sec. Prologue §2.
66 Avicenna, "Letter to an Anonymous Disciple," quoted in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 60

"middle term." Avicenna argues, however, that the acquisition of this "middle term" depends upon a certain perfected ability that the human intellect by itself does not naturally possess. As such, he posits a connection between our limited intellect and a supernal or celestial intellect, the Active Intellect, which, because of its closer place to God in the emanationist scheme, does somehow have the ability. This connection is "intuition" (*ḥads*). Avicenna, however, concludes that there are varying degrees of it, some people (prophets) perceiving truth much like a person senses color; others having more difficulty, requiring a bit of research (philosophers); while others still have almost no ability at all, needing to be taught everything.[67] In this light, we can start to understand Avicenna's distinction in *On the Rational Soul* between people who attain the truths of philosophy "through research" and those who attain them "through direct experience:"[68] ultimately, the more intuition one has, the more directly one would experience truth.

We have seen how Avicenna in *On the Rational Soul* aspires to be among those who have intuition. In that treatise, however, he does not specify the desired *degree*; nor does it suggest anything about his place on the scheme of intuition. We encounter a much more telling account, however, in Avicenna's introduction to *The Easterners*:

> "As for ourselves, getting to understand what they [the Peripatetics] said has been easy for us from the very moment when we first occupied ourselves with it since *it is not unlikely that Philosophical Sciences may have come to us from a direction other than that of the Greeks.* We were occupied with it in *the prime of our youth*, and were granted such success by God that we were able thereby to come to comprehend in a short time what they bequeathed" (emphasis added).[69]

By claiming that philosophy came to him through an avenue other than the Greeks, and

67 *The Salvation*, chap. VI
68 *On the Rational Soul*, §11
69 *The Easterners*, §2

by attributing to God such success, Avicenna here seems to be placing himself among the philosophers who have some intuition but who, unlike the prophets, still require some research (in this case, into the doctrines of the Peripatetics) to attain certain knowledge. The excerpted passage above seems to be parallel to one from the autobiography, in which Avicenna describes how, in his youth, he used to go to the mosque to pray that the "middle terms" be revealed to him:

> "Because of those problems that used to baffle me, not being able to solve the middle term of the syllogism, I used to visit the mosque frequently and worship, praying humbly to the All-Creating until He opened the mystery of it to me and made the difficult seem easy." (emphasis added).[70]

The implication of both these passages is that Avicenna was, admittedly, not supremely gifted like a prophet, that is, to the extent that he would be able to perceive truth simply as we perceive colors; yet he admits having been given some intuition to understand reality without having to spend much time doing very deep research. On the other hand, in the letter to an unnamed disciple, Avicenna admits that he came "to know things which [he had] verified and [could] not be improved," though he only did this through "great effort," and the results were "few."[71]

The image we are left of Avicenna, therefore, is of a man eminently conscious of his place in the intellectual spectrum: he knew he was intelligent, yes; that he had an intuitive perception of reality; and that, only because of this, he was able to ascertain the hidden truths of the Peripatetics. At the same time, however, he knew that he was not a prophet; he admitted that he still had to work hard to attain those truths he ascertained;

70 *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 29
71 Avicenna, "Letter to an Anonymous Disciple," quoted in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 59

and that, as such, he was indeed indebted to his predecessors. This does not mean, however, that he saw see himself merely as an iteration in a long chain. Rather, he quite clearly states in *The Easterners* that his position among the Peripatetics was more a matter of convenience than philosophical alignment:

> "Now, since those who are occupied with Philosophy are forcefully asserting their descent from the Peripatetics among the Greeks, we were loath to create schisms and disagree with the majority of the people. We thus joined their ranks and adhered in a partisan spirit to the Peripatetics, since they were the sect among them most worthy of such an adherence. We *perfected what they meant to say* but fell short of doing, never reaching their aim in it; and we pretended not to see what they were mistaken about, devising reasons for it and pretexts, while we were conscious of its real nature and aware of its defect. If ever we spoke out openly our disagreement with them, then it concerned matters which it was impossible to tolerate. The greater part [of these matters], however, we concealed with the veils of feigned neglect."[72]

As we have seen throughout this paper, the issue of hylomorphism in psychology was probably one of these areas of disagreement. The fact that he attempted to accommodate it into his dualistic account of the soul in the beginning of his career perhaps distinguishes it from those areas of disagreement about which he "feigned neglect;" that he was ultimately unsuccessful, however, and that he eventually dropped it altogether, means that, notwithstanding his attempts to "devis[e] reasons for it and pretexts," ultimately his allegiance was to what he perceived as truth, not partisanship.

72 Avicenna, *The Easterners*, §3

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