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PROCESS CAUSATION AND METAPHYSICAL GROUNDING IN THE THOUGHT OF THE IKHWĀN AL-ŞAFĀ'

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Abstract

Drawing on the fortieth epistle of the Ikhwān al-Şafā', this article proposes a framework that links hylomorphism with the idiom of metaphysical grounding. The distinction between two descriptive idioms, process causation at the level of events and non-causal explanatory dependence at the level of structure, underwrites a model in which the roles of form (şūra) and matter or prime matter (hayūlā) are articulated together with the recipient-capacity profile H(y). In this way, "craft" (şinā'a) is understood as the impressing of form upon matter, and the "analogy of speech" (tamthīl al-kalām) elucidates the relation of divine upholding (qayyūmiyya) and ongoing ontological dependence. The Ikhwān al-Şafā''s distinction between atemporal all-at-once origination (ibdā') and aeonically natural unfolding (dahr) is aligned with the idea of atemporal grounding laws and temporally realized mechanisms. On this basis, metaphysically impossible states of affairs are, as such, outside the scope of power, and defects within the natural domain trace back to constraints encoded by H(y), not to any deficiency on the side of the agent. The result is a more precise account of omnipotence paradoxes, the compatibility of conservation or continuous emanation with secondary causes, and a natural-theodicy explanation grounded in partial grounding.

Keywords: Hylomorphism; metaphysical grounding; process causation; ongoing ontological dependence; Ikhwān al-Şafā';

INTRODUCTION

Within the interface between the Islamic philosophical tradition and analytic metaphysics, the question of the structure of ontological dependence is of central importance. One might even say that several major debates in the philosophy of religion, such as the scope of definitions of divine power and the analysis of evil, hinge on how one understands non-causal explanatory dependence. In this light, a rereading of the *Ikhwān al-Şafā'*'s causal framework promises conceptual clarity¹. This framework

¹ Ikhwān al-Şafā', *Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Şafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā'*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Al-Dār Al-Islāmiyyah, 1957), Vol 3, 344-83.



simultaneously relies on hylomorphism and on precise analogical formulations, and it is equipped to engage the idiom of metaphysical grounding.

In the fortieth epistle (*fī al-ʿilal wa-al-maʿlūlāt*), the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* articulate a distinctly hylomorphic framework by treating craft (*ṣināʿa*) as the paradigm of causality in nature: the artisan draws out the forms conceived in intellect and impresses them into prime matter (*hayūlā*), so that form (*ṣūra*) functions as the organizing principle whose inscription actualizes the potentials of matter and yields concrete processes and products ². In the same epistle they also model the relation between God and the world by means of the analogy of speech, presenting the world's being and persistence as dependent on a continuous divine act of articulation, such that the cessation of that act would entail the lapse of the world's presence. This is a *qayyūmī* account of conservation rather than existential inertia ³. This indicates ongoing ontological dependence and the logic of conservation, without necessarily entailing full-blown occasionalism ⁴. In addition, the clarifying distinction between atemporal all-at-once origination in the spiritual domain and aeonic unfolding in the aeon (*dahr*) within nature provides the theoretical basis for distinguishing atemporal grounding laws from temporally realized mechanisms.

Despite this background, a theoretical gap remains. Although the philosophical thought of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* has been evaluated and analyzed from various angles ⁵, an explicit linkage between craft causation, the four causes, privation on the side of the recipient, and categories of grounding, including full and partial grounding and the logic of in-virtue-of relations, has not yet been systematically articulated. Analytic literature has shown that grounding is necessary to describe constructive dependencies that go beyond event-focused process causation ⁶. Moreover, contemporary debates on divine power rely on the analysis of states of affairs and restrict the scope of power to metaphysically possible states of affairs. On this basis, omnipotence paradoxes reduce to a conflation of the modal domain of possibility with verbally defined tasks ⁷. Consequently, what is needed is a formulation that simultaneously accounts for process causation at the level of events and for constructive dependence at the level of structure, while remaining faithful to the analogy of speech as a model of divine upholding.

To this end, the relevant distinctions are applied impartially and without sectarian presuppositions: craft is understood as an event-focused mechanism, whereas the God–world relation is recast in the language of grounding and ongoing ontological dependence. In addition, the principle “*Inability is nonbeing, not being*” ⁸, is interpreted parametrically, with the recipient-capacity profile $H(y)$ determining the threshold for the transition from partial grounding to full grounding. Thus, natural defects are traced back to receptive constraints rather than to any deficiency on the side of the agent. Here F stands for

² Ibid., Vol 3, 358.

³ Ibid., Vol 3, 351.

⁴ Frank Griffel, "Al-Ghazali," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020).

⁵ Carmela Baffioni, "Onto-Cosmology and Hierohistory in the Manuscript Tradition of the Rasāʾil Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ," *Intellectual interactions in the Islamic world* (2020); Godefroid De Callatay, *Ikhwan Al-Safa': A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam* (Simon and Schuster, 2012); Emrah Kaya, "Reason and Rationality in the Epistles of Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ," *İlahiyat Tetkikleri Dergisi*, no. 52 (2019); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ, Al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā* (Thames and Hudson, 1978); Ian Richard Netton, "Private Caves and Public Islands: Islam, Plato, and the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ," (2009); *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (Routledge, 2013); "The Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ)," in *History of Islamic Philosophy* (Routledge, 2013).

⁶ Ricki Bliss and Kelly Trogdon, "Metaphysical Grounding," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024); Kit Fine, "Guide to Ground," in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, ed. Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁷ Joshua Hoffman and Gary Rosenkrantz, "Omnipotence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022); Kenneth L Pearce and Alexander R Pruss, "Understanding Omnipotence," *Religious studies* 48, no. 3 (2012); Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983).

⁸ Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil Ikhwān Al-Ṣafāʾ Wa Khullān Al-Wafāʾ*, Vol 3, 358.

form, M for matter, $C(a, b)$ for process causation, and $G(a, b)$ for the grounding relation. By designing this model, coherent dialogue between the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*'s reading and contemporary analytic metaphysics and philosophical theology becomes possible, without recourse to existential inertia or the denial of secondary causes⁹.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE *RASĀ'IL*

The fortieth epistle explicitly endorses the Aristotelian scheme of the four causes and, at the same time, reconfigures it within its own conceptual framework: "*How many kinds of causes are there? Four: efficient, material, formal, and perceptive (final)*"¹⁰. It then extends the scope of the effect beyond human-made artifacts to encompass the natural realm, the psychical realm, and the spiritual realm. Within this horizon, craft causation is taken as the paradigm of causality in the natural world: "*What is craft? It is the artisan's bringing forth the forms that are within himself and imprinting them upon prime matter (hayūlā)*"¹¹. The final cause or *telos* is treated as the criterion of completed action: "*Every wise craftsman acts for an end in his craft, and that end is the goal that antecedently exists in the knower's knowledge or in the craftsman's thought, for the sake of which the work is undertaken*"¹². On an analytic reading, form is the causal structure or organization that actualizes the potentials of prime matter (*hylē*), and the final cause (*telos*) functions as the standard of success or perfection of realization. Contemporary hylomorphism articulates precisely this point, namely, that structure is the fundamental ontological and explanatory principle of things, and that what things can do is a function of their form-imparting structure¹³. Within the four-category ontology of substance/kind and mode/attribute, it has been shown how substantial form, that is, the form of the species, together with properties, determines the subject, and how the form-matter relation can be restated coherently¹⁴. Moreover, differences among forms can shoulder grounding facts about artifacts and kind-level features, and can even resolve the statue-clay problem of co-location¹⁵. This analytic reading appears to be consonant with the *Rasā'il*, and, moreover, the text itself explicitly differentiates natural craft from spiritual origination: "*As for the divine, spiritual realities, their origination occurs in a single act, ordered and well-arranged, without time, without place, and without any subsistent matter; rather, it is by His command, 'Be!' and it is*"¹⁶. Thus craft causation is the paradigm for nature, not for origination. A compressed formalization of craft may be written as $C(F_{in\ the\ maker's\ intellect}, M_{extramental})$, where, as noted in the introduction, $C(a, b)$ stands for process causation, F for form, and M for prime matter. The relation between God and the world is articulated in the *Rasā'il* through the "speech" analogy, which clarifies the idea of ongoing ontological dependence: "*The existence of the world from God is like the existence of speech from the speaker; if the speaker refrains from speaking, speech ceases to exist*"¹⁷. This means that the world's persistence is identical with divine upholding, not with ontological inertia. The analogy supports a model of conservation and continuous emanation, without committing to moment-by-moment temporal re-creation or instantaneous per-instant creation. In other words, ongoing ontological dependence is understood as a non-causal explanatory dependence, rather than as productive causation.

⁹ This article focuses on rereading and reconstructing the epistle *fī al-'ilal wa-l-ma'lūlāt* in the idiom of contemporary analytic metaphysics. Accordingly, no reference will be made to other historical or philosophical dimensions of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*'s thought. For a survey of prior scholarship, see Baffioni Carmela Baffioni, "Ikhwān Al-Safā'," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021)..

¹⁰ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā'*, Vol 3, 358.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, Vol 3, 359.

¹³ William Jaworski, *Structure and the Metaphysics of Mind: How Hylomorphism Solves the Mind-Body Problem* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 336.

¹⁴ E Jonathan Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

¹⁵ Kathrin Koslicki, "Towards a Hylomorphic Solution to the Grounding Problem," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 82 (2018): 333–41.

¹⁶ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā'*, Vol 3, 352.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol 3, 351.

At precisely this point the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*'s compatible duality emerges, namely, atemporal all-at-once spiritual origination (*ibdā'*) in the World of Command (*ʿĀlam al-Amr*) and gradual natural unfolding in the world of nature. In the realm of Command, "Be, and it is" functions as the timeless and efficacious divine fiat, not as a mechanical event in time. Methodologically, the *Rasā'il*'s reliance on analogies, including the micro-macro analogy, structures their argumentation and facilitates the articulation of *qayyūmī* relations between the human and the cosmos¹⁸. In effect, the speech analogy depicts the world not as an artifact that can stand on its own once made, but as discourse that endures only so long as the act of speaking endures. Therefore, the God-world relation can be rendered coherently and explanatorily in the language of grounding and conservation. On this model, the "speech" analogy is not merely a literary trope, but an indicator of two distinct modes of actualization: on the one hand, an emanative grounding law that fixes a non-causal explanatory dependence at the higher level, and, on the other, process causation that obtains in the natural realm under conservation. This duality of mechanisms articulates a natural passage from ongoing ontological dependence to temporal manifestation and clarifies how the texts are to be read. The same theoretical insight is restated within the *Rasā'il* themselves as an explicit "two rhythms of creation," namely, a one-shot origination in the realm of Command and a gradual unfolding in nature.

The two rhythms of creation are set side by side explicitly in the *Rasā'il*, that is, in the thought of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*' creation occurs at two distinct yet harmonious levels: "As for the divine, spiritual realities, their origination occurs in a single act, ordered and well-arranged, without time, without place, and without any subsistent matter; rather, it is by His command, 'Be!' and it is", in contrast "Then know that the four elements precede in existence their generated compounds by days, months, and years, just as the celestial spheres precede the elements in existence by periods, cycles, and conjunctions. The realm of spirits precedes the realm of the spheres in existence by endless ages, and the Creator, exalted be He, precedes them all in existence, as the One precedes every number"¹⁹. Analytically, the absence of matter in the spiritual domain implies the absence of recipient constraints and therefore the possibility of atemporal all-at-once origination, whereas the presence of matter in nature brings with it time, motion, and order as constraints of realization, that is, processual becoming in time. Crucially, the text's explicit statement that the paradigm of craft, namely making with matter, in place and time and by means of instruments, is not transferable to origination, sharpens the boundary between "timeless constitutive laws" and "mechanisms of temporal realization": "He brought forth from nonexistence into existence all of these things, namely prime matter, place, time, motions, instruments, and accidents. For this reason, the manner of the world's coming-to-be and its origination is inconceivable"²⁰. This distinction resonates with contemporary formulations in philosophical theology, where the creation versus conservation distinction and the discussion of continuous or ongoing dependence are central²¹. Accordingly, separating atemporal all-at-once origination from temporally gradual realization has a clear methodological consequence: wherever matter and recipient constraints are in play, the degree to which form is actualized is traced not to the agent but to the recipient's capacity. In other words, while in the spiritual tier dependence is ongoing ontological dependence without material constraints, in the natural tier the same dependence appears only as partial grounding by virtue of constraints on receptivity. From precisely this point a natural transition to the thesis of privation on the side of the recipient and to a privation-based reading of evil is obtained, namely, deficiency is the product of limitations of receptivity in matter, not a shortcoming in the agent's act.

¹⁸ Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', Al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā*, 66–74; Inka Nokso-Koivisto, "Microcosm-Macrocosm Analogy in *Rasā'il Ikhwān Aṣ-Ṣafā'* and Certain Related Texts," *PhD diss., University of Helsinki* (2014).

¹⁹ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā'*, Vol 3, 352-53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol 3, 346.

²¹ Jon McGinnis and Rahim Acar, "Arabic and Islamic Philosophy of Religion," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023).

Indeed, the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*'s core thesis concerning evil and deficiency rests on the idea of privation on the side of the recipient. The epistle states: "*Inability is nonbeing, not being*"²². That is, "inability" is the absence of a relation to what is impossible, not a defect in divine power. At the same time, the speech analogy reminded us that the world's persistence is an ongoing dependence on divine effusion. At the level of natural explanation, the source of differences and defects is referred to the varying capacities of materials and the degrees to which forms are received, and gradation or natural oppositions are counted among the entailments of matter, not as defects in the efficient cause²³. This stance coheres with the privation theory of evil, which understands evils as lacking positive ontological status and, at the level of analysis, as the absence of the perfection proper to a kind²⁴.

Recent criticisms, from the "problem of pain" understood as a seemingly positive evil²⁵ to the "evil-God challenge," which seeks to neutralize privation theory by means of symmetry, are significant in their own right²⁶. Nevertheless, on the basis of the *Rasā'il* one may respond that pain or suffering, at the metaphysical level, is a disruption of the fit between powers and acts relative to a kind's teleological end, hence its privative character consists in a lack of order, not in denying the experiential phenomenology. This line of defense appears to be strengthened by recent McCabian readings and cognate approaches²⁷. Moreover, the two rhythms of creation, namely atemporal spiritual origination and gradual natural becoming in the aeon (*dahr*), explain why deficiencies arise in the domain of matter, motion, and time without being attributable to the First Agent. Within the horizon of philosophy of religion, this conclusion is consistent with analyses of omnipotence: metaphysically impossible states of affairs are, by definition, outside the scope of power, and what is ascribed to the material world are consequences entailed by matter, potency, and contrariety. Therefore, the explanatory burden shifts from the agent to *H* (recipient-capacity profile): if Δ is the set of facts concerning *F* and *M*, and the truth that *y* has form *F* depends on Δ , then the sufficiency of Δ is conditioned by a threshold determined by *H*(*y*). Consequently, grounding can in some cases remain partial grounding, and this shortfall in realization manifests as natural differences and defects.

2. ANALYTICAL FORMULATION

The transition from a historical reading of the *Rasā'il* to an analytical formulation requires distinguishing two complementary descriptive idioms: first, the idiom of process causation, which is event focused and speaks in terms of making or bringing about, and second, the idiom of metaphysical grounding, which is structure focused and speaks in in-virtue-of terms²⁸. In the fortieth epistle of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*' these two idioms are clearly traceable at the textual level. On the one hand, the definition of craft causation as the impressing of form upon matter, "*What is craft? It is the artisan's bringing forth the forms that are within himself and imprinting them upon prime matter (hayūlā)*"²⁹, is an explicit instance of process causation. On the other hand, the speech analogy, "*The existence of the world from God is like the existence of speech from the speaker; if the speaker refrains from speaking, speech ceases to exist*"³⁰, evokes the idiom of constitutive dependence and ongoing ontological dependence. For precise interpretation, the following notational conventions are adopted: $P(x)$ is the range of power of *x* (the domain of metaphysical possibility), $C(a, b)$ is process causation from *a* to *b*, $G(a, b)$ is the grounding

²² *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*', *Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā*', Vol 3, 358.

²³ Muhd Abdullah Darraz, "Islamic Eco-Cosmology in Ikhwan Al-Safa's View," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 2, no. 1 (2012).

²⁴ Mohammad Saeedimehr, "Muslim Philosophers on the Privation Theory of Evil," *Religious Studies* 59, no. S1 (2023).

²⁵ Timothy Parker Haratine, "On the Privation Theory of Evil: A Reflection on Pain and the Goodness of God's Creation," *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology* (2023).

²⁶ John M Collins, "The Privation Theory of Evil and the Evil-God Challenge," *Religious Studies* (2024).

²⁷ Anastasia Phillipa Scrutton, "Evil as Privative: A McCabian Defence," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 85, no. 1-2 (2024).

²⁸ Tuomas E Tahko, *An Introduction to Metametaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 93-97.

²⁹ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*', *Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā*', Vol 3, 358.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol 3, 351.

relation between a and b , and the hylomorphic parameters are F for form, M for *hylē* or prime matter, and $H(y)$ for the recipient-capacity profile of the item y . With this conceptual distinction and notational scheme, the passage from verbal report to formal reconstruction becomes possible. The paradigm of craft is re-expressible as $C(\cdot, \cdot)$ within the framework of process causation, and the text's *qayyūmī* or explanatory relation is formulated as $G(\cdot, \cdot)$ in terms of metaphysical grounding. In this setting, the parameter $H(y)$ serves as the mediating variable, determining the sufficiency of the grounds in the transition from causal contribution to constitutive sufficiency. On this basis, one can show systematically how the idiom of making or doing and the idiom of in-virtue-of are unified within a single model. In the next step, the H-Profile model is introduced in order to render this linkage explicit and applicable to the case of form and matter. Accordingly, craft causation in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* may be translated as a structural mapping of what is in the maker's intellect onto extra-mental matter, that is, $C(F_{\text{in the maker's intellect}}, M_{\text{extramental}})$. This rewriting registers the event-focused aspect of making. However, for describing the ontological dependence of the product on its source or bearer, the idiom of G is more effective, since grounding, unlike causation, targets non-causal explanatory dependence³¹.

On this basis, the H-Profile model is formulated as follows: within a hylomorphic framework, the recipient's capacity determines how much of the formal structure constitutively grounds the composite entity. Formally, if Δ is the set of facts concerning F and the arrangement of M , then the fact that y has form F is grounded in Δ , partially or fully. The threshold governing the passage from partial grounding to full grounding is a function of $H(y)$. Hence $H(y)$ plays the role of a regulator of the sufficiency of the grounds, explaining why some realizations remain merely contributory while others become sufficient.

This model is also consonant with the "two rhythms of creation" in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. As noted in the previous section, in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*'s system creation has two distinct yet harmonious tiers, which map neatly onto the present model. At the higher spiritual tier, the coming-to-be of entities is understood not within the framework of matter, place, and time, but as atemporal all-at-once origination. This tier may be construed as the domain of timeless constitutive laws, that is, emanative grounding laws or linking principles, metaphysical principles that fix the relevant in-virtue-of relations and determine the pattern of grounding at the apex of the hierarchy. By contrast, the natural tier proceeds on the basis of prime matter, *hylē*, and the organization of space-time and motion. Here the concern is with processual becoming in time and with process causation. From the standpoint of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*'s architecture, both the priority of the spiritual over the natural and the ordered arrangement of the elements and spheres in *dahr* can be recast in contemporary terms as follows: constitutive laws at the upper layer determine the map of explanatory dependence, and the lower layer realizes that map under the constraints of the receptivity of matter and temporal ordering³².

³¹ In contemporary literature it is emphasized that grounding should not be identified with every kind of existential dependence. There is a distinction between the existential dependence of one entity on another and the dependence of one fact on another fact, even if there are often correlations between these two kinds of dependence Henrik Rydén, "Grounding and Ontological Dependence," *Synthese* 198, no. Suppl 6 (2021); Benjamin Schnieder, "Grounding and Dependence," *ibid.* 197, no. 1 (2020)..

³² This reading is consonant with current debates as well. On the one hand, the idea of linking principles shows that grounding connections can, at a fundamental level, "code" the method by which derivatives are produced, without engendering an infinite regress of grounding facts Christopher Frugé, "Janus-Faced Grounding," *Ergo an Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2023).. On the other hand, arguments for the fundamentality of grounding facts explain why and how some of these facts must be basic, so that the explanatory network does not collapse Fabrice Correia, "A New Argument for the Groundedness of Grounding Facts," *Erkenntnis* 88, no. 4 (2023).. Consequently, one may say that at the apex, timeless constitutive laws secure explanatory sufficiency, that is, full grounding at the higher level, while at the base, natural realizations often occur as partial grounding because of recipient limitations and material arrangements. The parameter $H(y)$ regulates precisely this transition. Wherever H 's sufficiency threshold is met, explanatory dependence is complete, and wherever that threshold falls short on account of material or temporal constraints, natural gaps and a diversity of degrees of actualizability appear. This reconstruction unifies the two descriptive idioms within a single framework, making or doing within nature, and in-virtue-of at the higher structural tier. A further point concerns necessitarianism about grounding. In cases of full ground, the grounded truth follows of necessity from the grounds, and the

Accordingly, the idiom of process causation must be distinguished from the idiom of metaphysical grounding, so that a fallacy of level conflation does not arise. On this basis, two complementary arguments, **A** and **B**, are advanced. Argument **A** restricts the range of power to metaphysically possible states of affairs and shows that putative cases such as creating a divine peer or a spherical cube lie outside the very subject matter of power. Consequently, standard omnipotence paradoxes stem from conflating the modal domain of possibility with verbally stipulated “tasks” and do not indicate an incapacity. Argument **B**, moves to the level of natural realization and, by appeal to $H(y)$, shows that the actualization of forms F in matter M depends on the recipient’s constraints and capacities. Hence natural defects and differences trace back to inadequate or partial grounding, not to a deficiency in the agent. To clarify the connection between these arguments and the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s framework, the two tiers must be kept distinct yet mutually reinforcing: the first tier concerns the modal range of power, addressed by the analysis of omnipotence, while the second concerns the mode of realization in matter, tied to hylomorphism and to constraints of receptivity.

Argument **A** focuses on the first tier and shows how the familiar “omnipotence paradoxes” dissolve once the modal domain is correctly specified. The core claim is that divine power ranges over metaphysically possible states of affairs, not over metaphysically impossible ones. On this formulation, power is the power to bring about states of affairs, on condition that those states are possible in themselves. Well-worn examples such as a “spherical cube” or “creating a peer of God” are therefore not the subject matter of power at all, since these are verbal descriptions that do not denote any metaphysically possible condition. Likewise, self-limiting acts that would entail the loss of omnipotence are internally contradictory and so fall outside the domain. Read in light of the *Rasā’il*, the point is explicit: “Inability is nonbeing, not being”³³, and what appears to be “incapacity” is in fact a lack of subject matter, not a deficiency in the agent. That is, if the “object of the act” is metaphysically impossible, its nonoccurrence does not count as incapacity but as the absence of a case. Moreover, since the God–world relation is of the sort of divine upholding, suspending ongoing effusion in favor of metaphysical impossibilities is conceptually incoherent. Effusion pertains to the domain of possibility, not to conceptual contradictions. Put differently, the logic of Argument **A** in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’ can be stated as follows:

- Premise 1) Power ranges over metaphysically possible states of affairs.
- Premise 2) Creating a peer of God and self-limiting acts are metaphysically impossible.
- Conclusion) Therefore, their nonoccurrence is not evidence of incapacity but of being outside the modal domain.

This delivers precisely the shift the *Rasā’il* insist upon, namely, relocating the burden of the problem from a “defect in the agent” to a “defect or absence in the subject”. By contrast, Argument **B** operates at the second tier and shows that natural defects and differences arise from limitations on the side of receptivity rather than from any deficiency in the agent. The second argument concerns the mode of realization in matter and builds on the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s idea of “privation on the side of the recipient.” The *Rasā’il*’s hylomorphic framework, that is, their acceptance of the four causes and their model of “craft” as the imposition of a form F upon matter M , already prepares the ground for this orientation. On this view, the realization of perfections depends on thresholds of receptivity in matter, not merely on the perfection of the agent. The *Rasā’il* explicitly attribute differences in manifestation to variations in the recipient’s power, scope, and capacity, each thing receiving the form “according to its power and capacity,” and thus an overall good can be accompanied by a localized harm without being attributable to the agent³⁴. In contemporary terms, this *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s perspective can be recast by means of the H-profile model. If Δ is the set of facts concerning F and the arrangement of M , then the fact that “ Y has form F ” is grounded in Δ , either partially or fully, and the transition from partial grounding to full grounding is governed by the threshold fixed by $H(y)$. In other words, natural differences and defects are

source of this necessity is typically sought in essential truths. This picture coheres with the layer of “*kun fa-yakūn*” as a timeless and complete issuance, without committing one to a modal collapse at the level of nature, since at the natural level the degree of realization depends precisely on $H(y)$ and on the material constraints and organization of M .

³³ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’, *Rasā’il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā’ Wa Khullān Al-Wafā’*, Vol 3, 358.

³⁴ Darraz, “Islamic Eco-Cosmology in Ikhwan Al-Safa’s View,” 149.

manifestations of insufficient grounding that arise directly from limitations of receptivity, not from any failure in the imparting agency. It should also be noted that the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* distinguish two “rhythms of creation,” namely, atemporal all-at-once origination in the World of Command and gradual natural unfolding in the realm of matter, motion, and time. On the proposed reading, the upper layer features timeless constitutive laws, that is, emanative grounding laws or linking principles, which fix explanatory relations, while the lower layer realizes those relations under material constraints and the thresholds set by H . The natural consequence is that grounding sometimes fails to be complete, because $H(y)$ does not reach the sufficiency threshold, and this shortfall of realization appears as differences, disharmonies, or “localized harms”. The logic of Argument **B** in the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* can be stated as follows:

- Premise 1) In nature, the actualization of forms F in matter M depends on the thresholds $H(y)$.
- Premise 2) Natural differences and defects are manifestations of the constraints encoded in $H(y)$, not of a defect in the agent.
- Conclusion) Therefore, privation on the side of the recipient and the privative character of evil are explicable at the level of natural realization, because the grounding of degrees of perfection is sometimes only partial and does not reach sufficiency.

On this basis, Argument **A** removes omnipotence paradoxes by correctly delimiting the modal domain, and Argument **B** shows that defect belongs to the recipient, since the sufficiency of grounds is indexed to $H(y)$ and is not an indicator of any shortcoming in the agent. The combination of these two tiers, illuminated by the *Rasā'il*'s two rhythms of creation, yields a picture in which the higher act is all at once and atemporal, at the level of constitutive laws or grounding, while material-temporal realizations unfold in proportion to capacities, at the level of process causation. This very distinction also prevents modal collapse, for the explanatory necessity associated with full grounding at the upper tier is not imposed wholesale upon nature, given the constraints of H and the arrangements of M . Nature remains a domain of “possibility conditioned by receptivity.” Accordingly, in the present framework the tier of the modal range of power is distinguished from the tier of the mode of realization in matter, and the claims are these: first, divine power ranges over metaphysically possible states of affairs and metaphysical impossibilities are not the subject matter of power; second, in nature, the degree to which forms are actualized depends on the constraints encoded in H , and it is precisely this dependence that explains privation on the side of the recipient.

3. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Having set out the formulation, we must now analyze and assess the possible objections. In the course of addressing these objections, the positive and decisive features of the proposed formulation become apparent.

The first objection concerns the range of power. If H constrains realizations, for example, if the entity y , due to its limited capacities, cannot receive the form F “fully,” has not this constraint in effect restricted the divine range of power, so that the limitation on realization transfers to the scope of divine power itself? In other words, have we not said, “God cannot realize F fully in y ,” which would amount to diminishing divine power? The crucial point is the distinction between the modal range of power and the mode of realization in matter. If omnipotence is defined as the power to bring about possible states of affairs, then it explicitly carries a possibility condition, and what is metaphysically impossible is not the subject matter of power at all. The Fortieth Epistle of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* gives this point explicit expression: “*Inability is nonbeing, not being*”³⁵. That is, the nonoccurrence of an impossibility is not a case of “inability,” but a case of “no subject.” Hence one must distinguish between the domain P and realization in matter R . At the level of P , that is, the domain of metaphysical possibility, the sentence “ x is able to bring about A ” is meaningful only if $A \in P$, and cases such as “creating a peer of God” or “a spherical cube” are not members of P at all. By contrast, realization in matter R concerns situations in which A is a matter of actualizing a form in nature, where the realization of A depends not only on the will of the agent but also on the arrangement of M and the thresholds fixed by $H(y)$. This dependence is not a “restriction of the domain,” it is a specification of the “conditions of realization” at the material level. Here $H(y)$ does not limit the domain, it determines the sufficiency threshold for grounds at the level of natural realization. The relation of qayyūmiyya is preserved by the same consideration: “*The*

³⁵ *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, *Rasā'il Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā' Wa Khullān Al-Wafā'*, Vol 3, 358.

existence of the world from God is like the existence of speech from the speaker; if the speaker refrains from speaking, speech ceases to exist”³⁶. What is at issue is ongoing ontological dependence, not self-subsisting inertia.

A further objection may take the form of an occasionalist challenge. If everything is the direct act of God, on strong readings of occasionalism, what room remains for *H* and for secondary causes? Is the “recipient-capacity profile” anything more than a mask for the direct act of God? It should be noted that in the *Ikhwānīan* reading, “craft” and the four causes provide the language for describing the orders of possibles, while the “speech” analogy provides the language of *qayyūmiyya* and conservation. Combining the two requires separating the level of divine upholding and the level of natural realization. The level of conservation or continuous emanation is from God at every moment, without which persistence would be impossible. In other words, the being and continued being of anything at any moment stand in need of divine effusion. Without this effusion, nothing would endure for even an instant. At the same time, the natural level proceeds in a structured way by means of form, matter, and end, which is to say by the network of *G* and *C* together with the parameter *H*. This level specifies how, and to what degree, a thing comes to be or functions, in accordance with its natural structure, its matter, its form, its organization, and its “capacity for reception”. This is what *H* encapsulates. In effect, the first level states that “everything depends on God,” and the second level states “how that dependence manifests through the capacities and structures of creatures”. *H*, therefore, is not a rival to God, nor a mere label for the direct act of God, but an account of the path through which that same effusion appears³⁷. Full-blown occasionalism is not assumed. Rather, the simultaneity of “continuous effusion” with the “natural structure of the recipient” is described. Craft causation is the language of events, grounding is the language of constitutive dependence among facts, and *H*(*y*) is the parameter for the capacity to receive effusion in nature.

One may also object that tying grounding to the layer (*dafʿatan*) engenders full-blown necessitarianism and thereby leads to modal collapse. That is, if timeless emanative grounding laws are fixed at the spiritual level and necessitation (full-ground necessitarianism) is accepted, would it not follow that all natural facts obtain by necessity, leaving the very notion of possibility empty? In response, first, one can distinguish among emanative laws (*L*), essential truths (*E*), and boundary or configurational conditions (*B*): $L \cup E \cup B \Rightarrow \text{ground Facts}$. The necessity involved in grounding at the level of full ground arises from *L*∪*E*, whereas natural determinability comes from *B* (*B* is the material configurations and the *H*-profiles). So long as *B* admits multiple admissible values, collapse does not occur. This is precisely the role of *H*(*y*): the fact that some realizations remain only partially grounded (because of *H*-thresholds) leaves genuine indeterminacy in outcomes, and one adopts minimalist grounding laws (conceived as elite regularities) so that necessity does not propagate unrestrained to all levels. Second, regarding the relation between divine knowledge and will and creaturely details, one may appeal to extrinsicity or Cambridge properties, meaning that part of the truthmakers for the claims “God knows/wills that ...” are external and pertain to the content of possibles rather than to any intrinsic change in God. Consequently, divine simplicity can be reconciled with a plurality of possibilities, and modal collapse does not follow. Moreover, powers-based approaches to divine simplicity³⁸ indicate that the divine powers are multi-track and relate to multiple pathways of actualization³⁹.

³⁶ Ibid., Vol 3, 351.

³⁷ Even if one grants that preservation and effusion of existence are entirely from God, that is, at the first level, an account of how manifestation occurs within nature, that is, at the second level, remains explanatorily valuable. The language of *H* and of secondary causes does not compete with God, it describes the pattern of manifestation that God himself has instituted. Even someone who assigns no intrinsic role to natural structure can still say, “God wills that acts appear by way of the capacities of creatures.” In that case, *H* functions as the divine scheme of manifestation, not as a mask. Thus divine unity (*tawḥīd*) is preserved, and a scientific or philosophical account of the how is also provided.

³⁸ Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science*.

³⁹ One might further ask where “suspension of the customary order” (*taʿīl al-ʿāda*) or “miracle” (*iʿjāz*) fits if *H* determines receptive constraints. The *Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*’s architecture distinguishes two rhythms, “all-at-once origination” (*ibdāʿ dafʿatan*) in the “World of Command” (*ʿĀlam al-Amr*), and “natural gradualness” within the world of nature. A supernatural intervention can be understood as a retuning of *B*, that is, of boundary or configurational conditions, not as a violation of *L* and *E*.

The problem of natural evils, such as the pain and suffering of animals and human beings ⁴⁰, can be raised as another objection to this *Ikhwānīan* framework. Here the H-profile enables a nature-centered theodicy in which overall good can be combined with localized harm. If pain has a warning and protective function, then nociceptive thresholds, neural complexity, fecundity, and trophic stability are all parameters of *H*. Tuning these parameters, within the constraints of natural laws, can both secure the overall survival of biological systems and minimize superfluous suffering as far as possible. At this point the Hypothesis of Indifference becomes salient: if the distribution of pain and pleasure in the world is incompatible with theism, then the evidence speaks against God. The present framework proposes a two-tier reply. The first is methodological: evidential assessments must be sensitive to the receptive structure of systems. Comparing ecosystems with different pain thresholds, trophic networks, and reproductive capacities shows that the distribution of harm and benefit is strongly a function of *H*, not of an agent's arbitrary fiat. If both law and chance (a law–chance blend) contribute to generating these settings, then negative evidence does not by itself indicate divine indifference. The second is theological and explanatory: on the basis of privation on the side of the recipient, evil is understood as the absence of the order due to a kind, not as a positive entity alongside the good. Pain, at the metaphysical level, is a disordering of the relation between powers and their acts relative to a kind's telos, that is, the very phenomenon of partial grounding due to *H/M* constraints. This interpretation coheres with the privation theory of evil and has received fresh defenses in contemporary literature ⁴¹. In addition, the study of predator–prey systems shows how localized harm (for example, the prey's suffering) can be part of the overall good of an ecosystem, since without predation pressure trophic networks tend toward instability and collapse. At the parametric level, one can show that reducing pain intensity while preserving protective signaling, in species with lower neural complexity, may approach biological optima and attenuate the “negative evidential force.” These lines of defense approximate a modest skeptical theism: we lack sufficient knowledge of the details of *H/M* across scales to adjudicate decisively against theism in the court of evidence. As already noted, the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* attribute differences and defects to heterogeneous material capacities and to degrees of receptivity to forms, hence “local harms” are treated as concomitants of the domain of matter, motion, and time, not as effects of a defect in the First Agent. Consequently, a natural theodicy based on the H-profile neither denies pain nor trivializes suffering, but offers an ontological and systemic account of the relation between localized harm and overall good in natural networks.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, the central claim can be summarized as follows: the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*'s causal system, with its pillars of the four causes, the definition of “craft,” the analogy of “speech,” and the distinction between atemporal all-at-once origination and gradual natural realization, makes possible a contemporary formulation in the language of grounding that is both metaphysically precise and illuminating for philosophical theology. The key to this formulation is the distinction between two complementary levels: the event-focused level of process causation, which concerns making or bringing about, and the structure-focused level of non-causal explanatory dependence, which concerns what is so in virtue of what. With this distinction in place, not only is a confusion of levels avoided, but a conceptual bridge is built between the Islamic philosophical tradition and analytic metaphysics. Within this framework, “craft” is treated as the paradigmatic form of causation in nature: the form *F* is impressed upon matter *M*, and natural realizations occur by process, instrument, and temporal order. By contrast, the “persistence” of those very products and of the cosmos as a whole, in the analogy of “speech,” is understood under a *qayyūmī* relation of sustaining: existence and endurance obtain so long as the “emanation/speaking” continues. This analogy restates, in premodern idiom, precisely the idea of ongoing ontological dependence and allows us to recast ontological dependence in the format of *G(a, b)* relations (grounding), while describing the mechanisms of natural realization by *C(a, b)* (process causation).

The explanatory engine of the model is completed by the parameter *H(y)*, the “recipient-capacity profile,” which fixes the threshold for the transition from partial grounding to full grounding. If Δ is the

⁴⁰ Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” *Noûs* (1989).

⁴¹ Saeedimehr, “Muslim Philosophers on the Privation Theory of Evil.”; Scrutton, “Evil as Privative: A Mccabian Defence.”

set of facts concerning form and the arrangement of matter, then the truth that “ y has form F ” is grounded in Δ , either partially or fully, and it is $H(y)$ that determines whether Δ suffices for fullness or falls short. This conceptual link shifts the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s thesis of “privation on the side of the recipient” from a normative register to an ontological architecture: defects and differences are manifestations of circumstances in which the grounds do not reach the threshold of sufficiency. The first implication of this reading clarifies the relation of divine omnipotence to metaphysically impossible states of affairs. Once the modal domain is distinguished from the mode of realization, the claim is that power ranges over metaphysically possible states of affairs; hence, “creating a peer to God” or “a spherical cube” lie entirely outside the subject matter of power, and their non-occurrence indicates neither impotence nor a need to revise the very nature of power. The second implication is the reconciliation of conservation or continuous emanation with the reality of secondary causes. When the creatio, conservatio, concursus triad is aligned with the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’s distinction between timeless origination and temporal gradation, we obtain a picture in which emanative grounding laws stabilize the structure at the summit, while the mechanisms of natural realization, that is, process causation, are at work at the base and secondary causes have a genuine share. Here, ongoing ontological dependence functions as the guarantor: whatever exists and persists does so by emanation, but how something comes to be and to what degree it comes to be depends on the constraints encoded in H and M . Thus, full-blown occasionalism does not follow, yet neither does an independence thesis for nature. The third implication concerns a natural theodicy. By construing evils as the “lack of the order proper to a kind” and by parameterizing $H(y)$, one can show that many natural sufferings, including animal pain, are related to thresholds and receptive limits in biological systems: nociceptive threshold, neural complexity, fecundity, and trophic stability are all coded within $H(y)$. As a result, “localized harms” can be parts of the “overall good of the system” without being traced to a defect in the First Agent. This reinterpretation, while sympathetic to the privation theory of evil, permits the evidential strength of negative data in probabilistic arguments to be assessed with due regard for receptive structure. The fourth implication is a principled prevention of modal collapse. If the necessity associated with full grounding is tied to essential truths or to grounding laws, and if it is combined with genuine degrees of freedom at the level of H and M , necessity does not percolate indiscriminately through all layers. More technically, even if grounding links at the summit are necessitating, material arrangements and capacity thresholds keep the space of possibility open in nature and render realizations spectrum-like, from partial to full. In this way, “minimalist and elite grounding laws” remain compatible with the multi-track realities of the natural order.

This formulation does, of course, have limitations. First, the *Rasā’il*’s encyclopedic and analogical style entails ambiguities that any analytic reconstruction must handle with care. Second, the H-Profile model has been sketched parametrically and requires further work for cross-traditional testing, for example in *Ibn Sīnā* and *Suhrawardī*, and for cross-disciplinary engagement with evolutionary biology and ecology, so that its explanatory scope can be assessed more clearly. Third, the precise separation between “an entity’s ontological dependence on another entity” and “one fact’s dependence on another fact,” which is debated in the grounding literature, should be more closely fitted to the corpus of the *Rasā’il* in future studies.

With these cautions acknowledged, the principal achievement is clear. This reading of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*’ simultaneously, first, refines the range of divine power by the criterion of metaphysical possibility, second, secures ongoing ontological dependence at the level of grounding, third, accounts for secondary causes and natural mechanisms at the level of process causation, and fourth, converts the theological slogan of “privation on the side of the recipient” into a precise explanatory architecture. The result is that the *Rasā’il* are not merely a historical source but a conversation partner in contemporary metaphysics, a partner that can help bring order to difficult debates about the limits of divine power, the explanation of natural evil, and the structure of dependence in the world. Future lines of work, from a more exact logical formulation of the H-Profile, to systematic comparison with contemporary theories of grounding, to broader application within Islamic traditions, including *Ibn Sīnā*, the *Ash‘arīs*, and *Mullā Ṣadrā*, can carry this conversation to a higher level of precision and depth.

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