Chapter 6

Matter and Form: Problem 1

The opening section of the Shukūk tackles a problem that occurs towards the beginning of Chapter 1 of the Physics and Metaphysics of the Ishārāt. Al-Masʿūdī attacks Avicenna’s theory of matter and body, particularly his proof of prime matter and closely related theory of corporeal form. In what follows, I shall begin by contextualising the problem against the backdrop of Avicenna’s hylomorphism and Abū l-Barakāt’s criticisms and advocacy of an alternative strand of hylomorphism. We shall then turn to the Ishārāt and Shukūk.¹

6.1 Avicenna’s Theory of Matter and Corporeity

According to Avicenna, ‘body’ (jism) is said of different things. In the sense of ‘natural body’ (jism ṭabīʿī), it denotes the substance in which three dimensions (buʿd), perpendicular to one another can be postulated.² He is, nonetheless, aware that were the dimensions hypothesised to become actual, they would be accidental, rather than essential, features of body; for this reason, he considers this definition a description (rasm) of body, as opposed to a real definition (ḥadd), which would only consist of essential features of what is defined.³ In one place, Avicenna gives the real definition of body as ‘the form of continuity (ittiṣāl), which receives the positing of the three dimensions we have mentioned’.⁴ ‘Continuity’ here is used in the sense of divisibility, which is the absolute sense of the term: a thing is continuous in itself if we can postulate divisions within it, such that any two postulated divisions share a common boundary.⁵

¹ See also: Shihadeh, ‘Avicenna’s Corporeal Form and Proof of Prime Matter’. In the present chapter, Sections 6.1 and 6.2 and part of Section 6.3 draw closely on this article.
² Avicenna, Ṭabiʻyyat, I.I.2, 13; Ilāhiyyāt, II.2, 61–63; Ḥudūd, 22.
³ Avicenna, Ilāhiyyāt, II.2, 63.
⁵ In addition to this absolute sense, Avicenna gives two further, relative definitions for ‘continuity’, namely: contiguity, that is, when two bodies share a common boundary, in the sense that their surfaces are in contact; and attachment, that is, when two bodies are attached to one another, either by adhesion or interconnection (Avicenna, Manṭiq, II.III.4, 116–117; Ṭabiʻyyat, I.III.2, 269–271; cf. Stone, ‘Simplicius and Avicenna’, 102).
Another sense of ‘body’ is ‘mathematical body’ (jism taʿlīmī), which is a non-substantial, but accidental, form that inheres in a corporeal substance.6 ‘Mathematical body’ denotes the accidents of magnitude that are concomitant (lāzīm, lāḥiq) to natural body in its actual existence in determinate bodies, but do not contribute to the subsistence (qiwām) and realisation (taḥaqquq) of corporeity, being accidental rather than essential to it.7 For example, finitude is necessarily concomitant to all determinate bodies, because all individual bodies consist of finite parcels of matter.8 Associated with finitude are further quantitative accidents, specifically surfaces, determinate dimensions and shapes.9 As the quantitative form of any given body is accidental, it is never inherently necessary; yet certain bodies, most notably the celestial spheres, possess fixed magnitudes by virtue of their natures, which are distinct from the corporeity they share with all bodies, and from their specific magnitudes.10

Body, in the sense of natural body, is a composite of two primary principles, namely prime matter and corporeal form (ṣūrajismiyya). These are the two proximate causes to which body owes its subsistence.11 The most basic difference between these two principles is that the material cause of body is a passive principle and associated with pure potentiality, whereas the formal cause is an active principle and associated with actuality:

If [the cause of a thing] is included in its constitution and is part of its existence, then either it must be the part where, in terms of its existence alone,12 it is not necessary for it to be actual, but only to be in potency, and is termed ‘matter’. Or [the cause must be] the part whose existence is its being in actuality, namely form.13

Considering its absolute passivity, matter, according to Avicenna, lacks existence of itself and exists only by virtue of being actualised by the form, to which

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6 Avicenna, Manṭiq, II.III.4, 115; Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 64–65.
7 Avicenna, Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 62.
8 Avicenna, Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 62; Manṭiq, II.III.4, 113; Ishārāt, 2, 191–195; 2, 227.
9 Avicenna, Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 62; Ishārāt, 2, 191; 2, 243–244; 2, 227.
10 Avicenna, Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 64; Najāt, 499; Ishārāt, 2, 174–176.
11 Avicenna, Ṭabīʿiyāt, I.1, 14; Ilāḥiyāt, II.2, 64–65; 257 ff.; Najāt, 190–191.
12 Reading waḥdahu, rather than wa-ḥaddihi (Marmura).
13 Avicenna, Ilāḥiyāt, VI.1, 258 (Marmura, 195, with modifications); cf. 257; cf. Belo, Chance and Determinism, 57 ff.