



The Principle of the Systematic Ambiguity of Existence in the Philosophy of Ibn Sina and Mulla Sadra



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The famous doxographer Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-Karim al-Shahrastani (d. 548/1086 –1087) in his *Musāra‘at al-falāsifa* ascribes the invention of the term *tashkīk* (“systematic ambiguity” or “analogical gradation”) to Ibn Sina.¹ However, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, who lived two centuries later, denies Bu Ali’s being the inventor of the term and refers to the Alexander Aphrodisias’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories* as one of the possible sources of the term.² A 20th century American scholar H.A. Wolfson also holds that the term *mushakkik* (“systematic ambiguity”) was first used by the Arab translators of Alexander Aphrodisias, but points to his commentary on another Aristotle’s book – the *Topics*.³ Anyhow, it seems pretty certain that the terms *tashkīk* and *mushakkik* were coined by the Arab translators of Aristotle’s works on logic and the Neoplatonic commentaries upon them, as an attempt to translate the Greek word *amphibola*, which, as a technical term, is used to describe a certain kind of homonym – namely, a word which is used in the same sense, but in different ways.

In any case, it is evident that, in the Arab translations of Aristotle’s works and commentaries upon them, *tashkīk* was used predominantly as a logical concept, not as a philosophical one. Likewise, an analysis of those Ibn Sina’s works which are currently available to me, seems to give enough evidence to conclude that, in most cases, Bu Ali treats *tashkīk* and *mushakkik* (“systematic ambiguity” and “systematically ambiguous”) as logical concepts.

Thus, in the *Jadal* of the *Shifā* he discusses three kinds of terms (following Aristotle’s *Categories* closely): 1) the terms whose meaning is the same in all cases, although they may differ in another way; 2) the terms whose meaning is not identical, but in which a certain similarity is preserved (e.g., animal’s leg and the leg of the table); 3) terms (homonyms proper), whose meaning is not the same and has no similarity. Ibn Sina qualifies the first group as *mushakkik* and defines them as follows:

“The term, whose concept (*mafḥūm*) is identical if it is considered abstractly, but which [itself] is not identical in all aspects, and which is similar in all things [which are] united by it (the given term – Y.E.), is called *mushakkik*”.⁴

He then explains that, what he has defined in the above quoted lines, is the *mushakkik mutlaq* (an “unbounded systematically ambiguous”) – one which is not conditioned anyhow and is not related to anything else.

“This is a term” – he says – “whose meaning is one, but this single meaning is not shared by all referents in an identical way, as it is the case with a univocal term, where the same meaning is shared [by all referents] in the same degree”.⁵

Another kind of *mushakkik* is *mushakkik muqayyad* (the “bound systematically ambiguous”) – a *mushakkik* which is considered as such in relation to a certain thing.⁶ It is briefly discussed in the *Maqūlāt*, but to our knowledge, nowhere else in Ibn Sina’s works.

In turn, what we get in the *'Uyūn al-hikma*, appears to be a somewhat simplified division of different modes of attribution. Ibn Sina divides all terms applied to different things in three groups: 1) terms used in the same sense and in the same way; 2) terms used in completely different sense; 3) terms used in the same sense, but in a different way:

“If a term is applied to many things, it can be done in one sense [and] in the same way (*'ala-l-siwā*), as “animal” is applied to man and horse, [and then] it is called “univocal” (*mutawātin*). If it is applied in different senses, as “*ayn*” is applied to cash (*dinār*) and to an eye, it is called common (or: shared) (*mushtarak*). If it is applied in one sense, but not in the same way, it is called “systematically ambiguous” (*mashakkik*), as it is the case with existence (*wujūd*), which is applied both to substance and accident”.⁷

Have we not come, by chance, across an important piece of evidence that Ibn Sina professed some kind of *tashkīk al-wujūd*? The answer is: what he has in mind here, is *tashkīk fī mahhūm al-wujūd* (systematic ambiguity of the concept of existence), not *tashkīk fī haqīqat al-wujūd* (systematic ambiguity of the reality of existence), professed by Mulla Sadra and his school (this latter principle itself, in turn, represents a slightly altered Shaykh al-Ishraq’s idea of the *tashkīk al-nūr*). Moreover, what Sadra and Suhrawardi intend, is *tashkīk bi-shidda wa-l-da'f* (systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity (=strength) and weakness, while the kind of *tashkīk* that Ibn Sina has in mind, is *tashkīk bi-l-taqaddum wa-l-ta'akhhur* (systematic ambiguity in terms of priority and posteriority), that is he believes the existence of substance to be prior to that of accident.

Evidently, the basic reason for Ibn Sina’s refusal to accept *tashkīk fī haqīqat al-wujūd* (systematic ambiguity of/in the reality of existence) lies in his denial of any commonality between the Necessarily Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) and Possibly Existent (*mumkin al-wujūd*): in the discussion on *burhān al-siddiqīn* and elsewhere, Bu Ali took great pains to prove that the contingent cannot change into the necessary anyhow. Since Ibn Sina’s ontology is based on this essential necessary-contingent dichotomy, there is no place for *tashkīk fī haqīqat al-wujūd* in it, because it is pointless to speak of the contingent’s becoming more/less contingent or the necessary’s becoming less/more necessary.

Tashkīk al-nūr, as we know, is one of the fundamental principles of Suhrawardi’s wisdom of illumination. In two of his works, namely, the “*Kitāb al-mashāri' wa-l-mutārahāt*” (The Book of the Paths and Havens) and the “*Kitāb al-talwihāt al-lawhiyya wa-l-'arshiyya*” (The Intimations of the Table and the Throne), Shaykh al-Ishraq posed a number of proofs to support it and to refute Ibn Sina’s objections against the systematic ambiguity of the reality/quiddity of thing. Four centuries later, the idea was picked up by Mulla Sadra, who also accepted as valid (with some minor objections) Suhrawardi’s arguments in favour of it. However, Sadra replaced *nūr* (“light”) with “*wujūd*” (“existence”) and tried to give Suhrawardi’s proofs a more solid and systematic structure. In the remaining part of my paper, I intend to analyse four Ibn Sina’s principles regarding *tashkīk* and to show how Suhrawardi and Sadra attempted to refute them.

First I’ll count Ibn Sina’s principles on *tashkīk* (which mostly concern the limitations of systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity and weakness):

- 1) it is impossible that the essence and the essential would differ by any kind of systematic ambiguity in respect to their instances (*afrād*);

- 2) systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity and weakness necessitates specific difference (*al-ikhtilāf al-naw'ī*) between the instances [of the nature] in which the difference occurs, so that it (the specific difference – Y.E.) becomes the cause of the difference between their (instances' – Y.E.) essential differentiae (*al-fusūl al-dhātiyya*);
- 3) the diversity in respect of quality and the diversity in respect of quantity represent different kinds of systematic ambiguity;
- 4) the difference in terms of intensity and weakness and perfection and imperfection is limited to [the categories of] quantity and quality.⁸

Now I'll briefly discuss the arguments pro and contra, as they are presented in the relevant chapter of Sadra's *Asfār*.

(But, before doing this, I would like to underline that what is really at issue, is a particular kind of *tashkīk* – a systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity and weakness (*tashkīk bi-l-shidda wa-l-da'f*): apparently, there is no disagreement between the Peripatetics and the Illuminationists regarding other kinds of *tashkīk*, such as systematic ambiguity in terms of priority and posteriority (*bi-l-taqaddum wa-l-ta'akhhur*) and systematic ambiguity through preference (*awlawiyya*). Suhrawardi's hierarchy of lights (and perhaps the *'irfāne khusravānī* in general, as opposed to *'irfāne maghribī*, which prefers to speak about *ta'ayyun* (entification)) is based on this kind of systematic ambiguity – i.e., the one which takes place through different degrees/levels of intensity and weakness; the same is the case with Sadra's famous doctrine of substantial motion (*al-haraka al-jawhariyya*).

The first principle. In the *Categories* of the *Shifā* Ibn Sina writes:

"I do not mean that one quantity is not greater or smaller than another one; what I mean is that one quantity is not stronger and greater in its being a quantity than another one, which shares with it [the concept of quantity], although the former is greater [than the latter] in respect of the relative (*idāfi*) meaning – I mean the relative length".⁹

A bit later he adds:

"Know that "many" without relation is number and "many" in relation [to something] is an accident of number. Likewise, the nature of blackness and temperature is identical in all black and hot things respectively. And, indeed, the diversity takes place in regard to specific features of instances, not due to the substance of the shared quiddity and its root".¹⁰

Then he goes on to explain:

"The true blackness does not become more intense or weaker, but what is blackness in comparison with one thing, is whiteness in comparison with another one. And whatever kind of blackness is supposed, it does not become more intense or weaker as regards its selfhood, but this happens when it is considered in comparison [with something]. And therefore the contrariety (*taqābul*) of two sides includes what is situated between them, and the conditioning of true opposition is not destroyed by the utmost limit of contradiction".¹¹

As we see, Ibn Sina univocally denies the occurrence of systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity and weakness in the nature/substance of thing: according to him, it pertains to accidents only. Moreover, *tashkīk* can only be perceived if one accident is considered in comparison with another one. Sadra explains that, as a result of a mental operation, carried out by the assistance of the estimative faculty (*wahm*), a more intense instance is perceived as a likeness (*mithal*)

of a weaker one, together with the allowance of addition (*tajwīz ziyāda*), not as an increase of the intensity of the universal nature itself in some instances or as a greater degree of manifestation of the its universal traces in some instances (the latter case is explained by the Peripatetics as being caused by the difference in the degree of truthfulness of attribution of a single derivative to two instances from which it was derived).

As a result, considering two blacknesses, the Peripatetics do not see one common affair in which they both differ; instead, they establish in each of them the constituent through which the difference occurs, namely, its species-forming differentia. Moreover, they detect in two bodies-intensely black and weakly black – the concept in which the difference lies: according to them, it is the concept of “black” (*aswad*): and, indeed, one of them possesses that characteristic which is called “blackness” in a greater degree than the other.

In the end of his analysis of the first principle, Sadra invalidates Suhrawardi’s objection against Ibn Sina’s interpretation of the intensity and weakness in blackness by showing that it does not necessitate the admittance of *tashkīk* in genus (as Shaykh al-Ishraq argued).

The second principle. Sadra asserts that the ancient Stoics have successfully proved that the instances of the reality of existence do not differ from each other by their differentiae, despite their diversity in terms of intensity and weakness. He points out that the Peripatetics themselves have established the increase and decrease of the intensity of qualities as regards the motion of a corporeal subject in respect of the levels/degrees of qualities, such as temperatures and blacknesses. Besides, the Peripatetics also admit that a single motion is an individual affair, possessing a connected itness from the beginning to the end.

Hence, it is evident that intense and weak degrees of blackness, in respect of their blackening the body, share in their specific quiddity.

The third principle. The rules of common usage (*urf*) in Arabic permit to apply the terms “intensity” (*shidda*) and “weakness” (*da’f*) only to qualities, while, in turn, the terms “increase” (*ziyāda*) and “decrease” (*nuqsān*), and “manyness” (*kathra*) and “smallness” (*qilla*) can be applied to quantities only. However, a sage and philosopher is not concerned with the observance of the rules of common usage.

Some commentators of Ibn Sina try to distinguish intensity from greatness in measure by claiming the increase in the intensity of quality to be limited while alleging the increase in quantity to be unlimited. This assertion, however, can be refuted in two ways: 1) whatever exists (= “is found”), is limited, be it either quality or quantity (since the limits of the physical world, according to the mediaeval Islamic cosmology, are set by the “delimiter of the directions” (*muhaddid al-jihāt*); 2) even if we accept the aforementioned claim as true, the acceptance of it does not lead to the establishing of two different kinds of systematic ambiguity pertaining to quality and quantity respectively.

Another attempt to distinguish between intensity/weakness and greatness/smallness in measure was made by those followers of Ibn Sina who asserted that something is called great or small in measure when it is possible to point to the exact measure in which two things equal each other and to establish the additional one – the measure by which one thing exceeds the other.

To refute the assertion, their opponents argue that the reality of every number is constituted by “one”, repeated a certain number of times, not by other numbers. Hence, every number is a simple (non-compound) species, which is not composed by other numbers. (Thus, “four” is not constituted by “three” and “one”,

nor is “three” constituted by “two” and “one”.) When the intellect divides any number into parts, the form of that number disappears and another form comes into existence.

In a nutshell, the Peripatetics hold that the difference between the surpassing and the surpassed in the connected quantity (*kamm muttasil*), the disconnected quantity (*kamm munfasil*) and the quality (*kayf*) is of different character in each case, while the Illuminationists deny this.

The fourth principle is perhaps the most important and sensitive one, because in it Ibn Sina delimits the systematic ambiguity in terms of intensity and weakness to two of ten Aristotelian categories, namely, quantity and quality.

Suhrawardi¹² (and Sadra, who repeats Shaykh al-Ishraq’s words almost verbatim) points out that this principle contradicts the beliefs of the ancient philosophers, in particular Empedocles and Plotinus, who regarded the substances of this lower world as the shadows of the substances of the higher world. Sadra explains that this means that they (the ancient sages) treated the substances of the higher world as causes and those of the lower one as their effects, because the substantiality of the cause is by necessity fuller and more complete than the substantiality of the effect, and then adds that, to him, intensity has no other meaning except this one, i.e., that some substances are more intense and stronger in their substantiality than other ones. This approach – to reduce all accidental differences to substantial one(s) – is most typical of Sadra, who regards substances as dynamic entities, whereas Ibn Sina believes them to be static and immutable, while (as he hold) only accidents are subject to change. In the last analysis, the difference in Ibn Sina and Sadra’s opinions comes down to different understanding of substance and accident.

I would like to conclude my paper with a simple remark that, to an ordinary human being, who bases his judgement upon the data provided by his five external faculties and common sense, the idea of (the possibility of) systematic ambiguity in substance seems odd – take such statements as: “this cat is more cattish than that one”, “that flower is more flowerish than this one”. Do they seem to make much sense?

The attribution of *tashkīk*, in terms of intensity and weakness, to substance, thus, seems to contradict the common sense and even the rules of language. Hence, it is either an invention of sophists or a fruit of mystical experience such, in brief, appears to be Ibn Sina’s conclusion on the topic.

Notes

- ¹ M.al-Shahrastani, *Musāra‘at al-falāsifa*, ed. I.al-Mu‘azzi, Qum: Maktabat Ayatallah al-Mar‘ashi 1405 L.H., p.46.
- ² Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, *Masāri‘ al-musāri‘*, published in one volume with M.al-Shahrastani’s *Musāra‘at al-falāsifa*, ed. I.al-Mu‘azzi, Qum: Maktabat Ayatallah al-Mar‘ashi 1405 L.H., p.56-60.
- ³ H.A.Wolfson, The amphibolous terms in Aristotle, Arabic philosophy and Maimonides, in *Harvard Theological Review*, 31 (1938), p.173. For more information on the history of the usage of terms *tashkik/mushakkik*, see the doctoral dissertation of C.Bonmariage: Cecile Bonmariage, *Le reel et les realites: La structure de la realite de l’etre chez Mulla Sadra Shirazi*, 2 parties, Universite Catholique de Louvain 1998 and her article: C.Bonmariage, Elements pour la comprehension de la notion de tashkik chez Mulla Sadra in *Islam-West Philosophical Dialogue. The papers presented at the World Congress on Mulla Sadra (May 1999, Tehran)*, vol.2. *Mulla Sadra and Transcendent Philosophy*, Tehran: SIPRIn Publications 1380/2001, p.127-146.
- ⁴ Ibn Sina, *Shifā: Jadal*, ed. by F.El-Ahwani, under the supervision and with the introduction of I.Madkour, Cairo: GEBO 1965, p.118.
- ⁵ Ibid. Cf. C.Bonmariage’s French translation of the passage in *Elements*, p.128.
- ⁶ See: Ibn Sina, *Shifā: Maqūlāt*, ed. M.El-Khodeiri, G.Anawati, F.Al-Ahwani, S.Zayd, under the supervision and with the introduction of I.Madkour, Cairo: GEBO 1959, faO12, p.9-11.
- ⁷ Ibn Sina, *‘Uyūn al-hikma*, quoted from: Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Sharh ‘uyūn al-hikma*, ed. A.al-Saqa, Tehran: Entersherate Mu‘assisaye al-Sadiq 1373 S.H./1415 L.H., vol.1, p.117.
- ⁸ See: Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, *Al-hikma al-mutaāliyya fī-l-asfār al-arba‘a al-‘aqliyya*, ed. R.Lutfi et als., 3rd ed., Beirut: Dār ihyā’ al-turāth al-‘arabī 1981, part 1, p.433.
- ⁹ Ibn Sina, *Shifā: Qātiqūriyās*, quoted from: Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi, *Asfār*, part 1, p.434-435.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p.435.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² See: Sh.Y.Sohrawardi, *Oeuvres philosophiques et mystiques, texts edites avec prolegomenes en francais* par H.Corbin, reedition anastatique, Tehran – Paris: Academie Imperiale Iranienne de Philosophie et Depositaire Librairie Adrien Maisonneuve 1976, t.1, p.13.