# What is First? Islamic First Philosophy and Public Warrant

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## 1. Introduction

First philosophy is a contested phrase. In its most general sense, it refers to what has explanatory priority: what comes first in the order of philosophical, and hence often metaphysical, explanation or judgement (Cahoone 2002: 41-43).[1] Yet there are various candidates for what that might be. I suggest that, whereas there is much debate on how to answer this question, "reasonableness" requires viable candidates to pass two widely accepted philosophical tests: non-circularity and publicness (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 176, 125-126). That is, something that is explanatorily first cannot presuppose what it purports to explain and cannot rely on private evidence that is not intersubjectively accessible to other rational observers. These, I suggest, are metatheoretical norms that apply across religious traditions and should be understood in the methodological sense of our public reasons for religious judgements, not the viability of our personal commitments. From this, I shall argue, follows a dilemma for prevailing historical approaches to first philosophy arising from my specific object of study, the class of Islamic philosophers and theologians. They typically either adopt a "being-first" position and fall into a vicious circularity or an "intelligibility-first" one that while non-circular is poorly warranted, leading to reliance on non-public evidence to secure its explanatory grounds.

More precisely, classical Islamic thinkers can be said to usually put forward one of a pair of candidates for what is first: (i) "ontotheology",[2] in which existence acts as the supreme explanatory principle; or (ii) "henology" where it is replaced by oneness. To concretise this dilemma, it can be applied to essence, the notion of *what*, as opposed to *that*,

things are.[3] The case of essence is significant because it is a primary metaphysical discussion: if candidates for first philosophy cannot meet my two tests on this key concept, it is very unlikely that they can do so elsewhere. I argue that historical proponents either presuppose by ontotheology the very metaphysics of essence that they claim to derive or, through henology, ultimately fall back on an appeal to non-public warrants, such as mystical insight. In the former camp, I suggest, are classical *kalām* scholars, who assume a temporal ontology and its ultimate supernatural cause, as well as Avicenna (d. 1037) and those who follow his ideas, who start with a notion of contingent existence and a stronger modal explanatory ground. In the latter camp, are the Ismāʿīlīs, Suhrawardī (d. 1191) and the school of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), known as the Akbarīs, with ideas such as emanationism, "Lords of Species" and "Permanent Archetypes" respectively. My contention is not that this second set of traditions ignore metaphysics, but that, within their frameworks, existence is not the primary explanatory ground. Rather, essences are explained by an approach to a higher participatory intelligibility that requires either a weak abductive justification for its henology or a turn to existence-transcending mysticism. Accordingly, neither of the two major approaches that I have sketched, as typically formulated, robustly satisfies both non-circularity and publicness at once: the first is public yet circular, while the second is non-circular yet (ultimately) non-public. I suggest that the result of taking these prevalent options off the table is not to make Islamic first philosophy an impossible task, but points to dead ends that should be avoided when articulating one. It also indicates broader methodological constraints on what can count as explanatory for first philosophy when religious claims are to be upheld as reasonable within the public sphere.

In what follows, I take a synchronic, philosophical approach to the above Islamic traditions, considered as representative types. This means that I will use primary texts and secondary commentary for my big-picture methodological intervention rather than engaging

in the detailed genealogical debates of intellectual history. Nevertheless, providing some of the historical connective tissue helps in setting the various approaches in their proper context. I will start by discussing the earliest presentation of Islamic first philosophy in the thought of Yaʿqūb b. Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. 873) who I argue introduces the two key themes that underpin my argument: existence and oneness. This allows me to provide an initial characterisation of the two horns of my dilemma and some of the main figures that I will classify as falling under each. In the next section, I turn to the question of the metaphysical status of essences and articulate three principal types, which I term (i) Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism, (ii) Postclassical Immanentism, and (iii) Platonic Exemplarism. As I discuss major representatives, I present the features that problematise the first two in terms of circularity, and the third in terms of publicness. The final section provides a shorter further critical assessment of each position on the discovery of essences, showing how they are liable for the critique that I have outlined. I conclude by restating the dilemma in light of my discussion and pointing towards a research programme that can preserve both tests.

## 2. Existence and Oneness in Islamic First Philosophy

Al-Kindī, known as the Philosopher of the Arabs, was the first major conduit for Aristotelian ideas of first philosophy to flow into the emerging Arabic-language genre of *falsafa*. He was involved in two important activities: the translation of Greek philosophical materials into Arabic and the original development of philosophical ideas adapted within the religious context of Islam. The significance of al-Kindī for the present article can be gauged by the title of his major work *On First Philosophy* (*fī al-Falsafa al-ūlā*). Al-Kindī sets the tone for much subsequent Islamic discourse by taking a cue from Aristotle's approach to first philosophy in which what is studied are the "causes and principles of beings qua beings" (Cohen and Reeve

2025). The priority accorded to first philosophy comes from it furnishing "knowledge of the first Reality[4] who is the cause of every reality" (al-Kindī 1950: 1/98). This cause, God, is the real One (*al-wāḥid al-ḥaqq*) who, unlike every apparent unity within the world is the essentially One (*al-wāḥid bi-l-dhāt*) (al-Kindī 1950: 1/161). He describes how this occurs as follows:

> The emanation of oneness from the first, real One is the bringing-to-be of every sensible object and that which is attached to it. Hence, each of them is originated when He brings them to be by His being.[5] Therefore, the cause of bringing-to-be is the real One who does not derive oneness from another. Rather, He is essentially one. What is brought-to-be has not always existed, and what has not always existed is created, i.e. it is brought-to-be by a cause (al-Kindī 1950: 1/162; see Ivry 1974: 113; Adamson and Pormann 2012: 55).[6]

Two things stand out here as expressions of Islamic first philosophy. First, al-Kindī frames first philosophy around the idea of God's oneness (*tawḥīd*), which is a central Islamic concern. Second, the One is a special being who has always existed and thus can act as a cause to bring originated things into existence *ex nihilo*, a point on which he differs from Aristotle and later emanationists among the Muslim *falāsifa*, most prominently al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Avicenna. This is also a broader theistic concern shared with Jewish and Christian traditions (Soskice 2023: 115-117). Hence, al-Kindī highlights two concepts that are important for all first philosophy treatments that follow within the Islamic tradition but receive relative emphasis within specific discourses: God's being and His oneness.

The early Muʿtazila, a school of Islamic theologians whose major activities were proximate to al-Kindī, shared both these emphasises. Yet rather than a direct transplant of the

Hellenistic Greek philosophical legacy, they hybridised a range of influences, including Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Stoic ideas, with the emerging rational disciplines of Islamic civilisation. The early *kalām* tradition, of which they were the most notable systematic representatives, is strictly speaking a theological rather than philosophical enterprise, focusing on the defence of core doctrinal positions derived from the interpretation of scripture (for the Muʿtazila, mainly the Qur'an). Proponents of *kalām* would come to include both those who continued many Muʿtazilī positions within the Imāmī and Zaydī Shīʿa traditions and those who often opposed them among the Sunnī Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs.

In terms of the philosophical question that animates this study, it is possible to speak of the tradition of *falsafa* in its rationalistic peripatetic versions, such as Averroes (d. 1198), the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic synthesis of Avicenna, plus the various "empiricist" formulations of *kalām*, despite their differences, as all stemming from a common approach. It is one in which a basic priority is given to the idea of existence. This metaphysical emphasis, though finding diverse expressions, remained dominant throughout the wider tradition. This can be shown by the significance accorded to the modal idea of God's necessity of existence (*wājib al-wujūd*), which was closely associated with the philosophical legacy of Avicenna, though adopted broadly within *kalām* discourses (Wisnovsky 2004). The core idea animating this perspective is that metaphysical explanation ultimately relies on a distinct entity, God or the One, who must exist, whatever the further details of the divine nature.[7] Hence, there is in these traditions the primacy of existence that forms the first horn of my dilemma.

An alternative tendency drawing more from al-Kindī's emphasis on oneness and adhering to a less Aristotelian version of Neoplatonism included the Ismāʿīlīs, Suhrawardī and the school of Ibn ʿArabī. Neoplatonism as a rational enterprise is premised on two main presumptions. First, the priority of consciousness over the factual world – mind over matter. Second, that everything is understood through its participation in degrees of oneness

(Wildberg 2021). Hence, in "non-Aristotelianised" Neoplatonic traditions, the rational explanation of all beings is not secured by an ontotheology with God as the necessary and eternal existent in contrast to contingent or temporal worldly existents. Rather, members of these traditions propose a henology in which the One is the principle of intelligibility for all beings, as it is the only unitary explanation for them as many. Such a scheme is not "anti-metaphysical" per se, but it subjects metaphysical theses to a further explanatory requirement, that of intelligibility. This means that the multiplicity of beings is explicable by greater degrees of unity until eventually reaching total unity in an ineffable One.[8] Hence, God is not a being, an entity, or a thing, but in an important sense "beyond being" or "beyond being and non-being" (Kars 2019: 30, 49). Nevertheless, rather than remaining at the level of negative theology, some thinkers, especially those in the Akbarī tradition, declared the One to be Being itself, provided that concept is taken in an unrestricted or unconditioned sense, thus effecting something of a reconciliation with ontotheology (Nasr 1981: 184-186; Attas 2014: 237-238).[9] These ideas are also sometimes taken in the direction of an "existence monism", in which it is said that nothing except God has true being at all (Schaffer 2018). Overall, according to the intelligibility-first camp, oneness of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) reigns over necessity of existence (*wājib al-wujūd*).

How does the general approach of this group fit in with my thesis? It avoids the presupposition of ontology by clarifying it according to *a priori* first principles. Yet methodologically it does so not according to commonly accessible evidence but by adopting a speculative system built up from certain assumptions about mind and unity. In my view, the inference in question at best amounts to the essentially abductive notion that such a metaphysical position would be explanatorily successful without ruling out other alternatives. Erik Goodwyn makes this point when adopting a Cosmopsychist stance, which he compares to Neoplatonism:

> Our holistic principle then can be seen as a restating of the Neoplatonic principle that all properties "emanate" from the One like rays from the sun. The difference between the ancient and modern approach, however, is that we are being more careful about how we arrive at the holistic principle, beginning with the experientially near human psyche and seeing if we can logically deduce, through admittedly abductive reasoning, at the originating principle, rather than simply stating it exists without justification and proceeding from there (Goodwyn 2022: 144-45).

Thus, while this Neoplatonic approach seemingly meets the criterion of what a first philosophy is meant to explain, it fails to provide a satisfying methodology to do so. These tendencies help to elucidate why this trend has been called speculative mysticism. Reiner Schürmann comments as follows:

> Plotinus is usually, and probably rightfully, considered the father of speculative mysticism. His teaching is speculative since it consists apparently in hypostasizing forms of thought into realms of the world, and it is mystical since by such hypostatization Plotinus wishes to account for an experience of transcendence that leads the mind beyond reason (Schürmann 1983: 26).

The hypostasising of forms of thought refers to the positing of concrete aspects of reality at higher levels of unity to explain the differences of those at lower levels through the notion of participation. The systems falling under this philosophical type thus posit intermediaries of emanation between the human agent and the One, though these are characterised differently depending on the particular scheme. For Ismāʿīlīs, these are the Neoplatonic Intellects, for

Suhrawardī, various Lights, and for Akbarīs specific levels of reality such as the Divine Names and Attributes, and the Permanent Archetypes (see Section 3 below).

The element of mysticism occurs both because the One in itself is held to be utterly ungraspable through rational thought and due to the inherently weak abductive grounding of the central principle. Hence, the major Islamic proponents of henology typically fall into a reliance on a mystical epistemology to provide a final guarantee to the system. For the Ismāʿīlīs this is the Imam of the Age who is held to be in communion with God (Daftary 2007: 129-130), for Suhrawardī it is spiritual "tasting" (*dhawq*) (Griffel 2024: 144-45), whereas for the Akbarīs it is the idea of *kashf* (spiritual unveiling) (Chittick 2020). My stance on this point is not that mystical practice is itself irrational, but that it cannot be publicly verifiable for the reason-giving needed by a first philosophy.

To sharpen my case, it is helpful to make use of Mehdi Yazdi's classification of the communicability of mystical knowing, which he generalises from various Islamic traditions. He distinguishes between the following three levels (Yazdi 1992: 160-161):[10]

> Level 1: Ineffable mysticism – this is the experience of mystical knowing, "a peculiar private language, which is not publicly understandable". In effect, it cannot be termed a conventional form of language.
>
> Level 2: Introspective or reconstructive mysticism – this is the language that mystical knowing is put into by the mystic, so that it can be communicated. Hence, it is the object language of mysticism.
>
> Level 3: Philosophical or scientific metamysticism – this is the metalanguage that allows for systematic rational discussion about mystical claims.

I suggest that if this picture is correct, then though detailed discussions about mystical claims can take place at the third level of inquiry, this activity cannot meet the criterion for first philosophy as a general rational enterprise with publicly accessible evidential grounds (Harvey 2023: 408-10). A hypothetical case may help to see why. Consider a debate between two mystical claimants who develop different conceptual languages to describe their experiences. While it is rationally viable for them at Level 3 to judge the mutual consistency of Level 2 concepts, they cannot determine anything about the other's Level 1 experiences, the accuracy of the Level 2 language used to express them or whether different terms might refer to the same experience. This inability to intersubjectively check mystical seemings, as opposed to things known by ordinary sense experience, explains why such modes of knowledge fail the publicness test insofar as that is needed to underpin a robust first philosophy.[11] Again, this constraint on warrant for mystical seemings is not a judgement about their personal value within a religious life, which can be evaluated according to alternative criteria.

The present section has aimed to show that despite the diversity and intricacy of premodern Islamic approaches to the theme of first philosophy, the explanatory grounds defended therein are liable to be challenged by the dilemma that I have introduced. In the next section, I will develop this idea in more detail by discussing how the various perspectives deal with the metaphysics of essence.

## 3. The Metaphysics of Essence in the Islamic Tradition

The concept of essence (*māhiyya* or *dhāt*), the essential or constitutive qualities of a thing, plays an important role in Islamic thought, reflecting a derivation from the Greek *to ti ên*

*einai*, "the what it was to be", i.e. whatness or essence (Rahman 2004).[12] There is broad agreement between Islamic traditions that objects of experience must possess certain features to be what they are, and that this fact can be captured by the concept of essence. Differences emerge when seeking further understanding of its ontological status. The landscape is complex, but for the purpose of this study, three positions can be taken as representative:[13]

1. Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism

2. Postclassical Immanentism

3. Platonic Exemplarism

Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism

Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism is a category that brings together two closely related positions vis-à-vis essences that were prominent between the eighth and twelfth century across a wide range of *kalām* schools, such as the Muʿtazila, the Ashʿarīs and Māturīdīs. Common to this stance is the idea that things are to be classified descriptively by essences, yet these essences do not find extramental realisation in the world. Proponents of these views agree that all that factually exists are the particular objects and properties described by essences.[14] As I shall explain in what follows, nominalist and conceptualist theories mainly diverge on the characterisation of such descriptions and how they relate to the things that they describe in the world. This means that the two positions present a similar enough set of considerations to warrant treating together given my aims. The adoption of nominalism represents an early and relatively "sparse" approach to ontology, which often

sought to posit the minimum number of factual realities needed to explain the objects of experience encountered by the senses and understood inferentially. Conceptualism presented a more sophisticated alternative that paid attention not just to the verbal description of shared particular features but to the formation of universal concepts about them.

For nominalists, the commonality between the use of an essence descriptor for one thing and for another is a mere convenience. Thus, the same name is applied equivocally to the particulars in question (Benevich 2016: 27-28). To take the example of a cat, the nominalist sees no meaning to the essence of "catness" beyond the ability to successfully pick out things that we call cats. There is obviously some resemblance between the features of various things that we call cats, but no unified concept apart from the agreement that such things come under the label. The nominalist does not necessarily deny the obvious fact that people form the idea of a common catness, just that there is anything philosophically interesting about it (Shalkowski 2020: 311-12). For the conceptualist, such as Abū Maʿālī al-Juwaynī (d. 1085), the essence descriptor applies univocally to its relevant particulars as a genuinely universal concept (Benevich 2016: 13-15; Benevich 2018: 333). In this case, there is a stable concept of catness that defines what counts as a cat in the factual world, not just a descriptor that allows cats to be picked out from other things.

It is, of course, possible for certain particulars to deviate from the ideal essence, for example the cat without a tail, whether by accident, birth defect, or inherited mutation (e.g. a Manx cat). In such cases, one may classify such individuals in relation to their degree of failure to fulfil the ideal essence. It should therefore be understood about this position that the descriptive essence always takes the ideal or paradigmatic case, which would need to be underpinned by some stable regime of creation according to a given ontological presumption, whether that is due to the habitual consistency of God's generation of the world as such, or to more thoroughgoing metaphysical necessities. Moreover, as essence is merely a verbal or

conceptual descriptor, the fact that it is almost, but not quite, realised in an individual is still useful for classifying that individual. Were the tailless variety of cat to be the only kind of cat in existence, it would be possible for an alternative descriptive essence, such as that embodied by the Manx cat, to take the place of "cat" in general within our language or concepts. This, and by extension all essence categories, ultimately follow what is convenient for human beings in classifying reality. Hence, though these classifications are based on the systematic patterns of objects and their constituents encountered in the world – as explained metaphysically – essences do not have an extramental existence in physical ontology.

The above remarks relate to both the essences of worldly things, as elaborated, and to the essence of God (in the sense of His "essential nature" and not His "entity"). God's essential nature on this view is just the particular description of the necessary distinct properties that He must have or, alternatively, His "simple essence" status. Of course, the case of God is understood within *kalām* as one in which there is no possible variation or non-ideal realisation. What must exist is the entity possessing those properties (or lacking them due to simplicity). According to my dilemma, proponents of *kalām* nominalism and conceptualism would need to show that essential names or concepts do more than just describe the world according to the categories of a presupposed *kalām* ontology. If they cannot do so, then their version of the "being-first" approach to first philosophy cannot be vindicated.

## Postclassical Immanentism

Postclassical Immanentism is a position that can only be understood in relation to the philosophy of Avicenna whose influence looms large over the development of Islamic philosophy and theology from the eleventh century onwards. Though his own stance had

adherents, it was the adaptation of his ideas by practitioners of *kalām* that gave the postclassical period its distinctive intellectual flavour. Avicenna's views are intricate, and subject to diverse interpretations, but several basic aspects can be described in a way that is helpful for the present study. First, he sharply distinguishes the essence or quiddity (*māhiyya*) of a thing from its existence (*wujūd*). Yet, when that existence is affirmed, he holds that its essence immanently exists as the thing's particular nature. This distinguishes Avicenna from "classical" Aristotelianism, at least as generally interpreted, since it is also understood from him that the immanent essence, say catness, is not a universal but rather a particular (Morvarid 2023: 6-9). This position differs from Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism, since the universal essence descriptor/concept, which is supplied by the Agent/Active Intellect, exists extramentally as a particularised factual element. In Avicenna's hylomorphism, this immanent essence acts as a substantial form that is necessary for the actual existence of its potential matter. In the world, each such essence is merely possible and thus requires the extra "ingredient" of existence to be added to it by God who is necessarily existent and hence whose essence, unlike that of creatures, is identical to existence in its simplicity (Lizzini 2021).

In order to better understand Avicenna's idea of immanent essence, we can consider his articulation of it in terms of his logical system. According to Avicenna, every essence has a definition, for example, the human is a "rational animal". In this case, each of the two essential aspects of the human (animal and rational) are intrinsic constituents of the essence, as genus and differentia respectively (Benevich 2022: 4). Additionally, there is another group, which are known as necessary concomitants. These are not strictly constitutive of the intrinsic attributes but rather are necessarily entailed by them. For example, the attributes of rationality and animality entail the capacity to wonder, which entails, in turn, the capacity to laugh (Benevich 2022: 5). This means that once Avicenna has the initial definition for the

human, he thinks that he can syllogistically deduce these subsequent characteristics. For the Avicennan to resist the challenge posed in this article, they would have to give a public route to uncover essence-revealing definitions and their deductive concomitants without presupposing a realist metaphysics. Yet Avicenna's logical system is built upon a series of ontological schemata, including Aristotelian categories, Porphyrian predicables and other distinctions (De Haan 2020: 36-40), such that it does not seem possible to isolate it from his metaphysical commitments.

A development of the Avicennan tendency occurred within the postclassical *kalām* tradition, especially through the reception of key Avicennan themes by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210). The most significant departure in how he characterises the essence of objects in the world is his rejection of "robust hylomorphism" and his willingness to consider composite essences of a "substance-plus-attribute" type. In other words, though the essences of particular substances are genuinely realised, immanent aspects of things, they are not singular forms as would be the case according to hylomorphism, but composites formed from the essences of their multiply interacting components (Ibrahim 2020: 93). This raised the possibility to retain *kalām* atomism, the dominant view of physical ontology in the classical period, though al-Rāzī maintained a non-committal stance towards it. He also remained critical about a deductive approach to the discovery of essences based on definitions (Ibrahim 2020: 105).

Later Postclassical Immanentists within the *kalām* tradition took on these ideas within the general parameters established by al-Rāzī, while opening considerable space for further philosophical debate.[15] Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī (d. 1322), a significant early reader of al-Rāzī, schematised the types of essence as follows:

> Either the essence is simple, which is that without parts, or it is composite. Each of them is either real or conceptual. The conceptual is either existent or non-existent. So, these are six categories.[16] The real is what exists as a matter of fact, whereas the conceptual is what exists by the postulation of the intellect. As for the existent [i.e. of the conceptual], it has already been mentioned that it is what is not negated in one's understanding, and the non-existent is what is [negated] (al-Samarqandī 1985: 99).

The important point for the present analysis is that though the purely conceptual essence remained an important category, so did the factually existing one. The dominance of postclassical immanentism within theological discourses can be shown by Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390) who wrote one of the most widely glossed commentaries on a Sunnī creed. In commenting on the opening words of the classical Māturīdī scholar Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (d. 1142), "the realities of things are established and knowledge of them is realised, contrary to the Sophists" – a statement against scepticism – al-Taftāzānī provides a fully immanentist reinterpretation:

> The reality of the thing and its essence are that which constitute the identity of a thing, such as "the rational animal" for the human being, as opposed to, for instance, "the laughing [animal]" and "the writing [animal]", which it is possible to conceive of the human being without, since they are accidents. It is said that "that which constitutes the identity of a thing" [i.e. the essence] is, with respect to its factuality,[17] a reality; and with respect to its individuality, an isness; and without consideration of either, an essence (al-Jūrī 2017: 15).

Despite the widespread adoption of an immanentist approach to essence, it seems that a pure Avicennism was rebuffed by scholars of *kalām* (as evidenced by general rejection of hylomorphism in favour of atom and accident accounts) and the deductive approach to essence elaboration was largely discredited. Thus, postclassical *kalām* immanentists typically remained inductive in their search for the essences of real objects, even though they often adopted peripatetic definitions in practice, as seen in the famous example of the human being quoted above (Ibrahim 2013: 419-426). This state of affairs is a challenge to proponents of postclassical *falsafa* and *kalām* alike, since induction – especially in the absence of a presupposed metaphysical picture – cannot ground a robust first philosophical approach towards essences. At best it delivers probabilistic regularity, not explanatory priority. This gap may explain to some extent the intellectual space created for a third strand of thinking that rejects both Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism and Postclassical Immanentism.

Platonic Exemplarism

Platonic Exemplarism, as with the other views surveyed, has internal diversity as a classificatory category, though there is enough in common to warrant the ascription. This camp understands the essences of things in the world to be given by participation in higher metaphysical orders that nevertheless remain beneath the One in their multiplicity. I use the term Platonic Exemplarism for these broadly Neoplatonist traditions because they take up the basic idea of Platonism that the essences of particular things must be explained through more lofty exemplars, not that they follow the classical doctrine of Platonic Forms. As discussed above, I will take Ismāʿīlism, Suhrawardī, and Akbarī thought as representatives of this trend.

The Ismāʿīlī tradition is distinctive for its adoption of a Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology that was adapted to a certain set of gnostic Shīʿī ideas within Islam. Ismāʿīlī schemes varied, but the basic idea is that all things find their explanation through a series of emanations, usually of Intellects, from the unknowable One (Daftary 2007: 228-231). Following Plotinus, the relevant motivation for my discussion is that this is held to provide an intelligible account of the essential properties of things. An illustrative example is the system propounded by the Ismāʿīlī philosopher Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. 1020-21). He suggested that the Third Intellect provides the archetypes of matter (*hayūlā*) and form (*ṣūra*) (Daftary 2007: 234). Thus, the hylomorphic ontology that explains the terrestrial world receives its characterisation of essence from without.

Next, I will consider Suhrawardī. His philosophical approach has a debt to the Platonic tradition, to Avicenna (often in criticism), as well as certain strands of thought associated with Zoroastrianism through the importance he gives to higher metaphysical lights. Suhrawardī reimagines the doctrine of Platonic Forms according to his own metaphysical premises, naming them the "Lords of Species". He does not think that they need to exactly resemble the things within the world for which they act as "exemplars" (*muthūl*). The details are complex, but the main point for the present discussion is that he posits a higher realm of "luminous simple essences" that explain the particular features of lower worldly objects ("idols"). Suhrawardī writes:

> [E]ach thing whose existence is independent has something holy that corresponds to it. The scent of musk does not have a form and the musk another; rather, there is a dominating light in the world of pure light with luminous states – rays and states of love, pleasure, and dominance – whose shadow falling in this world has as its idol

> musk with its scent, or sugar with its taste, or the human form with its various organs… (Suhrawardī 2000: 109).

Finally, I will give a brief account of the Akbarī exemplarist approach to essence. This school of thought, which mixed the mystical teachings of Ibn ʿArabī with a broadly Neoplatonic cosmology, gained significant influence in the later centuries of Islamic thought. Ibn ʿArabī's disciple and son-in-law Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274) had a profound influence on shaping the systematic philosophical ambitions of the school and hence is an ideal figure through which to sketch its position. Like his master, al-Qūnawī articulates a level of existence known as that of the Immutable Archetypes (*al-aʿyān al-thābita*). This domain acts as a kind of blotting pad in the divine mind in which the essential natures of the things that are created in the world are recorded. He describes this as follows:

> Because the essences are known [to God] and their intelligible forms are determined in God's essential and eternal knowledge, it follows that they cannot possibly be created (*majʿūla*) owing to the impossibility of anything new arising in God's Essence, and the impossibility of His containing anything other than Himself, or of His being contained, not to mention other absurdities which are only too clear to those who consider the matter attentively. Accordingly, neither the verifiers from among the folk of intuition, nor those from among the partisans of rational inquiry, regard [these essences] as having been created, for the created is synonymous with the existent. Hence whatever [like the essences] has no existence is not created. Indeed, if they were existent then the determination of the objects of God's immutable knowledge would inevitably affect Him in some way, despite the fact that they are in no way external to Him that knows them (*al-ʿālim bi-hā*). The truth of the matter, therefore, is

> that they in themselves are non-existent (*maʿdūm fī anfusi-hā*), their sole reality (*thubūt*) being in the self of the knower (Todd 2014: 91, quoting al-Qūnawī's *Risāla al-nuṣūṣ*).

The essences that al-Qūnawī describes, as determinations in God's knowledge, are eternal uncreated forms without genuine existence in their own right. Though this latter qualification is also true for all objects, according to the Akbarī system, a critical distinction is maintained between the uncreated eternality of the Immutable Archetypes and the temporal manifestation of things within the created world.

The three philosophical perspectives just studied foreground an approach to essences that insists not just on their factual reality, but their transcendent basis as archetypes that are exemplified rather than immanently instantiated by things in the world. This avoids the worry of presupposing ontology by affirming the explanatory priority of oneness through intelligibility. Yet, as suggested above, the challenge faced by this approach is epistemic: a seemingly abductive positing of a set of rational assumptions to secure the henological ascent and, failing that, a fallback into non-public mystical seemings. So, an intelligibility-first approach avoids circularity, but arguably only by compromising publicness.

This account of diverse Islamic first philosophies has thus witnessed essences as names/concepts, as extramental instantiated particulars, and finally as higher metaphysical realities of various kinds. In the next section, I will further critique these approaches in terms of the question of essence discovery and show why I judge that they fall onto the two horns of my dilemma.

## 4. Essence Discovery in Islamic First Philosophy

Wherever an Islamic philosophical or theological stance places essences on the metaphysical spectrum, it is necessary to have a method for discovering them. This point arose in the previous section in relation to the metaphysical views of the three positions that I discussed. Here I will build on my analysis so far to show how my dilemma applies to them on this epistemically focused point.

Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism relies on agreement between human beings for coming to an essential description of things. There is not only no extramental essence, there is no essence at all beyond the shared expressions or concepts that human beings designate for them. A major concern, then, is that the essence descriptions generated within Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism are merely conventional ascriptions dependent on the accidental features of the world and of the physical, psychological and social features of human beings. They are fundamentally based, therefore, on whatever metaphysical account of that world is given. According to my critique, this "common sense" approach to phenomena only gets off the ground by circularly presupposing a metaphysics by which essences can be categorised. Additionally, this camp would seem to be in danger of leaving human beings systematically mistaken about the correspondence of essence descriptions or concepts to reality in ways that could not be easily detected.

Postclassical Immanentism, as discussed in the previous section, comes in two main varieties, a robustly hylomorphic one, which reflects the Avicennan view towards the simple essences that comprise substances, and a modified version – favoured by the postclassical *kalām* tradition – that also allows for composite essences. In either case, the extramental status of essences, even though their universality may be construed conceptually, means that there must be some way to verify the link between the essence concept and its immanent counterpart. Avicennan optimism about deduction from first principles – or his speculative Neoplatonic idea that human beings can gain access to these via the Active Intellect – is very

vulnerable to criticism, leaving a possibly inductive alternative. But whereas induction may be useful for drawing up probabilistic judgements about phenomena, it is ill-suited for essence discovery, since it does not provide a method that goes beyond the habitual conjunction of properties. Classical *Kalām* Nominalism/Conceptualism falls back on the same method, of course, but acknowledges it more openly. The inductive version of Postclassical Immanentism seems to be trapped in the pretence of a method to genuinely cut nature at the joints, while being unable to demonstrate this is the case. Hence, this is a position that may lead to a revived scepticism, a complaint that is sometimes laid at the door of al-Rāzī (Adamson and Benevich 2023).

Platonic Exemplarism resolves that the essences of mundane things, which exist in some variety of higher metaphysical realm, are made intelligible by their relation to greater levels of oneness. As discussed earlier, there are several trends of thought within the Islamic tradition that take this kind of stance. They usually try to articulate this higher realm in such a way that it can take on this mediate role: beyond the mundane world while still dependent on the truly one, God, who is understood as radically transcendent from it. As I have outlined, this camp is liable to the second horn of the dilemma. The initial rational stance taken is henology, an argument based on the presumption that all multiplicity must be explained through increasing degrees of participation in unity, leading to positing the aforementioned metaphysical essences as links in a chain of intelligibility between the human being and God. Yet the central henological principle, if it can be rationally justified at all, arguably rests on a hidden abductive inference: merely one possible state of affairs that would provide an explanation for the reality we experience. In fact, each of the schools discussed has its own metaphysical system (or systems) that claim to provide that convincing account. Given the dubious rational basis for such a move, a mystical supplement is typically introduced by each claimant to bootstrap the worldly interlocutor up to these higher verities. The problem is that

this is precisely where the second horn is sharpest, since the appeal to mystical knowledge fails on grounds of publicness. Hence, the detailed essence schemes proposed by mystical claimants are unverifiable according to the reason-giving standard that is required in the present context.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that whereas the discourse of first philosophy has been a persistent claim within Islamic thought, the principles supplied to act as a first explanatory ground, existence and oneness, are not able to perform this function in the intended way. The metaphysical status and discovery of essences have provided my test case. I argued that being-first approaches, such as those found within the works of classical *kalām* and Avicennism, provide a circular grounding for the metaphysical status of essences while falling into various psychologistic, conventionalist, dubiously deductive or inductively uncertain methods for their discovery. Intelligibility-first approaches provide a non-circular grounding for essences but at the cost of using speculative abductive methods to establish the metaphysical systems that make them intelligible. This typically results in the collapse to mystical warrants that are not publicly verifiable.

If this critique is cogent, where does it leave Islamic first philosophy? A successful candidate would need to be able to discuss and classify essences without presupposing metaphysical commitments, while avoiding the slide into a speculative, mysticism-backed private account of intelligibility. Essences would need to be explained in terms of *what* they are, not *that* they are, in the way that they are accessed publicly by rational agents. One promising route is a phenomenological research programme in which essences are explored through intersubjective justificatory norms, for instance eidetic variation under the bracketing

of metaphysics.[18] In my judgement, only such an approach has the potential to be a first philosophy worthy of the name for Islamic discourses and beyond.

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[1] I do not assume that philosophical, or specifically metaphysical, explanation is equivalent to a form of "grounding", which is a contested notion. See Daly 2023.

[2] I do not use this in the full Heideggerian sense but to describe a metaphysics or being-first approach to first philosophy deriving from Aristotle. See Cohen and Reeve 2025.

[3] There is an ongoing debate about the definition of essence, especially in response to the work of Kit Fine since the 1990s (Leech 2021: 250-251). That discussion does not bear on my argument here.

[4] The Arabic is *al-ḥaqq al-ūlā*, which could also be translated as "First Truth".

[5] The Arabic is *huwiyya*, which is a thing's isness: that by which something is with consideration only to its existence.

[6] The translations of texts cited from their Arabic originals within this article are by the present author.

[7] Khalil Andani interprets Avicenna's "Necessary Existence as an absolutely independent being", which he then equates with his own constructive appraisal of God as "Unconditioned Reality", a concept that he treats as comparable to ideas in Ismāʿīlī and Akbarī thought, citing later commentators (Andani 2025: 23-24). Without getting drawn into an exegetical debate, this classification strikes me as inaccurate. The sense in which Avicenna thinks God is independent is that God's essence is just existence, whichever modal notions are used to explain that state of affairs (Lizzini 2021). This is very different from the "double negation" of both non-being and being that is the mainstay of Ismāʿīlī theology (Kars 2019: 37-38) or the "unrestricted being" understood by Akbarīs.

[8] Note that this point pertains to unity as an explanatory principle, according to the terms of my argument, rather than any claim about the mystical experience of union with God. When I turn to critically discuss the private nature of mystical knowledge, I present a general case about how that kind of knowledge can relate to first

philosophy and not a specific one about how varied traditions dealt with the possibility of such a union. I also accept the possibility of a blurring of the line between some of the *falāsifa* and Islamic mystics on ideas of mystical union, though I do not think this point affects the viability of my argument.

[9] Here I must deal with a classificatory question. If, according to my dilemma, Avicenna's idea of the necessarily existent represents an ontotheological position and Ismāʿīlī "double negation" represents a henological one (according to the distinction that I draw in this article), what should be said about Akbarī unrestricted being, or "unconditioned reality" in Andani's language (Andani 2025: 24-27)? I think the key question is to determine where explanatory priority lies. If it is the idea of complete existential independence, then it falls under the first horn. If, however, its unconditionality is so radical that it points to an ineffable singularity beyond even the notion of existence, then it falls under the second horn. My argument, then, is that prevailing Islamic approaches to first philosophy fall into one or other camp irrespective of the precise classification of any specific thinker or tradition.

[10] This can be taken as a specialised schema, directed solely at mystical knowledge, corresponding in some respects to William James' distinction between "personal" and "institutional" religion (James 1902: 28-29).

[11] One might want to argue that the use of similar or identical Level 2 language by different individuals or even diverse traditions provides a measure of corroboration that can reveal consistent patterns within Level 1 experience. The problem here is that apparent agreement of language underdetermines its causal explanation. There are many other factors that may lead to similar mystical language, such as social pressures and interacting traditions and practices. Additionally, any attempt to mediate between divergent Level 2 language systems to ascertain accurate Level 1 convergence can only occur within Level 3 and will therefore undermine any pure experiential significance, making such convergence unverifiable. On the basis of these points, I argue that it is not feasible to isolate genuine mystical experience as a publicly accessible source sufficient for first philosophy.

[12] The word *dhāt* also means in many contexts "entity" or "subject of attributes". In the case of God the ideas of essentiality and subjecthood typically come together. God is an entity and, for those that affirm distinct attributes, is often understood to possess all of them essentially. For those who uphold a position of divine simplicity, it is rather the case that God is considered a subject without extramentally distinct attributes (or non-self-identical attributes): a "simple essence".

[13] The opposition between immanentism and exemplarism can be found in this context in Spiker 2021: 108.

[14] See Richard M. Frank's remarks on the early Ashʿarī Abū al-Qāsim al-Isfarāʿīnī (d. 1060): "So too, '*d̲āt*' [essence], '*nafs*' [self], and '*ʿayn*' [substance] in the realm of words (logic) are universal and true of every

actually existent entity, while in the realm of the real (in metaphysics) every entity is, in itself and as such, a particular existence, an entity whose Self/existence does not extend beyond itself. Real existence is not something common or shared but is the actuality in being of the particular entity itself" Frank 1999: 177.

[15] Not all postclassical figures were immanentists. See Laura Hassan's discussion of al-Āmidī (d. 1233) who seemingly remained closer to a classical Ashʿarī understanding: Hassan 2020: 115, 122, 164; Benevich 2022: 334.

[16] That is: 1) Simple – real; 2) Simple – conceptual – existent; 3) Simple – conceptual – non-existent; 4) Composite – real; 5) Composite – conceptual – existent; 6) Composite – conceptual – non-existent.

[17] A supercommentary glosses the word *taḥaqququhu* as "its external existence" (*wujūduhu fī al-khārij*). Al-Jūrī 2017: 15, n. 7.

[18] To my mind, this is most plausibly accomplished as an extension of Husserl's original programme for phenomenology. For a relevant discussion, see Lohmar 2025.