Precedents

Let us now rewind from the madrasa centuries back through the eleventh century, and into the first three hundred years of extant Arabic scholarly output. Language use is first and foremost the use of precedent according to rules, and it is the past that determines how a word is deployed and then accepted. *Maʿnā* was an established and oft-used word that had formed part of scholars' conceptual vocabularies for several hundred years by the time our four scholars were at work. When we try to map this history of usage we notice that this single word, *maʿnā,* had been used to translate multiple Greek words into Arabic, was present as a label in the names of specific genres and groups, and was used to build and explain theories about both words and things. We have no word in English or European languages that plays the same roles, so let us therefore start to get acquainted with *maʿnā* as it would have appeared to our four scholars. In the course of this survey, we will encounter the word *ḥaqīqah* at several key points. This will also be our first encounter with the grinding complexity of some of the semantic, epistemological, and theological debates that had the use of *maʿnā* at their core. A non-Arabist reader in a hurry may wish to skip ahead to the translation theory in chapter 3.

IN TRANSLATION FROM GREEK

Texts in Greek were a major source of theoretical discussions, and I will discuss the details of that integration in more detail in the chapters on Ibn Sīnā and al-Ǧurǧānī. Here, in this chapter on the precedents for use of the word *maʿnā,* I would like to turn briefly to ninth-century translations of Greek, and to a representative genre of

scholarship: medicine. We are lucky to have Manfred Ullmann's magisterial (and hand-written) dictionary of translations, which primarily surveys Arabic interaction with the work of Galen (d. 216) and Aristotle. It quickly becomes apparent that *maʿnā* was a word used to translate a number of quite different Greek words into Arabic. This tells us that ninth-century Arabic translators were in the same position with regard to Greek as we twenty-first century translators into English are with regard to Arabic. In the absence of a shared conceptual vocabulary, translation has work to do.

Ullmann documents moments when *maʿnā* was used to translate *theōria, pragma, sēmainō,* and *tropos,* and also in phrases that translated the adjectives *paraphoros* and *presbutikos.*[1] Let us address these moments with some more detail. In Athens in the fourth-century B.C., Aristotle remarked that the methodology he was using to understand "the good" (begin at an accepted starting point and fill in the detail later) was one that should be followed "in other areas too" (*ton auton dē tropon*). The ninth-century Arabic translator, most likely Isḥāq b. Ḥunayn (d. 911),[2] translated this phrase as "according to this *maʿnā.*"[3] *Maʿnā* was a fundamental concept for the translators. The Baghdadi Christian Aristotelian al-Ḥasan Ibn Suwār (d. 1020), whom we will meet again in the chapter on Ibn Sīnā, explained that translators needed to conceive a *maʿnā* in the same way as the original author, and that he had produced a critical, comparative, multi-manuscript edition of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* in order to "get the *maʿnā.*"[4] Four hundred years after Aristotle, in second-century-A.D. Rome, Galen wrote that a large book on anatomy by his predecessor Marinus (of Alexandria, fl. 100) was marred by omissions. In ninth-century Baghdad, Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq (d. 873, father of the aforementioned Isḥāq and author of a treatise on these Galenic translations characterized by what Uwe Vagelpohl calls "vigorous pragmatism")[5] translated the phrase about the omissions, *ellipes de tēn theōrian,* as "you find his *maʿānī* to be inadequate."[6] Galen also used the adjective *paraphoros* to describe

---

1. *Theōria* ("theory," "speculative practice"), *pragma* ("matter," affair"), *sēmainō* ("signify"), *tropos* ("mode, manner"), *paraphoros* ("having deviated from the course," "incorrect"), and *presbutikos* ("like an old man"). Ullmann (2002–7, 1:865, 3:886). Translations selected from Liddell and Scott (1968).

2. Aristotle et al. (2005, 27).

3. Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1098a33. Arabic: وعلى هذا المعنى. Ullmann (2002–7, 3:492). English translation from Aristotle (2002, 102).

4. لمّا كان الناقلُ يحتاج في تأدية المعنى إلى فهمه إلى اللغة التي إليها يُنقَل إلى أنْ يكون متصوَّراً له كتصوُّرِ قائله . . . فلأنّا أحْببنا الوقوفَ على ما وقع لكلِّ واحدٍ منهم كتبنا جميعَ النقول التي وقعتْ إلينا ليقع التأمل بكلّ واحدٍ منها ويُستعان بعضها على بعض في إدراك المعنى. Georr (1948, 198), via Vagelpohl (2010, 254).

5. Vagelpohl (2010), 248.

6. Gal. *Anat. Admin.* 4:10. Ḥunayn:

the incorrect speech of other authorities about inflammation in the eyes, and Ḥunayn chose to describe such speech as having "no *maʿnā* to it."[7]

In all these examples, the word *maʿnā* would seem to be roughly equivalent to the English "meaning." But in his work on medicines, Galen warned that confusion about the names "dry" and "wet" would lead to uncertain knowledge of the *pragmata,* and then both names and knowledge of *pragmata* would become confused. (We will return to *pragmata* in chapter 6 below.) Ḥunayn translated this as "when the labels indicating them become confused, then so does knowledge of the *maʿānī* and the actual things."[8] Galen had used a standard Greek binary of *onoma* and *pragmata,* a pairing we could map onto the English pairing of "words/names" versus "things." Galen had warned that labeling confusion leads to confusion about what things actually are. When Ḥunayn wanted to say this in Arabic, he moved to an epistemological structure with three components. He made a specific distinction between the labels of the medicines on the one hand, and then both their *maʿānī* and their *umūr* on the other. The word *umūr* here stands for the actual physical medicines themselves. The *maʿānī* are Ḥunayn's third category: they are not the labels (the words are the labels), and they are not the actual medicines either. They are *maʿānī,* a core conceptual category not found in Greek or English without recourse to neologism.

In his work on body parts affected by disease, in a typological discussion of changes to organs, Galen again stressed the importance of consistent use of medical terminology, and he remarked how, "what speech signifies" has confused both junior physicians and philosophers (*tōn sēmainomenōn ho logos*). The translator, either Ḥunayn or his nephew Ḥubayš b. al-Ḥasan al-Aʿsam (fl. ninth century),[9] rendered this phrase as "the *maʿānī* that are indicated by names."[10] The Arabic

---

وَجَدْتَهُ في معانيه ناقصاً. Ullmann (2002–7, 1:295–96).

7. Gal. *De Pulsibus Libellus ad Tirones.* Galen (1821–33, 8:484). Ḥunayn:

لا معنى له. Ullmann (2002–7, 2:31–33, 3:55–56).

8. *Ex oun toutōn tōn prophaseōn hē tōn onomatōn chrēsis tarachtheisa kai tēn tōn pragmatōn epitarattei gnōsin. Hōsautōs de kai peri xērou kai hugrou tōn onomatōn sugxuthentōn kai hē tōn pragmatōn gnōsis sunexuthē.* Ḥunayn:

لمّا تشوّشتْ الألقابُ الدالة عليها تشوّش العلمُ بذلك بالمعاني والأمور. Gal. *De Simplicium Medicamentorum Temperamentis ac Facultatibus* 3.12. Galen (1821–33, 11:569), Ullmann (2002–7, 3:176).

9. Garofalo (1997, 15).

10. *Anamnēsthōmen d' eis ta paronia chrēsimōs kai tōn en tēi peri iatrikōn onomatōn pragmateia lelegmenōn, entha peri tōn sēmainomenōn ho logos ēn, ha kakōs sugcheousin ouk oligoi tōn neōterōn iatrōn te kai philosophōn.* Arabic [starting at *entha*]:

حيث ذكرتُ المعانيَ اللتي تدل عليها الأسماء. Rudolph E. Siegel's English translation says simply "where I discussed the signs." Gal. *De Locis Affectis* 1.3. Galen (1821–33, 8:32), (1976, 28); Ullmann (2002–7, 3:274).

conceptual vocabulary revealed by this translation choice matches the three-part division that we encountered in the previous example. There are words and things, and then there are those mental contents that result from the input provided by language. Ḥunayn or his nephew read the Greek and then wrote *maʿānī*. They read a combination of Greek words that Liddell and Scott tell us is also found in Sophocles (d. 406 B.C.): *chō logos sēmainetō* (translated variously as "now let your speech signal your meaning" or "you may tell your story") and that is clearly about forming a speech act to communicate one's meaning.[11] Galen had certainly read Sophocles, and it is possible that Ḥunayn or his nephew had too. (Maria Mavroudi has shown that Sophocles was read by Ḥunayn's fellow Christians in ninth-century Iraq.)[12] What is interesting for us is that in Sophocles' literary moment he seems to want to stress the process by which ideas are consciously turned into words (facts, lies, and silence are in play; Deianeira is telling the Messenger he can now speak freely). It is fun to imagine that this line was on Ḥunayn's mind when he used the Arabic word *maʿānī* for Galen's dry injunction about the same process of turning ideas into words. In a more prosaic final example, when the Archbishop of Constantinople Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) proscribed that his order wear shoes and crutches like old men, the tenth-century Christian Arabic translator rendered *presbutikos baktēreuontes* as "crutches according to the *maʿnā* of an old man."[13] In the mind of the translator, this was an idiomatic and appropriate Arabic phrase that could do the work done in English by "like": think of an old man, and then you will know what kind of crutches we are talking about.

These six Greek words (*theōria, pragma, sēmainō, tropos, paraphoros,* and *presbutikos*) were all translated (or in the case of *paraphoros* and *presbutikos,* translated in part) by *maʿnā*. The choice we have now is whether to shoehorn these *maʿānī* into a word such as "meanings," or to force them into a neologism such as "mental contents." The decision to make six different words into one single word has already been made by the ninth- and tenth-century translators; the question before us now is how to do justice to that Classical Arabic choice. Our primary task in this book is the translation of the Classical Arabic conceptual vocabulary, not the Greek one. Greek simply helps us see what Arabic was doing. Translation will be the subject of the next chapter. Here, I would just like to note that if we were to choose "meanings," then these six Greek words would represent a set of usages that does not match how we use the word "meaning" in English. The advantage

---

11. Soph. *Trachiniae* 345. Translations: Richard Jebb and Robert Torrance via Perseus Digital Library.

12. Mavroudi (2015, 329–30).

13. Gregory of Nazianzus (2001, 136). Arabic:

والعُكّازاتُ على معنى الشيخ. Ullmann (2002–7, 3:182).

of "mental content" is that it is an awkward neologism that makes us ask exactly what the Arabic word *maʿnā* was doing. It also helps us identify that some sort of content is in play, and provisionally locate that content in the mind.

IN BOOK TITLES

Some usages of *maʿnā* and its plural *maʿānī* were so well-established by the eleventh century that they appeared in the titles of books and the slogans of polemicists. They fit the same patterns of usage we have encountered in the translations from Greek, and could just as well be rendered in English as "mental content." Once again, the awkward nature of the resultant translations will remind us that these are genres and controversies that we just do not have in the histories of Anglophone or European theology, literary criticism, or grammar. And yet they were fundamental to the conceptual vocabulary of eleventh-century Arabic, and therefore to the theoretical discussions that are the subject matter of this book. Eleventh-century scholars would have read a great many books that dealt with *maʿānī al-Qurʾān* ("the *maʿānī* of the Quran") or *maʿānī aš-šiʿr* ("the *maʿānī* of poetry"), and they would have studied *maʿānī an-naḥw* ("the *maʿānī* of grammar/syntax") at school.

Let us start with the foundational text of the Quran, over three centuries distant when our four authors heard and read it but pedagogically, linguistically, epistemologically, and rhetorically omnipresent in their intellectual lives. The idea that the Quran had contents, *maʿānī,* was uncontroversial. And these contents were assumed to be located in the mind; they were mental contents. Unsurprisingly, the question of whose mind the contents of the Quran were in was theologically problematic, and we will confront it in chapters 4 and 5. But no one would have disagreed with the statement that the Quran was full of *maʿnā*. Perhaps the most famous book to enshrine this principle in a title was Abū Zakarīyah al-Farrāʾ's (d. 822) *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*. As we have the text today, al-Farrāʾ's work starts with a transmission note from one of his students, who wrote that this was "a book containing the *maʿānī* of the Quran" that al-Farrāʾ had dictated from memory starting in the early Tuesday and Friday mornings of the month of Ramadan in the year 818. The teacher's opening words were: "Exegesis of the problematic desinential inflections of the Quran and its *maʿānī* begins with the transmission consensus that the *alif* in the *basmalah* is elided." This is an orthographic statement about the opening phrase of the Quran known as the *basmalah* (*bi-smillāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm,* "In the name of God, the merciful, the beneficent") and how it is written down. According to al-Farrāʾ, the reason that Quranic orthography omitted the upright stroke of the letter *alif* was that the *basmalah* was a place in the Quran so well known that a reader would never be "ignorant of the *maʿnā* of the *alif.*" It was, after all, a customary linguistic trait among the Arabs to whom the Quran was revealed that abbreviation and elision were practiced "when the

maʿnā was known."[14] There is no doubt here that *maʿnā* is the mental content of speech, nor that this mental content is what is at stake when questions of orthography or grammar are under consideration. The single letter *alif* has a *maʿnā* so well known in a certain phrase that its physical representation on the page may be omitted. A book such as that of al-Farrāʾ, largely concerned with the accurate reading of the Quranic text and the discussion of dialectical variations therein, would therefore accurately be given the title "Mental Contents of the Quranic Text." The word *maʿnā* appears a great deal in the book; the lessons al-Farrāʾ dictated often consist of a paraphrase of the mental content of a certain word, or a statement that two words have the same or different mental contents, all backed up with evidence from sources including Arab poets, lexicographers of Arabic, and his own authorial judgment. And it was not just single words and letters that had mental contents; whole phrases or verses did too. The phrase "If God willed it, he would depart with their hearing" (Quran 2:20, al-Baqarah) is therefore explained by al-Farrāʾ as "the mental content, and God knows best, is that if God willed it he would make their hearing go away." The rhetorical thrust of the verse stays the same; the mental content is stable (albeit al-Farrāʾ piously eschews confidence in his interpretation), and only the syntax changes. We will return to syntax and *maʿānī* with a vengeance in chapter 7.

If the *maʿānī* of the Quran could be the mental contents occasioned by both letters and whole verses, so a book on "the mental contents of the Quran" could include more than the lexicographical and orthographical notes of al-Farrāʾ. Writing in tenth-century Egypt, Abū Ğaʿfar Muḥammad an-Naḥḥās (d. 950) started his *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* by saying that the book would also include explanation of the Quran's rare words, juridical prescriptions, and verses that abrogated other verses, all based on scholarly precedent from religious and lexicographical authority. But what was at stake in all these subgenres of Quranic study was the *maʿānī* of the Quran—the mental contents it contained. An-Naḥḥās was interested in desinential inflections only insofar as they were needed to grasp the *maʿnā,* and when he wanted (taking part in a long-standing debate)[15] to stress the Arabness of the Quranic language, he wrote that "the mental contents of the Quran are found only through the Arabic lexicon."[16]

---

14. لأنها وقعت في موضع معروف لايجهل القارئُ معناه ولا يحتاج إلى قراءته فاستُخفّ طرحُها لأنَّ مِن شأن العرب الإيجازَ وتقليل الكثير إذا عُرف معناه. Al-Farrāʾ (1960, 1:2.2–4).

15. Rippin (2016).

16. فدلّ على أن معانيه إنما وَرَدتْ من اللغة العربية . . . فقصدتُ في هذا الكتاب تفسيرَ المعاني والغريبَ وأحكامَ القرآن والناسخَ والمنسوخَ . . . وآتي مِن القراءات بما يَحتاج إلى تفسير معناه وما احتاج إليه المعنى مِن الإعراب. An-Naḥḥās (1988, 1:42.1–43.1).

After this Quranic introduction (more valuable detail and references can be found in Andrew Rippin),[17] it makes sense that multiple genres of pre-eleventh-century scholarship would produce books that dealt with the range of mental contents, *maʿānī*, occasioned in authors' and readers' minds when each genre of text was read. And while a comprehensive survey is beyond our scope here, a cursory review of the lists of book titles in Fuat Sezgin's bibliographic survey of pre-eleventh-century works bears out this conclusion. Sezgin's volumes dealing with Quranic sciences, Hadith, poetry, grammar, and lexicography list nearly a hundred books with *maʿnā* in their title. Their contents are of course not all the same: the mental content produced by poetry is not the same as the mental content produced by prophetic Hadith, nor are all the disciplines identical in their preoccupations. But they are all using *maʿnā* in the same stable way. So when Abū Ǧaʿfar Muḥammad at-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933) wrote, in response to requests from his companions, a substantial collection of Hadith designed to defend that corpus from its critics, it became known as *Kitāb Maʿānī al-Āṯār—The Book of the Mental Contents of Prophetic Traditions*.[18] When Ibn Qutaybah (d. 889) wrote his *Kitāb al-Maʿānī al-Kabīr fī Abyāt al-Maʿānī* (*The Big Book of Maʿānī Dealing with Maʿānī Verses*), which is also known as *Maʿānī aš-Šiʿr* (*The Maʿānī of Poetry*), he was producing a set of explanations of selected verses from the canon of Arabic poetry, the words of which might not have been familiar to his urban Baghdadi audience.[19] He spent a great deal of time explaining the *maʿnā* of descriptive terms used by poets from previous centuries, so the chapter on "Lines with *Maʿānī* about the Hyena" starts with a single line from al-Kumayt b. Zayd al-Asadī (d. 743):[20]

> *Like the mother of ʿĀmir hiding away in her den, but the hunter has the rope.*
> *The wolf will provide for her family.*

One can imagine that this line was as obscure to a ninth-century Baghdadi bureaucrat as it may be to us. Ibn Qutaybah provides the mental content in a concise paragraph: the mother of ʿĀmir is an alternative name for the hyena, an animal known for its stupidity, which is evinced by its habit of sticking to its den until its hind legs can be snared by the rope of a hunter who pretends to have abandoned the chase. Wolves have been known to raise the children of hyenas after the parents were hunted, and in some cases interbreed. Provided with this account of the

---

17. Rippin (2015).

18. Sezgīn (1967–, 1:437–38), aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī (1994, 1:11).

19. Cf. Harb (2013, 146 n. 463).

20. Ibn Qutaybah (1984, 1:212). كَما خامَرَتْ في حِضْنِها أُمُّ عامِرٍ | لَدَى ٱلْحَبْلِ حَتَّى عالَ أَوْسٌ عِيالَها

maʿnā, the reader of Ibn Qutaybah is now equipped to use the line as an apt quotation in a literary performance (the process known as *adab*).

The Quran, Hadith, and profane poetry all had *maʿānī* that could be recaptured and paraphrased by the scholars who worked to interpret them. Language was the interface between the mental contents of authors and readers. It is therefore unsurprising that language itself was analyzed using *maʿnā* as a label for the functions and meanings behind the words themselves. Any discussion of the function of a certain particle in syntax, or the import of a certain tense or mood of a verb, or indeed the type of illocutionary force intended by a speaker would be a matter of *maʿnā.* As we will see, al-Ǧurǧānī's poetics was at heart a theory of syntax, and the ingredients of syntax were *maʿānī.* This was not a controversial terminological assumption. For example, when al-Ǧurǧānī's predecessor in the canon of great grammarians, Abū al-Qāsim az-Zaǧǧāǧī (d. ca. 949), wrote a book about the grammatical functions of particles, he called it *Maʿānī al-Ḥurūf* (*The Maʿānī of Particles*). The first four particles dealt with were "at," "all," "some," and "like," and az-Zaǧǧāǧī then continued for another 133 Arabic words, explaining the semantic load of each word and how it functioned in Arabic syntax.[21]

Maʿnā was the word used to describe what happened in people's heads when they were faced with language. And seeing as the Quran, Hadith, and poetry were all made up of language, *maʿnā* was also the word used to describe what happened in people's heads when they interacted with those texts.

IN THE ARABIC DICTIONARY

The Arabic lexicographical tradition, as we will see in chapter 4, was itself a map of usage and precedent. What did the authors of dictionaries say about *maʿnā?* As was the case with all the words that existed in Arabic, a lexicon became firmly established during the first four centuries of Arabic scholarship, and the etymological relationships between words were delineated and argued over with reference both to the canon of pre-Islamic poetry and to anthropological lexical fieldwork among nomadic Arabic tribes. The word *maʿnā* was no exception. The lexicographers went to work on it just as they went to work on every other Arabic word in their vast, ever-expanding, mutually referencing dictionaries and manuals of morphology. And in David Larsen's recent article, we have a comprehensive engagement with both the lexicographers' work and the uses of *maʿnā* in early poetry on

---

21. مِثل and ‫،عندَ ،كلّ ،بعض‬. az-Zaǧǧāǧī (1984, 1–3).

which they drew. He concludes, inter alia, that "outward exposure of inner content is one of *maʿnā*'s master metaphors."[22]

The first lexical question was what part of speech, what type of noun, *maʿnā* was. On the face of it, *maʿnā* could be either a *maṣdar* (a quasi-verbal event noun) or a noun of place. These two parts of speech are in the case of the word *maʿnā* indistinguishable, so one could choose to read *maʿnā* as either the act of aiming or the place of aiming. Larsen and I might be tempted to prefer the latter, but al-Ǧurǧānī, himself a grammarian, wrote a voluminous commentary on his teacher's study of morphology, in which he concluded that in such cases the *maṣdar* is the starting point from which the noun of place derives. (The *maṣdar* was also, according to Gerhard Endress, the morphological form used most often to translate abstract and universal concepts from Greek.)[23] Al-Ǧurǧānī's general statement is backed up in the specific case of the word *maʿnā* by a scholar specializing in fine-grained lexical distinctions, Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. ca. 1010), who confirmed that while *maʿnā* looked like it could be a noun of place, it was indeed a *maṣdar*.[24]

But what did the lexicographers say that verb from which *maʿnā* derived meant? One of their traditional etymological starting points, the Quran, provided little assistance. Neither the word *maʿnā*, nor the root from which it is derived (ʿ-n-y) appears in the Quran, although Larsen has interrogated the appearance of the related root ʿ-n-w at Quran 20:111 (Ṭā Hā), noted the appearance of ʿ-n-y in a variant reading of Quran 80:37 (ʿAbasa), and supplied the word's Hebrew cognate (*maʾneh* from the same ʿ-n-y root.)[25] The word *ḥaqīqah* does not appear either, although the root ḥ-q-q is used by the Quran to talk about truth a great deal.

In the work of Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad Ibn Fāris (d. 1004) we read a synthesis of the work of the previous four centuries of lexicographers that tells us that the *maʿnā* of a thing is what you get when that thing is tested, or the basic default state of a thing (via al-Ḫalīl b. Aḥmad, d. 786),[26] or the purpose of a thing that is revealed when you look for it (via Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. Ziyād Ibn al-Aʿrābī, d. ca. 846). In the absence of Quranic precedent, the sources adduced by Ibn Fāris to prove his reading are nomadic Arabic prose and poetry, in which the verb from which *maʿnā* derives (ʿanā) is used for the putting forth of plants (by the earth) or

---

22. David Larsen, "Captivity and Meaning in Classical Arabic Philology," forthcoming in the *Journal of Abbasid Studies*.

23. The *maṣdar mīmī* of a form I third radical weak verb is identical to the *ism aẓ-ẓarf or ism al-makān*. Endress (1987, 19), (2002, 236); al-Ǧurǧānī (2007, 2:1057), Kouloughli (2016b), Larsen (2007, 158f), Wright (1898, 1:128).

24. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.12). والمفعولُ يكون مصدراً ومكاناً وهو هاهنا مصدر.

25. Larsen (2007, 163–67, 194).

26. Ibn Fāris (1946–52, 4:148). ولم يزدْ الخليلُ على أن قال معنى كلِّ شيءٍ محنته وحاله التي يصير إليها أمره.

water (by a waterskin). In a representative piece of eleventh-century lexicon construction, Ibn Fāris used the Umayyad poetry of Ḏu ar-Rummah (d. 735) to claim this etymological origin for *maʿnā:* what the land would produce.[27] An origin that would give land content, just as language has content.

IN THE OPENING SENTENCE OF THE FIRST ARABIC BOOK

Let us leave the accounts of the lexicographers here. We will return to the conceptual importance of the lexicon in chapter 4, and here I would like to turn back to usage. I do not want to cede control of the game to the lexicographers in the first innings! The first complete extant book we have in Arabic, a book given simply the name *al-Kitāb* (*The Book*), uses the word *maʿnā* in its very first sentence. The author of this foundational study of grammar was Sībawayh, a Persian speaker working in Basra, in southern Iraq, and the opening statement of his book was that "language is the noun, the verb, and the particle that comes for a *maʿnā,* neither noun nor verb."[28] It is highly instructive to note that the commentary tradition's response to this somewhat gnomic statement was not to ask what *maʿnā* meant; it was rather to ask exactly what this category of "particle" was and then use *maʿnā* to explain the different theoretical options.[29] The commentators also asked exactly what the word I have translated as "language" meant; *al-kalim* was a rare plural of *al-kalimah,* "word," and they disagreed about the significance of Sībawayh's word choice (in English we tend to say "language" at times like this, but "language" is an English word not exactly replicable in Arabic, where we find the words *lisān* ("tongue"), *kalām* ("speech"), *luġah* ("lexicon"), *qawl* ("speech act/statement"), and more.[30]

The word *maʿnā* was in play during Sībawayh's foundational Arabic answer to the question I am phrasing as "What is language?" And as he tried to explain what Sībawayh had meant, Abū Saʿīd as-Sīrāfī (d. 979) asked himself how one would answer this question: "Why did Sībawayh say, 'and the particle that comes for a *maʿnā,*' when we know that nouns and verbs also come for *maʿānī*?" The assumption in this short snatch of dialectic is clear: as-Sīrāfī's readers are already familiar with the word *maʿnā;* everyone knows how to use it. Nouns, verbs, and particles

27. Ibn Fāris (1946–52, 4:146–49). See also Larsen's "Captivity and Meaning in Classical Arabic Philology," forthcoming in the *Journal of Abbasid Studies.*

28. Sībawayh (1966, 1:12.2). فالكَلِمُ اسمٌ وفِعْلٌ وحَرْفٌ جاءَ لمعنئً ليس باسمٍ ولا فِعْل.

29. Ar-Rummānī (1993–94, 109), as-Sīrāfī (2008, 13–14.) Cf. Bernards (1997, 3f).

30. Cf. Gilliot and Larcher (2016).

all have *maʿānī*. It is the word to use when talking in Arabic about what language is and how language works. It is core conceptual vocabulary.

What was as-Sīrāfī's answer to his own question, and how did he explain Sībawayh's use of the word *maʿnā?* It should come as no surprise that an answer to a question about *maʿnā,* posed in terms of the functioning of *maʿnā,* should itself consist of a statement about how *maʿnā* worked. As-Sīrāfī said that the *maʿānī* of particles (which we encountered with az-Zaǧǧāǧī above) consisted only of acts of negation, affirmation, and connection between nouns and verbs, both of which had their own *maʿānī*. These *maʿānī* in nouns and verbs were different, existed integrally to each such word, and could be recaptured through paraphrase in answer to the question "What is . . . ?" The function of particles could also, of course, be recaptured through paraphrase, but the *maʿānī* of particles could be reasoned only alongside the *maʿānī* of the nouns or verbs to which they referred, whereas the *maʿānī* of nouns or verbs stood on their own and could be used as the basis for further reasoning. As-Sīrāfī's explanation of Sībawayh's gnomic reference to a mental content on account of which particles are used was that, for example, the conjunction "from" is used for a mental content that could be defined as "dividing a part from a whole" and that relied on the mental content of the noun or verb being divided. One couldn't reason the mental content of "from" without reasoning the mental content of what it was from.[31] What we can see here is some of the contours of a grammatical-logical framework that has one foot in Aristotelian logic and the other in Sībawayh's descriptive linguistics. This is a combination that was born out of polemical struggles between logicians and grammarians in the tenth century (see Peter Adamson and Key),[32] and it would be finally resolved in the eleventh century, as we will see in chapters 6 and 7. At this stage in the book I wish only to highlight the centrality of *maʿnā* to the discussion and its stability as an item of conceptual vocabulary in constant and widespread use.

IN A WORK OF LEXICAL THEORY

Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī (d. ca. 1010, on whom see George Kanazi and Beatrice Gruendler)[33] was a lexicographer and literary critic who wrote a book of lexical

---

31. وإنْ سأل سائلٌ فقال لِمَ قال وحرفٌ جاء لمعنى وقد علمنا أنّ الأسماء والأفعال جِئن لمعانٍ قيل له
. . . أنّ الحروف إنما تجيء للتأكيد .. وللنفي .. وللعطف .. والأسماءُ والأفعالُ معانيها في أنفسها قائمةٌ
صحيحة ودليلٌ على ذلك أنه إذا قيل ما الإنسانُ كان الجواب عن ذلك أنْ يقال الذي يكون حيّاً ناطقاً كاتباً
.. وإذا قيل ما معنى قام قيل وقوعُ قيامٍ في زمانٍ ماضٍ فعُقِلَ معناه في نفسه قبلَ أنْ يتجاوز به إلى غيره وليس
كذلك الحروف .. فعلمنا أنها تؤثر في المعاني ولا يُعقَل معناها إلا بغيرها As-Sīrāfī (2008, 1:13.25–14.13).

32. Key and Adamson (2015).

33. Azarnoosh and Negahban (2008); Gruendler (2005), (2007); Kanazi (1989).

definitions. The stated aim of that work was to clarify the differences between *maʿānī* that were close to each other and thereby dismantle the concept of synonymy.[34] It was a work of fine semantic distinctions that dealt with both the inherited lexicon of classical and scriptural precedent and with the living scholarly and ordinary language of the late tenth and early eleventh century: "the vocal forms of the jurists, the theologians, and all the rest of people's conversations."[35] He gave an account of how around twelve hundred pairs of words each differed in their meaning: "the difference between mental contents that are close to each other."[36] One such pair of words was, happily for us, *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah*.

Before we come to Abū Hilāl's detailed discussion of *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* we need to explain what he meant by "vocal forms." *Maʿnā* was an established and commonplace word for the mental content that could be accessed and expressed through language. It was primarily cognitive and resided in people's minds. The linguistic expression of these mental contents was then a separate category, *lafẓ* (plural *alfāẓ*), and the two terms very often sat in opposition to each other. *Lafẓ* can be translated as "vocal form," "verbal form," "vocal/verbal expression," or "utterance." I have invariably chosen "vocal form" to avoid confusion in English with the grammatical category of "verb," and as a nudge toward the omnipresence of the binary—vocal form / mental content—even when only one side of it is mentioned: vocal form / mental content. *Lafẓ* also tended to stand, in theoretical discussions about language, for both spoken and written expression.

Lafẓ was the real-world extramental existence of language, whether the vibration of the air produced by human vocal cords or the marks on the page produced by humans' pens. This notion of physical impact matches the standard definitions of *lafẓ* in the Arabic lexicon: a *lafẓ* is literally the act of ejecting something from one's mouth. The additional distinction between word and script was also available when necessary, laid out, for example, in the ninth century by al-Ǧāḥiẓ (Abū ʿUtmān ʿAmr b. Baḥr, d. 868 and a dominant literary voice of the ninth century and beyond). His taxonomy of communication famously identified five forms that could accurately indicate mental contents: vocal form, physical gesture, dactylonomy, writing, and context/performance (this last category reflected the way we may say that the presence of a corpse, or a building, "speaks volumes").[37]

---

34. Abū Hilāl (2006, 29, 33).

35. Abū Hilāl (2006, 30.2–3). وما يجري في ألفاظ الفقهاء والمتكلمين وسائر محاورات الناس.

36. Abū Hilāl (2006, 29.8).

37. وجميعُ أصناف الدلالات على المعاني من لفظ وغير لفظ خمسةُ أشياءُ لا تنقص ولا تزيد أولها اللفظ ثم الإشارة ثم العَقد ثم الخط ثم الحال التي تُسمّى نِصبة والنصبةُ هي الحال الدالة . . . ولكل واحد من هذه الخمسة صورةٌ بائنةٌ من صورة صاحبها . . . وهي التي تَكشِف لك عن أعيان المعاني في الجملة ثم

Abū Hilāl started his 232-word entry on *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* with the statement that "*maʿnā* is intent, the specific intent with which a speech act happens (the lexical *maʿnā* of the word 'speech' may be: 'that to which intent attaches itself.') *Ḥaqīqah,* on the other hand, is a speech act that is lexically placed according to its assigned place in the lexicon."[38] This is Abū Hilāl saying that *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* are linguistic categories: the intent behind a speech act and the lexical accuracy of a speech act. I will return to the lexicon and these categories in chapter 4. Abū Hilāl then provides the morphology: *maʿnā* is a *maṣdar* from the root *ʿ-n-y.* Next, he turns to theology to make the argument that *maʿnā* is a word for a human linguistic category, albeit one that can point toward God: "*maʿnā* is our hearts' intending what we intend to say. And what we intend is the *maʿnā*. God is therefore [if we intend him] the *maʿnā*." Abū Hilāl understood *maʿnā* as an internal human process of intent, one that had its fulfillment in a speech act. If a human being wanted to talk about God, then God would be the *maʿnā* of the resultant speech act. But Abū Hilāl acknowledged that there was a theological problem here, one that had been identified by the oft-cited and foundational early Basran Muʿtazilī theologian Abū ʿAlī al-Ǧubbāʾī (d. 915): "God cannot be described as 'a *maʿnā.*'"[39] God may have been what people wanted to talk about, but he could not actually be in people's hearts, subject to their intentions. He could be the *maʿnīy* ("the thing intended," a passive participle of the same *ʿ-n-y* root, less commonly used) but not a *maʿnā*.[40] An accurate account of the situation would recognize that the *maʿnā* was the human being's intent, not the divinity itself. After all, wrote Abū Hilāl, were one to say, "I intend to say, 'Zayd'" or "I wanted to talk about him," then one would not actually be conjuring up Zayd's presence. Mental content is not the same thing as extramental existence.[41]

عن حقائقها في التفسير Al-Ǧāḥiẓ (1960, 1:76.10f, 78.1f). Cf. Behzadi (2009, 62f), Miller (forthcoming). Dactylonomy is the practice of counting on the fingers.

38. الفرق بين الحقيقة والمعنى أنّ المعنى هو القصد الذي يقع به القولُ على وجهٍ دون وجهٍ وقد يكون معنى الكلام في اللغة ما تعلَّقَ به القصدُ والحقيقةُ ما وُضِع من القول موضوعَه [في أصل اللغة] على ما ذكرنا. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.9–11).

39. ولهذا قال أبو علي رحمة الله عليه إن المعنى هو القصد إلى ما يُقصَد إليه من القول فجَعَلَ المعنى القصدَ لأنه مصدرٌ قال ولا يوصَف اللهُ تعالى بأنه معنى لأن المعنى هو قصدُ قلوبِنا إلى ما نقصِد إليه من القول والمقصود هو المعنى. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.13–16).

40. ويقال إنه عزّ وجلّ مَعْنِيٌّ بالتشديد لأنّه See Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.16). واللهُ تعالى هو المَعْنِيُّ وليس بمعنىً المقصود بالكلام والإخبار فيصح ذلك فيه. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (1965–74, 5:253.7–8). Cf. note 47 below.

41. وحقيقةُ هذا الكلام أنْ يكون ذكرُ الله هو المعنى والقصدُ إليه هو المعنى إذا كان المقصودُ في الحقيقة حادثاً وقولُهم عنيتُ بكلامي زيداً كقولك أردتُه بكلامي ولا يجوز أنْ يكون زيدٌ في الحقيقة مراداً مع وجوده فدلّ ذلك على أنّه عُنِيَ ذِكرُه وأُريدَ الخبرُ عنه دون نفسه. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.16–19).

By this point, Abū Hilāl has used the words *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* to make statements in two different ways. He used them as subjects in definitional statements: "*maʿnā* is intent" and "*ḥaqīqah* is use according to lexical precedent." But he has also used the same two words as tools to explain how his language is working. When he said that the dictionary definition of "speech" can be "that to which intent attaches itself," he said, "the *maʿnā* of speech is that . . ." ("the mental content of the word 'speech' is that . . .") And when he explained al-Ǧubbāʾī's theological statement, he said that "the *ḥaqīqah* of this speech is that . . ." ("an accurate account of this speech is that . . .") These two words, *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah,* are so omnipresent in any discussion about semantics that they do double work: they are used to explain themselves.

After using al-Ǧubbāʾī and theology to clarify the boundary between the epistemological and the ontological, Abū Hilāl went on to consider examples from ordinary language usage of *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah.* First of all, while people do say, "the *maʿnā* of your speech is . . ." they do not say, "the *maʿnā* of your movement is . . ." People don't talk about gestures as having *maʿnā,* but they do talk about words as having *maʿnā.* Abū Hilāl's conscientious survey of ordinary language then led him to report that people do sometimes use *maʿnā* to talk about nonlinguistic events, for example in the phrase "your being admitted to see that person has no *maʿnā.*" This is found elsewhere—for example, in his history of Baghdad Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Tayfūr (d. 893, on whom see Shawkat Toorawa)[42] reports a ninth-century insult: "You have no *maʿnā* in the palace of the caliph!" (Josef van Ess translates *maʿnā* here as "function.")[43] In order to negotiate the range of usages of the word *maʿnā,* Abū Hilāl used the Arabic linguistic concept of semantic extension (*tawassuʿ*). Words have *maʿnā,* and by a process of semantic extension, actions such as admittance into a powerful person's presence may, or may not, have *maʿnā.* This extension works because the phrase "your being admitted to see that person has no *maʿnā*" can be reconstructed as "your being admitted to see that person has no benefit that is worth mentioning in a speech act."[44] Having established the principle of semantic extension, Abū Hilāl chose to make a distinction between the way it applied to *maʿnā* and the way it applied to *ḥaqīqah.* He thought that ordinary language exhibited more semantic extension for *ḥaqīqah* than it did for *maʿnā.*[45] Both categories were primarily used for language: speech

---

42. Toorawa (2005).

43. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (1949, 125), van Ess (1991–95, 3:159).

44. والمعنى مقصورٌ على القول دون ما يُقصَد ألا ترى أنك تقول معنى قولك كذا ولا تقول معنى حركتِكَ كذا ثم تُوسّع فيه فقيل ليس لدخولك إلى فلان معنى والمرادُ أنه ليس له فائدة تُقصَد ذكرَها بالقول. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.20–22).

45. وتُوُسِّعَ في الحقيقة ما لم يُتَوَسَّعْ في المعنى. Abū Hilāl (2006, 45.22–23).

has cognitive mental content (*maʿnā*) and things have lexically accurate accounts (*ḥaqīqah*) given of them. But whereas the use of *maʿnā* was largely restricted to cognition connected to language, the usage of *ḥaqīqah* could slip further away from language into the description of things.

Abū Hilāl's final remark in the entry is directed with an admirable frankness toward the most liminal case of the usage of *maʿnā*: the qualities of things in what we may call theological physics. This is a usage that I address in detail at the end of this chapter, in the sections "Theology" and "Theologians (Muʿammar)." What led Abū Hilāl to consider this theological usage, despite his clear preference for making *maʿnā* be only about language, was his report that in ordinary language we say, "the *ḥaqīqah* of the movement is . . . ," but we do not say, "the *maʿnā* of the movement is . . ." The reason that we do not talk about movements as having *maʿānī* is, for Abū Hilāl, that people have already called the movements themselves *maʿānī*: "They call the bodies and the accidents *maʿānī*." The people he was talking about were the theologians, and "accident" is an Aristotelian word for a nonessential quality or property of a thing. Abū Hilāl thought that the reason movements were called *maʿānī* was, again, the process of semantic extension, and he ended the entry with a reminder that such semantic extension is not an open-ended process: it cleaves to precedent.[46]

Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār had used *maʿnā* in a very similar way when discussing a theological question related to Abū Hilāl's: the legitimacy of describing God as a "thing." Where Abū Hilāl had used *maʿnā* for the prelinguistic (or pre- and postlinguistic, in the case of an ongoing conversation between two people) cognition of speech acts, and of bodies, and of the accidental qualities of bodies, ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār described how *maʿnā* could be used for the prelinguistic cognition of speech acts, and of things, and of actions undertaken by those things. ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār wrote that "it is possible one could say about a fixed thing that it is a *maʿnā*, just as we say that the act of combining things is a *maʿnā*. According to this usage, it would be necessary to say that God is a *maʿnā*." Furthermore, just as Abū Hilāl had explained the relationship between the speech-act usage of *maʿnā* and the things/qualities-of-things usage as being one of semantic extension, so ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār explained the relationship between the intent-of-speech-act usage and the things/actions-of-things usage as being a different kind of semantic extension (in his case "going beyond the lexicon," *maǧāz,* on which more below).

ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār wrote, and here I am paraphrasing, that we can talk about both things and the act of combining things in the same way—as mental

---

46. فقيل لا شيء إلا وله حقيقةٌ ولا يقال لا شيء إلا وله معنى ويقولون حقيقةُ الحركة كذا ولا يقولون معنى الحركة كذا هذا على أنهم سمّوا الأجسامَ والأعراضَ معانيَ إلا أنّ ذلك تَوَسُّعٌ والتَوَسُّعُ يلزم موضعَه المستعملَ فيه ولا يتعداه. Abū Hilāl (2006, 22–25).

content—because both are objects of thought about which we intend to talk. Furthermore, the word *maʿnā* is used for the intent (*qaṣd*) behind speech acts, but it is also used, by a process of semantic assimilation, for the target of those speech acts (*maqṣad*). But this does not work for God, and he cannot be called a mental content, although he can be the target of a speech act.[47] ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār left it to his reader to infer the reason for this final step in the reasoning: God is an object of thought for whom no comparisons or connections are possible or permissible. We can hypothetically consider the logic of a statement that God is a mental content, but the theological ramifications are too problematic. This is exactly what happened with Abū Hilāl. The linguistic description of God was carefully policed by theologians of all stripes. What Abū Hilāl and ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār confirm here is that *maʿnā* was used as a label for mental contents, for the things we hold in our minds and for the things to which we give names. The only limit on its usage and on its broad applicability to the things we think about was that it could not be easily used for the creator himself.

ADHERENTS OF *LAFẒ,* ADHERENTS OF *MAʿNĀ,* AND THE PURSUIT OF *ḤAQĪQAH*

Lafẓ and *maʿnā,* vocal form and mental content, were the primary categories for discussions of language and mind. They were not theories but, rather, core conceptual vocabulary items that contained shared assumptions about what mind and language were. No one disagreed with their existence; no one denied that *lafẓ* or *maʿnā* existed. How, then, could these basic conceptual categories have supporters or be associated with controversies? How do we explain the existence of "adherents of mental contents" or "adherents of vocal forms" (*aṣḥāb al-maʿānī* and *aṣḥāb al-lafẓ*)? The answer is that *maʿnā* had been used to do more than just theorize linguistic or hermeneutic processes. Al-Ǧāḥiẓ, while engaged in an argument with Aristotle about frogs and fish and bemoaning the loss of knowledge to the vicissitudes of time, exclaimed that "it all comes down to the process of understanding *maʿānī*, not vocal forms, and to the *ḥaqāʾiq,* not to the expressions used to describe them."[48] This is equivalent to us saying about Aristotle today, "It's the ideas and getting them right that matters!" The pairing of *maʿnā* and *lafẓ* was characterized by opposition: an adherent of *maʿnā* would by definition be opposed to

---

47. وربّما يقال في الشيء المثبَت إنه معنىً كما نقول إنّ التأليف معنىً فعلى هذا الوجه يجب أنْ يقال فيه تعالى إنه معنىً لكنَّ ذلك إنما يُستعمل على هذا الوجه على المجاز والتشبيه بالمقصَد لأنّ ما يصح أنْ يُقصَد إليه أُجرِي عليه الاسمُ الذي يتعلَّق بالقصد فلذلك لا يُستعمل فيه جلَّ وعز. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (1965–74, 5:253.12–15).

48. ومدارُ الأمر على فهم المعاني لا الألفاظ والحقائق لا العبارات. Al-Ǧāḥiẓ (1966–69, 5:542.6).

an adherent of *lafẓ,* just as the *maʿnā* of a sentence was by definition not the same as its *lafẓ.* The utility of the distinction between mental content and vocal form was that it was a binary.

The other word that al-Ǧāḥiẓ used, *ḥaqīqah,* was not on either side of this binary, but rather described the nature of the relationship between the two. Let us briefly address it here. *Ḥaqīqah* was used to denote the accuracy of a mental content, whether with regard to a vocal form in language, or with regard to extramental reality. Its plural form, *ḥaqāʾiq,* was therefore "accuracies" or "accurate accounts." In al-Ǧāḥiẓ's exclamation, this "getting it right" was exactly what mattered. This usage was common across all disciplines, and having access to *ḥaqīqah* or the *ḥaqāʾiq* was universally understood as a good thing. Ar-Rāǧib used the plural form in this way in his exegesis, as did Ibn Fūrak's pupil al-Qušayrī some decades later. Ar-Rāǧib: "This is the interpretation of the righteous forefathers, and of the owners of the *ḥaqāʾiq* who know the *ḥaqīqah* of the soul referred to in this Hadith and its corporeal substance, but as for the later Muʿtazilah . . ." We are not concerned here with ar-Rāǧib's subsequent take on Muʿtazilī interpretations of Hadith and Quran, but rather the way he uses *ḥaqīqah* and *ḥaqāʾiq* for accuracy and truth in this quotation.[49] The phrase "accurate accounts of things" (*ḥaqāʾiq al-umūr* or *ḥaqāʾiq al-ašyāʾ*) was a common description of the target of philhellenic philosophy, and "accuracies" were the divine truths available through Sufism: *les réalités spirituelles* (Paul Nwyia translating Abū al-Ḥusayn an-Nūrī, d. 907).[50] In a recent and posthumously published article, Heinrichs identified the same constellation of usage for *ḥaqīqah* across early theology and Sufism, as well as the way *ḥaqīqah* functioned in a pairing with *maǧāz.*[51] In the tenth-century diagrammatic classification of the sciences by Ibn Farīǧūn, knowledge itself is defined as being "of things and their *ḥaqāʾiq.*"[52] The phrase *ḥaqāʾiq al-umūr* could be successfully rendered in English as "the essential nature of things" (Gutas) or "the profound realities" (Mohamed Arkoun, both translating Abū ʿAlī Miskawayh, d. 1030).[53] But when Arabic scholars in and before the eleventh century wanted to talk about truth and reality, they did not reach for a Latinate word meaning "deep" or for a logical category ("profound" and "essential," respectively). Instead they reached for the conceptual vocabulary that is the subject of this book: it was mental contents

---

49. وهذا قولُ السلف وأصحاب الحقائق الذين عَرفوا حقيقة الروح المُعيَّنة هاهنا وكونه جوهراً له بذاته قَوامٌ. Ar-Rāǧib (2003, 980.3–81.1). Cf. al-Qušayrī (2000, 2:75.10). وأما متأخرو المعتزلة . . .

50. Nwyia (1970, 324; cf. 272, 368).

51. Heinrichs (2016, 256).

52. العلمُ معرفةُ الأشياء وحقايقها [كذا]. Biesterfeldt (2017), Ibn Farīʿūn (1985, 133).

53. Arkoun and eds. (2009), Gutas (1983, 232). Cf. Wakelnig (2014, 326.8).

that mattered, and accurate accounts of them that needed to be pursued: *maʿānī* and *ḥaqāʾiq,* respectively.

Maʿnā and *ḥaqīqah* were used to describe and dignify the pursuit of truth, and this is how, as terms that could bear such value, they were used to structure controversies and hierarchies across many genres of scholarship. They were key components of a conceptual vocabulary that we can throw into relief by comparing it with how we use words like "meaning" in English. We use the phrase "theory of meaning" for a linguistic and philosophical account of reference and the connections between language and mind. But we also use "meaning" as a term laden with value: "a personal search for meaning in life" or, conversely, "a meaningless pursuit." This combination is comparable to the Arabic use of *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* in both accounts of reference and in the pursuit of broad philosophical and divine truths.

But we do not, in English, have "adherents of meaning." In Arabic, that label did exist: *aṣḥāb al-maʿānī.* Who were they? In the sections that follow, I review the major debates and controversies that took *maʿānī* and *alfāẓ* as their labels. In literary criticism and theology the binary opposition of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* came to stand for both positions and methodological approaches. This was a scholarly tradition that often turned to the vocabulary of linguistic structures in order to explain all kinds of epistemological and ontological debates, and that loved nothing more than to schematize and curate its own disagreements. There were adherents of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* in arguments about the methodology of literary criticism, in debates about society that used *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* to label variant political philosophies, in analyses of syntax, in theological-hermeneutical arguments, and in dialectics on the philosophy of action that used *maʿnā* to explain cognition and physics. I will very briefly deal with each of these in turn, dipping into debates across a range of disciplines in order to highlight representative uses of the word *maʿnā.*

Literary Criticism

When eleventh-century literary critics argued about sound versus meaning in Arabic, they used the vocabulary of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* as a way to draw distinctions between words and ideas. They were the primary vocabulary used to discuss how language worked. This does not mean that these arguments resulted in complete agreement about whether a certain poetic technique should be associated with *lafẓ* or with *maʿnā;* the matter of paronomasia, for example, could be considered a question of *lafẓ,* since the sound of the words was the location of the assonance or alliteration, but it could also be considered a matter of *maʿnā.* This was because when the mental contents associated with those vocal forms did not align and interact, the paronomasia would be to little effect (for reviews of such disagreements and the usage of the terms, see Iḥsān ʿAbbās, Lidia Bettini, Kamal Abu Deeb, Wolfhart Heinrichs, Djamel Eddine Kouloughli, and, from the eleventh-century

itself, Abū ʿAlī Aḥmad al-Marzūqī, d. 1030).[54] But however much literary critics disagreed, the same core conceptual vocabulary of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* was in play. The two terms were always in the same relationship to each other, and they can always be translated as "vocal form" and "mental content." The conversation about form and content is not, of course, unique to Classical Arabic. To take an example almost at random, Susan Sontag advocated in the late twentieth century for "essays which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it." Was she calling for a focus on *lafẓ* as opposed to *maʿnā?* The problem is that the binary was constituted differently in her Anglophone theory and in al-Ǧāḥiẓ or al-Ǧurǧānī's Classical Arabic theory. Sontag wanted to "cut back content" because the mechanical drive to retrieve it leads us to ignore the sensory, and sensual, experience of form.[55] Some Arabic theory did use *maʿnā* in this way: the Quran was on some accounts inimitable because it communicated mental content, subject matter, known only to God. Others argued that such a position missed the unique beauty of the Quran's linguistic structure, its form. But here the two genealogically unconnected theories part ways: Sontag invested her form with erotics, whereas Arabic read its form as grammar. (In chapter 7 we will see how grammar, just like erotics, could lead to beauty.)

Politics and Society

The relationship between vocal form and mental content was often, in the ninth and tenth centuries, a proxy for broader critical discussions of the nature and purpose of literature. Perhaps the most famous moment came when al-Ǧāḥiẓ cited the opinion that mental contents were merely strewn in the street and accessible to the masses and foreigners, whereas vocal forms were the true site of eloquence and linguistic skill. When it came to assessing Arabic eloquence, word choice and poetic meter reigned supreme.[56] This passage was so famous that al-Ǧurǧānī included an extended reading of it in the opening discussions of the *Asrār,* a reading that showed al-Ǧāḥiẓ to be privileging the interaction of mental contents over the interactions of a rhyme scheme (cf. Jeannie Miller).[57] Elsewhere, however, al-Ǧāḥiẓ presented his readers with a conflicting opinion, arguing that true elo-

---

54. ʿAbbās (1971, 140, 370–71, 403–4, 422–25); Abu Deeb (1979, 50–52), (1990, 354–55); Bettini (2011, 110f), Heinrichs (1998); Kouloughli (2016a), (2016b); al-Marzūqī and Abū Tammām (1991).

55. Sontag (1966, 13, 14).

56. وذهب الشيخ إلى استحسان المعنى والمعاني مطروحةٌ في الطريق يَعرفها العجميُّ والعربيُّ والبدويُّ Al-Ǧāḥiẓ والقرويُّ وإنما الشأن في إقامة الوزن وتحيُّز اللفظ وسهولة المخرج في صحة الطبع وجودة السبك (1966–69, 3:131.9–132.1). Cf. Miller (2016b).

57. لأنه رأى التوفيقَ بين المعاني أحقَّ والموازنةَ فيها أحسن Al-Ǧurǧānī (1954, 10.5). Jeannie Miller forthcoming in the *Journal of Abbasid Studies.*

quence was effective communication. The ultimate test of communication was to communicate elite mental contents to the masses, clothing them along the way with the intermediaries of correct vocal forms. He wrote that a noble mental content simply deserved a noble vocal form.[58] In these contradictory positions, ethical and political arguments about literature and eloquence were at stake. Mental content was either tarred by its association with the street or reified as elite truth. In these passages, al-Ǧāḥiẓ was not concerned with the structure of language, nor with mechanisms of signification or reference; rather, he was using the words *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* as labels for vectors of concern to him in ninth-century Iraq, and he was not alone in doing so. The question as to whether Arabic eloquence should enable elites to communicate with the masses or whether in fact it enabled elites to separate themselves from the masses was a political issue.

The Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ (a mysterious group of tenth-century authors)[59] took the pairing in a slightly different direction. For them, the inarticulate masses and eloquent elites both understood mental contents (equivalent to al-Ǧāḥiẓ's "strewn in the street"). However, women, children, and the masses then falsely located eloquence in the sweet and pure sounds of words. The Iḫwān considered such popular assumptions to be false, and thought that not everything that sounded nice was eloquent. Bawdy songs, for example, were mental contents with no accuracy: *maʿānī* with no *ḥaqīqah* sung by drunkards and children. The mental contents that the Iḫwān did care about were *ḥaqīqah*: accurate praise that was actually deserved by its recipient, balanced on a happy medium by equally legitimate criticism. The language they valued communicated these *maʿānī* effectively, and effective communication was important because the stakes were high: *maʿānī* were principles first conceived in the soul with precision, but *alfāẓ* (vocal forms) were for the Iḫwān base matter; *maʿānī* were like souls and *alfāẓ* like bodies. What troubled the Iḫwān here was not the relationship between language and mind, nor indeed the question of how to determine eloquence. When they thought about mental content they felt threatened by women and children having access to mental content in the same way as they did, because everybody used speech to communicate. For elitists with a spiritual and emancipatory project this was a problem, and the Iḫwān solved it by using *ḥaqīqah* as a claim of accuracy that separated their own true, accurate, spiritually achieved *maʿānī* from the base ideas expressed by their inferiors in drunken song. When the Iḫwān spoke, they described the result with the words *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah,* loading both words

---

58. فإنَّ حق المعنى الشريف اللفظ الشريف .. إلى أنْ تُفهِم العامةَ معاني الخاصة وتَكسُوَها الألفاظَ
–136.15 ,136.6:1 ,(1960) Al-Ǧāḥiẓ. الوسيطة التي لا تلطُف عن الدهماء ولا تجفو عن الأكفاء فأنتَ البليغُ التام
16). Cf. Key (2012, 172–75), Thomas (2000, 112f).

59. Callataÿ (2005), Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ (2010–), Netton (2002).

with ethical and political values. Their speech was accurate communication of a mental content. When everyone else spoke, it was the noise of animals, madmen, drunkards, children, and women.[60]

Linguistics

Al-Ǧāḥiẓ used the pairing of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* to discuss the position of Arabic eloquence between elites and masses, and the Iḫwān used the same pairing to reinforce their own elite status. These ethical and political polemics about literature and society proved frustrating for scholars who wanted to focus on the mechanics of how language worked. If language itself was the subject of inquiry, it was painfully obvious that vocal form and mental content worked together and that they were only separated and given priority over each other in the service of polemic. Ibn Ǧinnī (Abū al-Fatḥ ʿUṯmān, d. 1002) wrote against the idea that the *lafẓ-maʿnā* pairing could be meaningfully separated. The fact that vocal forms were important did not mean that the mental content being communicated was irrelevant. Vocal forms were simply the way to get a point across. For example, one might make a proverb rhyme so it could be remembered, in which case the vocal form of the proverb would impact the reception of its mental content.[61] Al-Ǧurǧānī was frustrated by these discussions too, and by the imprecision of the trope, invoked by even Ibn Ǧinnī, that vocal forms were the servants of mental contents. Al-Ǧurǧānī wanted to map the connections between language and cognition but was forced to deal with ethical polemics and metaphorical or theologically motivated explanations that he thought were subject to misinterpretation. I do not mean to imply that al-Ǧurǧānī's frustration is evidence of any inconsistency between the polemical use of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* in al-Ǧāḥiẓ or the Iḫwān and the linguistic use of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* in Ibn Ǧinnī and al-Ǧurǧānī. In all cases the pairing referred to the same two levels of physical linguistic vocal form and cognitive mental content. But Ibn Ǧinnī and al-Ǧurǧānī were more concerned with how the levels interacted than with one level being "better" than the other. From this perspective the very opposition of the two levels was unproductive: both were *prima facie* involved in language.

Ibn Ǧinnī and al-Ǧurǧānī used the pairing of *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* to explain syntax. Al-Ǧāḥiẓ and the Iḫwān used the same pairing to label political dynamics, in effect thinking of language politics in terms of language itself. To understand this difference, we may imagine an author using "signifier" and "signified" in an article on

---

60. Iḫwān aṣ-Ṣafāʾ (1957, 3:119.7–122.3).

61. فإنها [الألفاظُ] عنوانُ معانيها وطريقاً إلى إظهار أغراضها ومَرامِيها . . . ألا ترى أنَّ المَثل إذا كان مَسجوعاً لذَّ لِسامعه فَحَفِظَه . . . فإذا رأيتَ العربَ قد أصلحوا ألفاظاً وحسَّنوها .. فلا ترينَّ أن العنايةَ إذ ذاك إنما هي بالألفاظ بل هي عندنا خدمةٌ منهم للمعاني. Ibn Ǧinnī (1952–56, 1:215.15–16, 216.1–2, 217.5–7).

how good Barack Obama's rhetoric was. I use this thought experiment to suggest three things: that the use of linguistic categories outside linguistic disciplines was more prevalent in pre-eleventh-century Arabic than it is in twenty-first-century English, that this breadth of usage does not imply any dissonance in meaning, and that this breadth of usage could give a literary-critical flavor to conversations about politics, society, and more.

Theology

My next example of precedent comes from theology and the definition of "monotheism" (*tawḥīd*). A famous late-tenth-century scholar, Abū Ḥayyān at-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023), was reviewing definitions of core conceptual vocabulary that had been provided by his teacher Abū Sulaymān as-Siğistānī (d. ca. 985, on whom see Joel Kraemer).[62] The definition comprised a belief in God's oneness together with a verbal profession of God's oneness. At-Tawḥīdī reported that as-Siğistānī, after this definition, had gone on to explain that when he said, "a person professed God's unity," he was referring not to a simple verbal profession, but to a thoroughgoing conception of the unity of God that went beyond denials of polytheism to conceive of an unblemished, unqualified, and indescribable essence captured by the phrase "he is one alone; he alone is one." That essence was a *maʿnā*, and as mental content the power of the phrase should not, as-Siğistānī said, be located in its syntactic symmetry, "as is the habit of the adherents of *lafẓ*."[63] The words "he is one alone; he alone is one" are not theologically salient because of their repetition and inversion (an antimetabole), but rather because of the deep mental content they convey. What we have here is the use of the pairing of vocal form and mental content to privilege mental content and denigrate critical focus on the level of vocal form. It seems that the methodology from which as-Siğistānī and at-Tawḥīdī wanted to distinguish themselves was a literary-critical approach to theology: the adherents of *lafẓ* are accused of having located the theological force of "he is one alone; he alone is one" in the antimetabole itself.

Just like the Iḫwān, as-Siğistānī used the pairing of vocal form and mental content to privilege the latter. When he said "adherents of *lafẓ*," he meant people whose readings were not to be trusted. What then might it mean to have adherents

---

62. Kraemer (1986).

63. وليس معنى قولنا وَحَّدَ فلانٌ أنه قال هو واحِدٌ هذا مفهومُ العامة لا معقولُ الخاصة بل معنى قولنا وَحَّدَ
أي عرَفه واحِداً وعَلِمَ واحداً وأثبَت واحداً ووجَد واحِداً [ذكر المحقق حسين أنَّ في التحقيق السابق للسندوبي:
عَلِمه و أثْبته ووَجده] لا لأنه نَفَى عنه الثانيَ والثالثَ فصاعداً وكيف ذلك ولا ثانيَ له فيُنفَى ولكنْ لأنه واحدٌ
وحْدُه بل هو وحْدُه واحِدٌ لا على سبيل نَسْقٍ في عادة أصحاب اللفظ ولا على تعقيبٍ يَقتضيه أَلْفُ أكثرِ الخلْق
بل على لحْظِ ذاتٍ لا شَوْبَ فيها .At-Tawḥīdī (1970, 457.5–9).

of *maʿnā*? What implications might such a phrase convey? On the one hand it could be used to describe interpretation (whether criticism of poetry or exegesis of scripture) that focused on the meaning behind the words. It could also be used for poets who aimed primarily at complex metaphor (Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, d. 815, quoted by al-Marzūqī).[64] But the phrase "adherents of *maʿnā*" had a specific theological history. It was perhaps first used to refer to a group of theologians who subscribed to a doctrine proposed by the ninth-century theologian Muʿammar b. ʿAbbād (d. 830) about the functioning of things he called *maʿānī*. This is a doctrine that deserves its own special section, which is up next. I have deliberately left it to the end of my survey of precedents despite the inversion of chronology this involves: Muʿammar's *maʿānī* need to be read in the context of everyone else's.

Let us return to al-Ǧāḥiẓ. His work engaged with theology on such a deep and systematic level as to make the distinction between literature and theology meaningless (see Miller's review of James Montgomery),[65] and he wrote that the Quranic statement "God taught Adam all the names" meant that God taught Adam "all the *maʿānī*" (Quran 2:31, al-Baqarah, on which see further below). But al-Ǧāḥiẓ then went on to say that by *maʿānī* he did not mean "the constitution of colors, tastes, and smells, or the multiplications of finite and infinite numbers." He was clearly sensitive to the fact that *maʿnā* was used both for the mental contents connected to words and for the mental contents that result from cognition of either the qualities of physical bodies or the components of arithmetic. Al-Ǧāḥiẓ then wrote: "The only way to name those mental contents that exceed the bounds of what is required or go beyond the limit of a description is to enter them into the sphere of knowledge and say, 'a thing and a *maʿnā*.'"[66] Al-Ǧāḥiẓ knew that mental content *in toto* was a broader category than the mental content connected to names by the lexicon. The way to deal with arithmetic or the cognition of physical bodies and their qualities was therefore to *name* a thing and then also voice the extra bit of mental content required to specify what one is talking about. One could think, for example, about a camel that smelt of lemons and thereby one would have a mental content of "camel smelling of lemons." But there is no name in the lexicon for a package thus constituted. One would have to say "a camel smelling of lemons" and thereby (in al-Ǧāḥiẓ's vocabulary) name both a thing and a *maʿnā*. This is why

---

64. وهم أصحابُ المعاني فطلبوا المعانيَ المُعْجِبة . . . وجَعلوا رُسومَها أن تكون قريةَ التشبيه لائقة الاستعارة. ʿAbbās (1971, 404), al-Marzūqī and Abū Tammām (1991, 7.7–10).

65. Miller (2016a).

66. وقولُه جلّ ذكره ﴿وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الأَسْماءَ كُلَّها﴾ إخبارٌ أنه قد علّمه المعانيَ كلها ولسْنا نَعني معانيَ تركيب الألوان والطعوم وتضاعيف الأعداد التي لا تنتهي ولا تتناهى وليس لِما فضَل عن مقدار المصلحة ونهاية الرسم اسمٌ إلا أن تدخُله في باب العلم فتقول شيءٌ ومعنى. Al-Ǧāḥiẓ (1965b, 1:262.12–15). Cf. translation and analysis in Miller (2016b, 68).

when al-Ǧāḥiẓ said that God taught Adam all the *maʿānī*, al-Ǧāḥiẓ did not mean that God taught Adam every possible mental content. God did not teach Adam the composition "camel plus lemon smell"; rather, he taught Adam the mental content "camel" and the mental content "lemon smell," just as he taught Adam the mental content of each number but not the mental content of every possible arithmetical composition. In any case, color, taste, and smell were *maʿānī*.

This same assumption can also be read outside Islamic theology. A century later in Baghdad, the Jewish theologian Saadiya Gaon (d. 942) was engaged in refuting the belief that all composite bodies were created from eternal spiritual beings. One of his objections to this theory was that such spiritual beings would have to have heat, cold, moistness, and dryness in order to be the source of those same four attributes in physical bodies, as was claimed by his opponents. Equally, he could not accept that the posited spiritual beings had color, taste, limit, dimension, quantity, place, or time, because "all these *maʿānī* were attributes of bodies," and the spiritual beings were claimed to be prior to bodies.[67] Gaon's argument was that the theory was incoherent. On the one hand it implied that the spiritual beings needed heat and cold in order to be the source of heat and cold in bodies. On the other hand, it implied that because the spiritual beings were prior to bodies, they could not have color or quantity. The Arabic word that Gaon used for all these different attributes of physical bodies was *maʿnā*. Heat, cold, dimension, and quantity were all *maʿānī*. If we translate *maʿānī* as "mental contents," then Saadiya was assuming that hot, cold, and all the other attributes of physical bodies were cognitive judgments: things that we judge, in our minds, other things to have.

THEOLOGIANS (MUʿAMMAR)

The theological discussions that used *maʿnā* are dominated by Muʿammar, whose ninth-century claim about what we now call physics, the study of the basic principles that govern the physical world around us, used *maʿnā* as its central concept. As we saw from Abū Hilāl, this usage of *maʿnā* was noticed by his contemporaries, who worked to explain it, just as scholarship would work to explain it again in German, English, and French over a millennium later. Let us start with the presentation of the theory by Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥayyāṭ (d. ca. 913) in his *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*. "Chapter 34: Muʿammar's statements on generation and on *maʿānī*."[68] Al-Ḥayyāṭ

---

67. أرى أن هذه الأشياء التي ادّعَوها لا يجوز أن تكون لا حارةً ولا باردةً ولا رطبةً ولا يابسةً إذ عندهم أنّ هذه الأربع منها خُلقتْ وأرى أيضاً أنها لا يجوز أن يكون لها لونٌ ولا طعمٌ ولا رائحةٌ ولا حدٌّ ولا مقدارٌ ولا كَثرةٌ ولا قلّةٌ ولا في مكان ولا في زمان لأن هذه المعاني كلها هي صفات الأجسام وتلك الأشياءُ هي عندهم قبل الجسم. Gaon (1880, 42.12–17), (1948, 52); Wolfson (1976, 117 n. 29).

68. قوله في التولّد وفي المعاني. Al-Ḥayyāṭ (1957, 46.10). Cf. van Ess (1991–95, 5:264–65).

starts the chapter with a review of what appears to be a self-evidently unlikely theory: Muʿammar's claim that every single action in the world is actually accompanied by thousands and thousands of other actions stretching to infinity. Every act of every actor, whether God or human, is actually an infinite number of acts that occur at the same time. Al-Ḥayyāṭ then works to reduce the counterintuitiveness of this theory, first by explaining that Muʿammar was in fact responding to another early theologian, Abū Isḥāq an-Naẓẓām (d. ca. 840), who held that when God acts he does so in a single state but on an infinite number of bodies. Now, it may seem that Muʿammar was claiming that if each action has infinite objects then it must in fact be an infinite number of actions. But this is not the case, and here al-Ḥayyāṭ makes an important statement about *maʿnā:* "You should know that this school of thought that I am describing from the statements of Muʿammar is in fact a statement about *maʿānī.*" Al-Ḥayyāṭ explains that Muʿammar claimed that when there are two motionless bodies next to each other, and then one of them moves and the other doesn't, then there must have been a *maʿnā* subsisting in the one that moved, on account of which it moved, and no such *maʿnā* in the other. Otherwise, it could not have moved before the other one.[69] So for Muʿammar, on al-Ḥayyāṭ's reading, *maʿnā* is something that a body has on account of which it moves. But where does that *maʿnā* come from? Al-Ḥayyāṭ tells us that Muʿammar's answer was that there was another *maʿnā* that caused the first *maʿnā* to be there, and so on.[70] Perhaps a decade or so later, Abū Qāsim al-Kaʿbī (d. 931) wrote that Muʿammar was the only person to have such a theory, and paraphrased it thus: every instance of motion is only at variance from a state of rest because of a *maʿnā* separate from that motion, and vice versa. Each of those *maʿānī* is then only at variance from the other because of another *maʿnā,* and so on to infinity.[71]

Muʿammar's claim also appears in the *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn* of al-Ašʿarī, a foundational text of Arabic theology. Al-Ašʿarī's description of Muʿammar's position

---

69. اعلمْ علَّمك اللهُ الخيرَ أنّ هذا المذهب الذي وصَفه صاحبُ الكتاب [ابن الراوندي] من قول معمَّر هو القول بالمعاني وتفسيرهُ زعم أنه لمّا وجد جسمين ساكنين أحدُهما يلي الآخر ثم وجد أحدَهما قد تحرَّك دون صاحبه كان لا بد عنده من معنى حَلَّه دون صاحبه من أجله تحرَّكَ وإلا لم يكن بالتحرك أُولى من صاحبه. Al-Ḥayyāṭ (1957, 46.16–19).

70. فإذا كان هذا حُكماً صحيحاً فلا بد أيضاً من معنى حدثٍ له حلَّت [من أجله (نادر)] الحركةُ في أحدهما دون صاحبه وإلا لم يكن حلولُها في أحدهما أُولى من حلولها في الآخر وكذلك أيضاً إنْ سُئلتُ عن ذلك المعنى لِما كان علَّةً لِحلولِ الحركة في أحدهما دون صاحبه لمعنى آخر قُلتُ وكذلك أيضاً إنْ سُئلتُ عن ذلك المعنى كان جوابي فيه كجوابي فيما قبله. Al-Ḥayyāṭ (1957, 46.20–24).

71. والذي تفرَّد به [معمَّر] القولُ بالمعاني وتفسيرُها أنّ الحركة إنما خالفتْ السكونَ لمعنى هو غيرها وكذلك السكونُ إنما خالفَ الحركةَ بمعنى هو غيره وأنّ ذَينكَ المعنيين إنما اختلفا أيضاً بمعنى هو غيرهما ثم كذلك كل معنيين اختلفا بمعنيين غيرهما إلى ما لا نهاية له. Al-Kaʿbī (1974, 71.6–9). Cf. Ibn Ḥazm (1899–1903, 5:46.14–24), van Ess (1991–95, 5:265–66).

(for we are always dependent on the reports of others when it comes to Muʿammar, none of whose work has been preserved)[72] reads: "Some say that the body, if at rest, is only at rest because of a *maʿnā* that is movement. Without that *maʿnā* of movement the body would not, back in the time when it was the first to move, have been the first to move."[73] According to al-Ašʿarī, Muʿammar even explained the state of rest as being the result of a prior *maʿnā*-driven movement. This is a theory in which it is assumed that things have *maʿānī* that make them do things, or give them color, or make them alive, and so on. Each *maʿnā* is then dependent on a further *maʿnā,* and that *maʿnā* on a further *maʿnā,* in an infinite chain of dependence. At every stage, the *maʿnā* of movement is the only thing that makes the previous *maʿnā* of movement move. These *maʿānī* depend on each other, but "they do not have a sum total, and they cannot be gathered together. They all occur in the same instant."[74] According to this theory, there is no other explanation for why some things are black and others white, some things moving and others not, some things alive and others not. The *maʿānī* are "actions of the place in which they inhere."[75] This is a conceptual vocabulary for a physics that has no correlate in English. Muʿammar's theory, according to al-Ašʿarī, is that if something is white, black, moving, or alive, then something must make it white, black, moving, or alive. The *maʿānī* that do this then need to be made what they are by other *maʿānī*, and so on to infinite regress.

What are these *maʿānī*, and where are they? As Abū Hilāl noted, this is a theological usage of the word that is connected with what he believed was its core meaning: prelinguistic cognition or mental content. The clue that we get in the theological texts themselves is that *maʿnā* was a broad category, from which one could distinguish more technical categories such as the accidental quality or attribute (*ʿaraḍ*). As al-Ašʿarī says, theologians "disagreed about why the *maʿānī* that inhered in bodies were called 'accidents.'"[76] Furthermore, on the page directly preceding his discussion of that disagreement about why a *maʿnā* might be called an accident, al-Ašʿarī used the very same word to talk about language, reference, and

---

72. Daiber (2015).

73. واختلفَ الناسُ في المعاني فقال قائلون إنّ الجسم إذا سَكَن فإنما يَسكُن لمعنى هو الحركةُ لولاه لم يكن بأنْ يكون متحرّكاً أُوْلى من غيره ولم يكن بأنْ يتحرّك في الوقت الذي يتحرك [فيه (ريتر)] أُوْلى منه بالحركة قبل ذلك. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33), 372.2–5. Cf. translations and analysis in Sabra (2006, 241–42), van Ess (1991–95, 3:74–83, 5:266–67).

74. وإذا كان ذلك كذلك فذلك الحركةُ لو لا معنى له [كذا] كانت حركةً للمتحرِّك لم تكن بأنْ تكون حركةً أُوْلى منها أنْ تكون حركةً لغيره وذلك المعنى كان معنى لأنْ كانت الحركةُ حركةً للمتحرك لمعنى آخر وليس للمعاني كلٌّ ولا جميعٌ وإنها تَحدُث في وقت واحد. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 372.5–8). Cf. translations and analysis in Sabra (2006, 241–42), van Ess (1991–95, 3:74–83, 5:266–67).

75. المعاني التي لا كُلَّ لها فِعلٌ للمكان الذي حلَّته. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 372.13–14).

76. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 369). For translations: Dhanani (1994, 38–39), Sabra (2006, 240–42).

meaning: "Al-Iskāfī was one of those who said that the *maʿnā* of the statement with regard to the created thing was that it . . ."[77] These are the two usages that Abū Hilāl identified, working together unmarked and unremarked upon. *Maʿnā* was both prelinguistic cognition and cognition of physical forces, what Hans Daiber calls "ein Relationsbegriff von ontischer Qualität."[78]

In his section on theological disagreements about movement and rest, al-Ašʿarī cited the opinion of al-Ǧubbāʾī that movement and rest are ways of being in a place, and that: "the *maʿnā* of movement is the *maʿnā* of passing away; every movement is a passing away. But the *maʿnā* of movement is not the *maʿnā* of changing position; the nonexistent movement is called passing away before it comes to be. It is not called changing position."[79] Al-Ǧubbāʾī was making a distinction between three related technical concepts: "movement," "passing away," and "changing position." In physics today we may call these "forces" or "interactions." Whatever the translation, we are talking about principles that govern the physical world. Al-Ǧubbāʾī was using a vocabulary based around *maʿnā,* and from our perspective today, it looks as if he is saying two things at the same time: that the Arabic word for movement did not mean the same thing as the word for passing away or the word for changing position, but also that the quality or force of "movement," when present in an object in extramental reality, was not the same quality or force as "passing away" or "changing position." This was both lexicography and theological physics. In English, we tend to use different phrases for each of these. We may therefore say either that "'normal force' *does not mean the same thing* as 'applied force,' or that: "normal force *is not the same thing* as applied force." When Arabic theorists, whether lexicographers like Abū Hilāl or theologians like ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār, wanted to make the same distinction they did so using different conceptual vocabulary with an equivalent degree of clarity. Abū Hilal described the difference between "does not mean" and "is not" as being a difference between a process of intent on the one hand, and a target of intention on the other. He said that the phrase "*maʿnā* of . . ." was used for both statements, in the former case with accuracy and in the latter case by a process of semantic extension. ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār agreed, and his name for the process of semantic extension was *maǧāz.* In English, we use quotation marks and the phrases "means" and "is" to make the distinction. In Arabic, theorists used a core conceptual vocabulary based around language and reference to do the same job. For al-Ǧubbāʾī, of course, the distinction did not matter. He

---

77. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 368).

78. "A relational concept of ontological quality": Daiber (1975, 82).

79. وكان الجبائي يزعم أنّ الحركة والسكون أكوان وأنّ معنى الحركة معنى الزوال فلا حركة إلا وهي
زوال. وأنه ليس معنى الحركة معنى الانتقال وأنّ الحركة المعدومة تُسمّى زوالاً قبل كونها ولا تُسمّى انتقالاً.
Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 355.12–14). Thanks to David Bennett for the reference.

was talking about both the meaning of the word "movement" and the extramental reality of the physical interaction of objects that was movement.

Another way we can think about the usage of *maʿnā* in theology is to notice that it was often used to talk about things one could think about but not see. If something was a body (and therefore both extramental and able to be seen), then it would not be *maʿnā*. So for the early and influential Shia theologian Hišām b. al-Ḥakam (d. ca. 803), human qualities were *maʿānī*. They could not be things or bodies, so they had to be *maʿānī*, what we can think about and talk about but not see. (In Hišām's theology, "things" were what al-Ašʿarī tended to call "bodies.")[80] Along the same lines, al-Ašʿarī also reports that Ǧaʿfar b. al-Mubaššir (d. 849) said that the soul was not a body, nor in a body, but rather a *maʿnā* between the atom and the body.[81] David Bennett has raised the further question of whether the word *maʿnā* was used for not doing something or for the absence of movement: al-Ašarī records disagreements about whether not acting was a *maʿnā* separate from the person (not) doing it,[82] and that Hišām and others considered movement to be a *maʿnā* whereas being at rest was not.[83]

The potential limit on this use of *maʿnā* for the cogitated unseen was, as we saw above with Abū Hilāl and ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār, whether it could be used for God. Abū al-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992) was prepared to connect a Neoplatonic rational soul to what he called "the divine *maʿnā*," but theologians avoided such locutions.[84] In another report in *Maqālāt al-Islāmīyīn,* Ibn Kullāb (d. ca. 855) had said that while God was unlike any other he could not be said to be a *maʿnā*.[85] This seems to make sense; one could describe the soul as a *maʿnā*, or attributes and qualities as *maʿānī,* or explain physical forces and their absence with *maʿānī,* because all these were in effect mental content; they were human cognitions that could be subsequently communicated in language. Even al-ʿĀmirī's divine *maʿnā* can be fitted into this account, for when he talks elsewhere of *maʿānī ilāhīyah,* in the plural, he is dealing with the divine matters that pious human beings pursue and seek to apprehend. Everett Rowson's translation of this process is "determining divine concepts."[86]

---

80. وحُكي عن هشام أنه كان يزعم أن صِفات الإنسان أشياءُ لأنّ الأشياء هي الأجسامُ عنده وكان يزعم أنها معانٍ وليست بأشياء. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 344.15–345.1). Thanks to David Bennett for the reference.

81. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 337.2–3), Gimaret (1988, 155).

82. واختلف المتكلمون في الترك للشيء والكفّ هل هو معنئً غير التارك. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 378.13–14), Bennett (2017).

83. وحَكى زرقانُ عن هشام بن الحكم أنه كان يزعم أن الحركة معنئً وأنّ السكون ليس بمعنى . . . .حكاه أبو عيسى عن أصحاب الطبائع. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 345.2–5), Bennett (2017).

84. فقد ظهر إذاً أنّ النفس النطقية بِقِنْياتها الأبدية وصُوَرها العقلية أشْبَهُ شيئٍ بالمعنى الإلهي. Al-ʿĀmirī and Rowson (1988, 106.9).

85. Al-Ašʿarī (1929–33, 496.9), Frank (1999, 216 n. 115).

86. تقرير المعاني الإلهية. Al-ʿĀmirī and Rowson (1988, 128–32).

Calling God a *maʿnā*, however, was not permissible for ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār: "God cannot be described as a *maʿnā*, because *maʿnā* is the intent of the heart to speak about what it wants. This is why we say, 'The *maʿnā* of this speech is such and such,' and 'My *maʿnā* in this discourse is this and that,' and why someone may ask their companion, 'What is your *maʿnā* in that speech?'"[87] ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār was citing examples from ordinary language to show that *maʿnā* is prelinguistic intent. He then went on to note, just as Abū Hilāl had, the usage made famous by Muʿammar: "The theologians have acquainted each other with the use of this vocal form for causes, so they say that 'the moving thing moves because of a *maʿnā*.' They use that statement in place of the statement 'It is moving because of a cause.'"[88] ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār did not distinguish at all between the *maʿānī* that were prelinguistic mental contents and the *maʿānī* that Muʿammar believed were an infinite series of causes: if we allow Muʿammar's infinite causal *maʿānī*, then "this will lead to an inability to put faith in accurate accounts of names."[89] The *maʿnā* that Muʿammar used to explain causality and physical forces was the same *maʿnā* that lay behind names in language.

Maʿnā was a word that was available for Muʿammar to pick up and use. He used it in a way consistent with his peers. What theories may have influenced him, and how he may have been inspired by reading the work of others, are questions of translation. We can speculate as to what foreign concepts may have influenced Muʿammar as he thought about causality. Harry Austryn Wolfson suggested that Muʿammar was translating the Aristotelian term *phusis* and that his theory of *maʿānī* "represents his theory of nature [*phusis*] as the cause of motion and rest."[90] This is quite possible, for the *phusis* Aristotle discussed at the beginning of Book Two of his *Physics* was described there as existing, and just like *maʿnā* it was also only conceptually separable from the thing in question.[91] But Aristotle's conceptual vocabulary was not the same as Muʿammar's, and we cannot easily map *phusis* onto *maʿnā*. For example, the distinction Aristotle draws between natural materials (where *phusis* is found) and man-made objects (where *phusis* is not found) is central to his theory,[92] but to the

---

87. Al-ʿĀmirī and Rowson (1988).

ولا يوصَف [اللهُ] بأنه معنًى قال شيخُنا أبو علي لأنّ المعنى هو قصدُ القلب بالكلام إلى المراد ولذلك يقال إنّ معنى هذا الكلام كَيْتَ وكَيْتَ وإنّ معنايَ بهذا الخطاب كذا وكذا ويقول القائلُ لصاحبه ما معناكَ في هذا الكلام. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (1965–74, 5:253.4–7).

88. وقد تعرف المتكلمون استعمالَ هذه اللفظة في العِلَل فيقولون إنّ المتحرّك متحرّكٌ لمعنًى ويُقيمونه مقامَ قَولِهِم إنه متحرّكٌ لِعِلّة. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (1965–74, 5:253.9–10).

89. وهذا يؤدّي إلى ألّا نَثِقُ بحقائق الأسماء. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ǧabbār (1965–74, 7.9–13, 18). Cf. Miller (2016b, 69).

90. Kelsey (2015, 44); Wolfson (1965, 684), (1976, 147f).

91. Arist. *Ph.* 193b5.

92. Arist. *Ph.* 192b.

best of my knowledge it is extraneous to Muʿammar's. There is also the evidence from the contemporaneous translation movement: when Isḥāq came to translate Aristotle's *Physics,* he did not use *maʿnā* for either Aristotle's *phusis* ("nature") or his *archēn kinēseōs* ("starting principle of motion"), but rather *ṭabīʿah* ("nature," a word indeed later used for causation and as such summarily dismissed by Ibn Fūrak)[93] and *mabdaʾ li-l-ḥarakah* ("starting point of motion"), respectively.[94] Wolfson's other suggestion, that Muʿammar's *maʿnā* comes from the reports of Christian theologians describing the Trinity as an eternal *maʿnā,* is equally possible.[95] It is not impossible that theologians were responding to Christian uses of *maʿnā* to describe the divine, but we are engaging in guesswork here at the remove of more than a millennium. Many scholars have been down this path and suggested a range of origins that includes, inter alia, Classical Indian philosophy. (The scholarship has been reviewed by Daiber.)[96]

I think, however, that Muʿammar's *maʿānī* theory, a staple of ninth-century theology/philosophy/physics, makes sense within the bounds set by the literary critic and lexicographer Abū Hilāl. In the seventh through tenth centuries, the conceptual vocabulary of *maʿnā, lafẓ,* and *ḥaqīqah* was everywhere. It was not omnipresent: the confluence of language, mind, and reality was sometimes confronted with other words, as we will see below with the discussion of name, naming, and named, and as Fritz Zimmermann has documented in the work of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950).[97] But this chapter has demonstrated that *maʿnā, lafẓ,* and *ḥaqīqah* were stable and available words from the eighth century onward. When scholars thought about the principles, natures, and qualities of things around them they did so, inescapably, with the stuff of cognition: mental content that they could later put into words. They usually called this mental content *maʿnā.* This is why I juxtapose theology, logic, and poetics in this book: because I am convinced that the language game being played by scholars in each of these disciplines, on each of these fields, was the same. It is as if, on one of those vast expanses of adjacent sports pitches that one finds in parts of the United Kingdom, multiple games were being played next to one another, each with different players and their own ball but all returning to the same changing rooms and all identifying themselves as doing the same thing: playing amateur football.

93. مَن قال بالطبيعة المجيبة والطبع المولِّدِ مُخطئٌ .. لا يصحّ أنْ يكون مِن جنسِ الجواهر [أوْ] الأعراضِ Ibn Fūrak (1987, 131.16–132.1). [الطبيعةُ والطبعُ] لفظ فارغ مِن معنىً معقولٍ . . . .

94. Aristotle (1964, 1:78f), van Ess (1991–95, 2:40). Cf. Ibn Fūrak's dismissal of the idea that "nature" could explain generation: Ibn Fūrak (1987, 131.16).

95. Wolfson (1956, 3f), (1976, 112f, 115, 147–67).

96. Daiber (1975, 82).

97. Zimmermann (1981, cxxix–cxxxvii).