

# Suhrawardi's sword on the neck of Peripatetics' first matter

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**Abstract:** Philosophy begins with substance and accident investigation and with the passage of time it becomes robust and brings forth the diverse and even conflicting views. One of the fundamental topics in peripatetic philosophy is a belief for substance, so the first matter that plays a crucial role in its cosmology and the discussion of it is considered as one of the oldest debates in peripatetic philosophy. Peripatetics prove the existence of first matter through the several arguments. Suhrawardi criticizes Peripatetics' first matter and rejects it. In this article we glance at the history of substance and accident, definition of substance and accident, their number, kinds of substance, Peripatetics's reasons for the existence of first matter; we relate the demonstration of junction and disjunction, power and act, porosity and condensation, then Suhrawardi's criticism on the Peripatetics' first matter. Thereafter, we compare and evaluate those two views and eventually it becomes clear that the peripatetic perspective has not a logical support.

**Keywords:** Avicenna, Suhrawardi, first matter, illumination, Peripatetic, body

## 1. Introduction

The history of philosophy testifies that the widespread and constant discourse of philosophy has been thinking substance which begins with Thales and still now shows in a new garment off. Thales said: «Everything is out of the water». (Aristotle, 1933, *Met*, 983 b6 8-11, 17-21) Philosophy is born from this statement and so the legend begins. We must investigate what this water is, whether it is the same water that we drink or something else. The water is the foundation of everything. Again, one could ask, what is a foundation? According to Aristotle this foundation is the material cause of things and we know that the material cause (matter) of things is substance and the substance is permanent and its accidents change; so it's neither the ocean water nor sea water, no wood and no mountain, but it is the foundation of all of them. According to Jean Wall, "due to the kind of substance that they consider as the principle of things, the first philosophers established the different areas: one assumed the principle as fire, another as air, another as water." (Wall, 2001, p. 74) Based on Aristotle's report, it can be realized that the history of philosophy begins with the substance and thus becomes stout. All philosophers after Thales have also dealt with the substance (*ibid*, Book1, sec3-9) to the extent that Aristotle sees substance as the fundamental subject of philosophy. Aristotle said, "Indeed, a question that has long been asked and now and in the future will be asked and defeats us, is "What is being?" and it means "What is substance?" (*ibid*, 1028b)

Things are substance or characteristics of substance that are called accidents (*ibid*, 1003b) and Aristotle calls them categories and their number is sometimes nine, sometimes ten. However, he knows ten categories, as it is said: 1. ousia (substance), ti esti (what is it?) (man or horse); 2. poson (quantity) three meters; 3. poion (quality) white; 4. pros ti (in relation to what?) (twice); 5. pou (where?) (in market); 6. pote (when?) (past year) 7. keistai (position) (he sits) 8. echein (possession) (armed, with shoe) 9. poiein (act) (he brings) 10. paschein (affection) (cut, burnt). The basis of counting categories is induction, not a demonstration (*ibid*, 1020a-1023a, 1017a) (Khorasani, 2536, p. 164) (Gompertz, 1996, pp. 1255-1264).

Ibn Sina divides the contingent being into the substance and accident and does not include God, the necessary being, in any category. He knows ten categories, one substance and nine accidents; he considers

their limitation in ten as based on induction, not demonstration. (Ibn Sina (*theology*), 1983, pp. 57 and 93-96)

For Ibn Sina the substance is a contingent being that is not in a subject (Avicenna 1983, *theology*, pp. 59-60), in other words, anything that is not in subject, is substance. To clarify this definition, we must unravel the meaning of subject. If two things are linked together, their link could be of two kinds: A) both are in need one another that such a link is so-called the link of **- and -**; B) one needs the other, but the other is needless. The needless of anything else is subject, the thing in need is accident (Ibn Sina 1983, *theology*, p. 59).

There exist five substances: intellect, soul, matter, form and body. The intellect is a substance that is not material and for doing his works needs not to the matter; the soul is a non-material substance that is dependent on the matter, body, for carrying out his works. (Ibn Sina 1983, *Logic* vol. 1, p. 94) (Davoudi, 1970 p. 28-77)

Second, the matter is a substance that exists in all material things. The matter has two meanings: the first matter, a substance that is nothing more than a potentiality for becoming anything; in other words, this matter does not have any form and can accept any form and the first form that can have, is the form of body, having length, width and depth. The body consists of a link between the first matter and the form of species. Matter in second meaning is the second matter, a substance that has a form, but it can accept other form or forms; like body that can become growing and growth that can become sensitive etc. Therefore, a substance that is only a potentiality for becoming something, is matter. Peripatetics prove the first matter with several reasons. (Ibn Sina 1983 *Theology*, pp. 65-69, *ibid* 1989 p. 53-62)

Third, the form that is a characterizing substance (Sina, 1983, *Theology*, p. 61), has several kinds:

1. A form that is combined with the matter, is the bodily form; it is a substance with length, width and depth. The combination of matter and bodily form makes the body and the body is a substance composed of matter and bodily form. (Sina, 1983, *Theology*, p. 61)

2. A form that is mixed with matter and bodily form, is called the form of species. The first form of species that in view of predecessors is joined to the body, is the elemental form. From the perspective of Peripatetics, the elemental forms are five: ether that makes the spheres and soil, water, air and fire that make the sublunary world. Mixing elements together, the tenth intellect creates the form of inanimate things, plants and animals. The elemental forms, inanimate things, plants and animals are called the forms of species.

In addition to bodily form, Peripatetics consider the elemental forms and form of inanimate things, plants and animals as the substantial, not accidental forms. (Sina, 1404, *Theology*, pp. 67-71) (Sina, 1989, pp. 134-143, *ibid*, 1989, 53-54) Then, to these species are added the different accidents; thus the particular things such as Babak and Nargess and this tree and that pen etc. are brought about. For the species (for example the man) and absolute body exist in all of their sub-groups (Babak and Houshang and Nargess etc. and the white and black and short body etc.) and what separates them from each other, should be something out of their nature and this is only the non-material accident. Third, a form apart from the matter with which has somehow a dependence, is called the soul and a form apart from the matter with which has not any dependence, is called the intellect. (Sina, 1983, *Theology*, p. 60, *ibid*, 1987, *treatise of definitions*, Page 23)

From what has been said, it is clear that from the perspective of Peripatetics the foundation of the material world is the first matter and all things are constituted by it. Suhrawardi criticizes and rejects this fundamental element of the peripatetic philosophy.

Now, we discuss the fundamental question of this article: what are Peripatetics' reasons for proving matter and Suhrawardi's reasons for denying it. By examining the thought of Ibn Sina, the head of Iranian Peripatetics, and of Suhrawardi, founder of illuminationism in Iran, in this article we shall try to analyze, evaluate and criticize the standpoints of each of them about matter.

## 2. Avicenna and the first matter

From the perspective of Ibn Sina, the matter is a substance that can have something that has not had already it; it is clear that such a thing is nothing unless it gets a form and if it accepts a form, it just becomes something. Therefore, the matter is a substance that can take any form and accident. (Ibn Sina, 2000, p. 10 and *ibid*, 1987, 23)

The question is whether in Ibn Sina's view such a substance exists outside the mind or not, if does, for what a reason or reasons. Ibn Sina believes that the first matter exists and for proving it gives three reasons that we explain here:

1. Power and act demonstration. Summary of this demonstration is as follows: in addition to have actually the extension in three directions and dimensions, the body has the ability to get the different forms of species such as being water, being soil etc., as well as different accidents such as the accident of burning (for fire) and that of solidity and firmness (for iron) etc.; it is clear that actuality aspect of bodies (extension in the three dimensions) can't accept the forms of species and accidents, because any actuality as actuality can't accept other actuality; and it should be a potential reason with this aspect of actuality in the bodies to receive these forms of species and accidents.

This demonstration has two premises and one conclusion is obtained from them: A. in so far as the body has a bodily form and substantial junction, is an actual thing; but in so far as it has a preparedness: whether a preparedness for being-inherent of a new form or occurrence of new accidents, it is a potential thing.

B. One thing and the same can't be actually one thing and potentially other thing else. Therefore, when we can say that a thing is actually one thing and potentially one thing else, we conclude that this thing is in fact two things: the aspect of actuality and that of potentiality. A potentiality that we assign to this thing, is not from the ground to which we assign the actuality, but from the other ground.

Therefore, a form and an actuality that we observe in the bodies, coincide with the other thing that is other than the form and actuality. It has completely alterity with form and actuality. The reason of its alterity is that the form has actuality, but this thing has no that. Therefore, the body is composed of two things: the matter that because of its potentiality is assigned to body; and the form that because of its actuality is assigned to that. Thus, we have a matter also alongside the form and its existence is proved. (Ibn Sina, 1983, *theology*, p. 67)

2. Disjunction and junction demonstration: in the bodies some changes happen like disjunction and junction and the substantial and accidental transformations; for example an adjoining and integrated body changes over two disjunctive and separated bodies, or the water is transformed into steam. Undoubtedly, happening these various transformations, it is not the case that the first existing is completely annihilated and one or more other existents are created from nothing; but a thing remains from the previous existent in the next one. However, what remains, is not the form or actuality of the previous existent. Hence there exists another substance between them that preserves their existential relation together and does not imply by itself any actuality; by this reason, it accepts different actualities. Thus, it is proved the existence of a substance that has not any actuality and its property is acceptance of forms and, philosophically speaking, it is a pure potentiality.

In other words, any bodily existent has two aspects: the one is the aspect of actuality and having, the other that of potentiality and lacking in relation to future actualities; these two aspects are different with each other. So any bodily existent is composed of two different objective things; since it is possible that the substance is composed of two accidents or one substance and one accident, it will inevitably be of two substantial components one of which is the aspect of actuality and the other the aspect of potentiality. The aspect of potentiality is on the part of its matter and the aspect of actuality on the part of form, hence the existence of matter. (Ibn Sina, 1983, *Theology*, p. 66) (*ibid*, 1996, p. 57) (Falsafi, 2012, p. 65)

3. The porosity and condensation demonstration: porosity and condensation in the philosophy are of two kinds: true and virtual. The true porosity is an increase in the size of body, without adding anything from outside; in contrast, the true condensation is a reduction of the size of body, without being separated or going out some parts of it. (Ibn Sina, 2000, p. 299) But the virtual porosity is that in which the size of body is increased by being attached the other body to it, like a balloon the size of which is increased by going air in; on the contrary, the non-true condensation means a reduction of the size of body due to going out a

body of it, like a balloon the size of which is decreased by going out the air. (*ibid.*, p. 301) Since the above division is merely a definition of philosophers in unanimity and some consider the true expansion and contraction without any external extension, Ibn Sina, regardless the problem of the first matter, has stated two examples for proving this sense, a noisy canteen and sucking bottle.

The noisy canteen is a canteen full of water that bursts as a result of heat. Ibn Sina has considered this phenomenon as indicating the existence of true porosity in the bodies; because in his view when the water is heated, nothing penetrate into the canteen neither fire, nor anything else; in other words, the water expands and because the canteen does not have enough capacity to accommodate this expansion, it bursts inevitably.

The second example is that if we suck the air inside a glass bottle and then we take the bottle's mouth and let go it upside-down on the water, it can be seen that some water get in the bottle. For Ibn Sina this phenomenon indicates that sucking a part of the air inside the bottle, remainder of the air expands really, so that it covers all of the space inside the bottle, without being added nothing to that. Then, after dipping the glass bottle in the water, the air inside the bottle is contracted and a part of space inside the bottle fill with water. (*ibid* 299-300) (Falsafi, 2012, p. 69) Accordingly, it should be acknowledged that without proposing any demonstration for proving the true porosity and condensation, Ibn Sina insists on the existence of true expansion and contraction in the bodies based on merely these examples. Although this topic has been discussed in *Najat*, but the main presupposition of porosity and condensation demonstration is proposed in *Išarat*. According to Malekshahi "when a body becomes large and small by the true porosity and condensation, it would be changed and altered in the form and we could not say the form of the great mass is the same form of the small mass and thus these two bodies are different. If a large body is the small one and a small body is the large one, we can ask what causes here to be the case the principle of "identity" and what leads us to say that small is large and large is small? (Malekshahi, 2009, vol. 1, p. 60) For Ibn Sina the common thing among small body and large body is the first matter that is in itself without any form of species and specific amount and yet is compatible with all amounts. (Ibn Sina, 1996, p. 59) So there is a matter, if it should be any porosity and condensation in the world.

### 3. Suhrawardi and the matter

From above three demonstrations, Suhrawardi does not give the demonstration of the power and act. It seems that his reason for not giving this demonstration is considering it as an obvious fallacy, the fallacy of *petitio principii*; because there has already been accepted the existence of two substances in the body, but this demonstration proves only two aspects of privation and having in the body on the basis of which having is the very form and privation the same matter.

Criticizing Peripatetics' two demonstrations, Suhrawardi proves that belief in a matter is an illusion that should set aside it and see the world otherwise.

3-1. Junction and disjunction reason: Suhrawardi believes that a fallacy in this argument has occurred, fallacy of equivocality. The junction has two meanings: the junction between two bodies that is in opposition to disjunction; the junction in the sense of extension; having length, width and depth is not the junction in opposition to disjunction. By the junction and disjunction argument, the Peripatetics say that since the body accepts the junction and disjunction, and on the other hand the junction is by no means disjunctive, so it is the case that a substance exists in the body that has an ability for junction and disjunction. Suhrawardi says: what is in the body, is not nothing but the extension of the length, width and depth and this extension is by no means opposed to the disjunction. In his view, what is in opposition to disjunction and is considered as its opposite, is only the junction between two bodies. Thus, what is opposed to disjunction, is realized only between two bodies and what exists in the body as extension of length, width and depth, is not in opposition to the disjunction.

In short, Suhrawardi has distinguished between extension and junction and what is in body, has called extension; in his view the junction is applied only in the case of two adjoining bodies. So what is in body, is extension and in so far as the extension is not in opposition with disjunction, it is can be considered disjunctive. (Suhrawardi, 1993, vol. 2, p. 57, Shirazi, 2005, p. Shahrazuri, 1993, S. and Falsafi, 2012, p. 65) Consequently, there is no such thing as matter and the body is the same extension.

### 3-2. Demonstration of porosity and condensation

We said that the porosity and condensation have been regarded as one of the demonstrations of proving matter. According to this demonstration, since in the phenomenon of porosity and condensation the body becomes large and small, it should be a common ground between large and small body, so that we can say this body is the same previous one. This common ground is the same matter (Ibn Sina, 1996, p. 59). Accepting the true porosity and condensation and first matter is mutually interdependent and therefore in some books, accepting and proving true porosity and condensation is considered as one of branches the existence of matter. This has made Suhrawardi who denies the existence of first matter, to reject also true porosity and condensation (Suhrawardi, 1993, p. 79).

For Suhrawardi this demonstration has several problems: first: we said that the only rational demonstration for the existence of true porosity and condensation has been based on being accident of quantity and if someone like Suhrawardi considers the truth of body as the same "quantity", then this demonstration will not be any more effective (Suhrawardi, 1993, p. 77; Shirazi, 2012, p. 418). Second, it can't be admitted a thing as a grain has the capacity to accept all quantities of the universe by the porosity (Suhrawardi, 1993, 79). Third: according to the majority of philosophers, since the vacuum is absurd, the universe is plenum. Also the universe is finite and these two phenomena are not necessarily developed simultaneously in two different bodies (with becoming porous a body, another body does not become necessarily condensed); in case of accepting the phenomenon of true porosity and condensation, with becoming porous and increase of the quantity of the body, it happens a physical interaction that is impossible (Suhrawardi, 1993, 78). Suhrawardi does not accept Peripatetics' two examples about porosity and condensation and justifies them otherwise. So if Peripatetics' reason for proving matter is this, their reasons are not really reasons and being clarified their falsity, Peripatetics should accept that there is no matter.

Criticizing Peripatetics' reasons, Suhrawardi uses their own method; by their own method he proves that there is no matter and if the Peripatetics adhere to their methods, they must accept also the conclusion of their argument. Thereby, based on his own method he proves by a reason that there is no matter; we will refer to that reason in the following.

Suhrawardi says that Peripatetics define the matter as: what exists and is a substance and receptive for bodily and species form; an existing that is a substance and receptive for bodily and species forms. For Suhrawardi this definition is incorrect, because firstly the existence is a mentally-positated concept and is only in mind and not out of mind; secondly based on Peripatetics' logic, the substance is a negative concept that does not exist in the external world; and thirdly the extension itself is receptive for junction and disjunction, we do not need any more assume a thing like matter. (Suhrawardi, 1993, 80)

#### **4. Evaluation of the viewpoints**

After examining these two views, it can be perceived that Peripatetics' matter is an assumption to which they have resorted out of necessity for help. Since they have failed to explain some problems such as what the body is and how the movement occurs, they were forced to propose a thing as matter; then they troubled themselves about whether it exists outside and if so, in what a manner. When we compare the explanation of Peripatetics and Suhrawardi, we clearly find that Suhrawardi's explanation is simpler and opens the way and has an internal consistency, while Peripatetics' explanation is complicated, static and self-contradictory; hence it can be said that Suhrawardi's view is more rational and more acceptable than that of theirs.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Thought is born from the thought and so is developed. Yet the thoughts become dusty by passage of time and once in a while, it is necessary to be dusted thoughts off by lovers of thought. Peripatetic philosophy and illuminationism are valuable funds. Their values will be revealed when each of them is read and analyzed critically and based on their own methodological and ontological foundations. By analyzing the first matter, we obtained to what extent firstly the philosophers' different methodological and ontological foundations are effective in understanding a thing; to what extent, secondly, the lack of a critical look on the one hand and dependence on the authority of a philosopher like Aristotle on the other remove us from the correct thought. Predecessors' fund can be recovered with the adze of criticism, not making them up. It is suggested that by looking at the methodological foundations and ontological components of every

thinker, his philosophy and different perceptions of it are analyzed and recognized, so that the light of philosophy and intellect tends to luminosity and "that our spirit and intellect are not darken".

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