PREDICATION TESTS, COPULA, AND A POSSIBLE LINK WITH AŠ'ARISM

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This paper very briefly describes a series of predication tests in the works of the early Arab grammarians and links them with the concept of the “copula” in the philosophers. It concludes with the suggestion that there may be some connection between these two topics and later Aš'arite speculations about the attributes of God. Naturally there can be no certainty about such a conjecture, though the paper will conclude with some remarks which might at least make it seem reasonable.

Predication tests in grammar are observable as early as al-Mubarrad (d. 898 A.D.)¹ and are a prominent feature in the works of such later figures as Ibn as-Sarrāġ (d. 929 A.D.)² and Ibn Mālik (d. 1274 A.D.)³. Under the general heading of al-ḥābr bi-illādī wa-l-lām a simple sentence is paraphrased either with a participle or allādī, often achieving great complexity, sometimes to the point of incomprehensibility. The following table presents a basic sentence⁴, its two paraphrases with the participle and allādī and, for contrast, the normal patterns of topicalization. For the purposes of the later discussion the boundary between subject and predicate is marked (|), the anaphoric pronouns which bind the two together are in bold type and non-canonical structures are starred:

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³ Alfiyya (any edition), verse 717f.
⁴ It is derived from al-Mubarrad’s Muqtaḍāb, vol. III, p. 93.
1a Basic sentence, normal word order

\textit{ātaytu zaydan dirhaman}

1b Normal topicalization

\textit{anā | ātaytu zaydan dirhaman}
\textit{zaydun | ātaytubu dirhaman}

(*dirhamun | ātaytubu zaydan)

\textit{ammā anā | fa-ātaytu zaydan dirhaman}
\textit{ammā zaydun | fa-ātaytubu dirhaman}

(*ammā dirhamun | fa-ātaytubu zaydan)

2a Paraphrase with participle (\textit{al-ibbār bi-l-lām})

\textit{al-muṭṭi Ṣ zaydan dirhaman | anā}
\textit{al-muṭṭi Ṣi anā dirhaman | zaydun}
\textit{al-muṭṭi Ṣi anā zaydan | dirhamun}

2b Paraphrase with alladī (\textit{al-ibbār bi-lladī})

\textit{alladī āṭā Ṣ zaydan dirhaman | anā}
\textit{alladī ātaytubu dirhaman | zaydun}
\textit{alladī ātaytubu zaydan | dirhamun}

or: alladī ātaytu iyyābu dirhaman | zaydun
\textit{alladī āṭaytu zaydan iyyābu | dirhamun}
3a Regular topicalization of 2a

\[
\text{anā l-muṭīḥīØ zaydun dirhamān} \\
\text{zaydun} | \text{anā l-muṭīḥī dirhamān}
\]

\(\left(\text{*dirhamun} \mid \text{anā l-muṭīḥī zaydun}\right)\)

3b Regular topicalization of 2b

\[
\text{anā} | \text{illādī aṭaytū zaydun dirhamān} \\
\text{zaydun} | \text{illādī aṭaytūhu dirhamān}
\]

\(\left(\text{*dirhamun illādī aṭaytūhu zaydun}\right)\)

It is obvious that the examples in 2a and 2b are not instances of the regular topicalization seen in 1b. In fact they are the opposite of topicalization, fronting or foregrounding, as it is variously termed, since they reverse the usual order of the given and the new. This is shown clearly by the starred forms in 3a and 3b, for while it is perfectly correct to make the indefinite word dirhamun the predicate in 2a and 2b, dirhamun cannot be topicalized into a subject position in 3a and 3b.

Interestingly the sentences with zaydun as the final element in 2a and 2b appear to break a rule of logic that predicates cannot be proper names. This rule has attracted some attention among the medieval Arab philosophers, not least of al-Fārābī, who evidently rejected it. Al-Baṭalyawṣī also discusses the question, and argues that a case such as illādī darabtūhu zaydun is merely an inversion of zaydun illādī darabtūhu, hence not an infringement of the rule of proper name predicates. This view is somewhat vulnerable, however, for the illegal *dirhamun

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5 See the discussion in K. Gyekeye, Arabic Logic: Ibn at-Taṣāyyib’s Commentar on Porphyry’s Eisagoge, Albany 1979, p. 188f.

illacī ātaytubu zaydan in 3b is sufficient to prove that inversion (here of alladī ātaytubu zaydan dirhamun) is not always possible. We should therefore be cautious in accepting al-Baṭalyawṣī’s ideas as a full explanation of the phenomenon.

Finally we should note that there are some restrictions on the use of al-ḥabār bi-illacī wa-l-lām. Two may be noted here: neither the mafūl muṭlaq nor the muddāf may occur as predicates, i.e.

4a darabtu zaydan ḍarban

4b *alladī darabtubu zaydan ḍarbun

5a darabtu ḡulāma zaydin

5b *alladī darabtubu zaydin ḡulāmu

In the case of 4b the rule of ifāda is breached, since the utterance would convey no more information than was already in ḍarabtu. In 5b ḡulāmu cannot be pronominalized since pronouns cannot occur as the first elements of idāfa (contrast alladī ḍarabtu ḡulāmahu zaydun).

The question now arises, what was the purpose of this elaborate procedure? The Arab grammarians regard these sentences as student practice, but that simply leads to another question, practice in what? The key to the answer probably lies in the term ḫabār, which strongly implies that the main concern of the exercise was the mechanism of predication, testing thereby the predicability of any noun in the sentence. For reasons which will become relevant later on, we suggest that in the earliest stage the focus was indeed on the predicability of the noun, and that relatively little attention was paid to the pronouns which automa-

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7 See al-Mubarrad, Muqtadāb vol. III, p. 103, and cf. p 91f for other restricted categories.

8 The same restrictions apply to any topicalization of the muddāf, e.g. after ammā or ḭinna.
tically appear as traces of the noun when it is moved into the predicate position.

Since the *ibtār* test appeared in the time of al-Mubarrad, we may also hypothesize that it has some connection with the grammarians’ interest in logic which begins to be noticeable in this period, particularly the principle of falsifiability which had intruded into grammar from logic. If we call to mind the critical Arabic distinction between verbal and nominal sentences, the *ibtār* method presents itself as a very effective device to test falsifiability.

For not only is there a formal difference between nominal and verbal sentences, but there is also a logical difference. We may characterize verbal sentences as intrinsically “historical”, as narrative statements, empirical, non-demonstrable: it cannot be apodictically “proved” that an event ever took place, and so verbal sentences are logically non-falsifiable. By contrast nominal sentences, by merely asserting that *x* and *y* are the same thing without the mediation of any verbal copula, are demonstrable, logical propositions and therefore by nature falsifiable. This, we would claim, is a likely motive for the *ibtār* test, since it enables all the nominal elements of a sentence (apart from the exceptions already alluded to above) to be placed in an equational relationship and thus become falsifiable. Straightforward topicalization cannot achieve this since, as has been shown, the indefinite nouns in the sentence cannot be fronted, whereas there is nothing to stop them from being thematized as predicates by the *ibtār* method.

In passing it may be observed that the verbs in such sentences have to be accepted as a given fact, exactly as in the English analogue, “what I gave him was a dirham”, which is one good reason why the *mas‘ul muṣlaq* type *alladī darabi ḫu ḫarbi* is disallowed. This is not trivial, since one of the features of the verbless equational sentences of Arabic

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9 Cf. al-Mubarrad, *Muqtaṣab* vol. III, p. 89., which seems to be the earliest instance of truth/falsehood as a sentence criterion. The gradual prevalence of *ismād/musnad/musnad ilayhi* over the purely structural terms *ibtida‘/mubtada‘/mabni ‘alaybi* probably belongs to the same trend.
is that they also take for granted the "being" of the subject, as was pointed out very perceptively by Elamrani-Jamal and to which we shall return shortly\textsuperscript{10}.

There remains the historical difficulty of tracing the origins of the \textit{ikhbār} procedure. Nothing conclusive can be said about it here, in the absence of any strong indications either of a foreign or an indigenous origin, but it is certainly a problem which deserves a proper investigation.

Turning now to the copula, it must be said at the outset that there are serious historical problems here too. Surprisingly the word \textit{copula} is not a term of classical Greek or Latin grammar, nor are its place and date of entry into medieval European grammar precisely known\textsuperscript{11}. And finally there is the fundamental fact that whatever may be the history of the \textit{rābiṭa} concept in Arabic linguistic analysis (see below), it is never at any time equated\textsuperscript{12} with a verb "to be" or indeed any notion of existence, for the reason already noted by Elamrani-Jamal above, that Arabic equational sentences do not assert but simply presume the existence of their subject.

As elaborated among the philosophers and grammarians, there were two different kinds of problem to be solved, firstly what was the formal, syntactic link between subject and predicate and secondly what was the nature of the semantic, ontological link between these two. The structural possibilities reduce to three, exemplified in the following:

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\textsuperscript{11} The first appearance in Europe is attributed to Abelard, Elamrani-Jamal, \textit{ibid.} p. 130, note 5.

\textsuperscript{12} The word has been chosen carefully: certainly some affinities were perceived between Indo-European verbs "to be" and the hypothetical \textit{rābiṭa}, but there the similarity ends, cf. Elamrani-Jamal, \textit{Logique aristotélicienne} p. 134.
6a  Predicate = an "underived noun" (ism ǧāmid)

zaydun raġulun

6b  Predicate = a sentence

zaydun māta abūhu

zaydun ġāriyatubu ḏāhibatun

6c  Predicate = a "derived noun" (ism muṣṭaqq)  

zaydun qāʾimun

The first two present no difficulty. In 6a the semantic relationship is one of identity as the paraphrase ḥuwa ḥuwa for this type illustrates, and there is no need to look for a formal syntactic connection between subject and predicate (note that there is also no need to seek any element denoting the existence of either component since that is taken for granted). In 6b the problem is solved by the explicit connecting pronoun (rābit(a) or ʿāʾid in the conventional terminology) which establishes the predicate as referring to the particular subject in accordance with the normal syntax of the ǧumla dāt waḡhaym (the inverted verbal sentence ar-riğālu ḏahabū can also be regarded as a variant of the ǧumla dāt waḡhayn in which the topic/subject happens to be the same as the agent of the verb in the predicate). The second example in 6b is a case where the ǧumla suğrā of the predicate is itself a sentence of type 6c, and will be discussed under that heading.

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14 In medieval grammar it became axiomatic that all complex predicates contained a pronoun referring to the subject, cf. M. G. Carter, “The term ṣubāb in Arabic grammar”, *ZAL* 15, 1985, p. 62.
In 6c the predicate is neither an underived noun identical with the subject, nor a sentence containing an overt pronoun referring to the subject. The philosophers recognized the potential inconsistencies and were perturbed by them: the underived noun was by definition resistant to further analysis and all 6a type sentences reduce to huwa huwa as already mentioned, but the derived noun, with its manifestly verbal concordance (as the pattern sentence a-qā'imun iz-zaydānī, with singular form of the participle in a verbal position is meant to display)\(^{15}\) was a challenge. Orthographically it may be a single word but semantically it is a complex notion.

al-Fārābī’s discussion of the problem comes to perhaps the only possible conclusion that there must, in fact, be some element which connects the subject zaydun with the predicate qā'imun\(^{16}\), and he appropriately calls this element rābiṭa, a term which he was apparently the first to use\(^{17}\). His explanation is doubtless the product of a mixture of influences. From the Arab grammarians he could draw on a well-established theory that derived nouns (including the whole category of adjectives) are equivalent to verbal predicates, i.e. zaydun ḥasanun is synonymous with yahsunu zaydun: in this way the phenomenon of adjectival concord is accounted for in terms of the agent pronouns either visible or concealed in verbs\(^{18}\). From the Greek grammatical ideas to which he was

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\(^{15}\) This is an example quoted by the grammarians in support of the claim that qā'imun may observe the rules of verbal concord when preceding its noun, see M. G. Carter, Arab Linguistics, Amsterdam 1981, p. 189.


\(^{17}\) Elamrani-Jamal, Logique aristotélicienne p. 131.

\(^{18}\) For this reason adjectives are terms “quasi-participial” (muṣabbaha bi-smī l-fi‘l) in certain contexts. It is not the purpose of this paper to review the damīr muṣṭatīr theory, but the examples in 2a, 2b and 3a show clearly how it was necessary to infer the existence of an agent pronoun in unmarked verbs. Note, too, that anā l-māṭī... is often expressed
indirectly exposed he was probably also aware of the intermediate status of the verbal noun (maṣdar) which might have suggested to him the possibility of an agent being concealed in a noun in the same way as it is in several Arabic verb forms as a ḍamīr mustatīr.\(^9\)

The combination of these ideas and al-Fārābī’s own logical imperatives produced the conclusion just mentioned, that indeed there was some invisible connecting element in qā'imun linking it to zaydun. This element, being invisible, was also entirely inferential. We must beware of misinterpreting the paraphrase *zaydun ḥuwā qā'imun\(^2⁰\) as implying that there was a real pronoun either concealed or, worse still, merely elided in zaydun qā'imun. This would be a gross error: in the first place *zaydun ḥuwā qā'imun is not a natural Arabic sentence at all (we are not talking of the emphatic appositive ḥuwā here), and the artificial ḥuwā is on no account to be confused with the ḍamīr al-faṣl. In the second place it contradicts al-Fārābī’s own argument, which is, that the linking element has no linguistic status beyond its ability to be paraphrased by the appropriate free pronoun. We shall see that for a number of reasons this is a perfectly sensible position.

It is hardly surprising that there was disagreement among the philosophers over the exact nature of the linking element\(^2¹\). al-Fārābī’s interpretation of a word like qā'imun is that unlike yaqūmu, which is predicative by nature and contains a pronoun (whether hidden, as here, or not, as in a yaqūmūna etc.), qā'imun is unable to stand as a predicate

\(^9\) Cf. the discussion of the debate over the priority of verb and verbal noun in C. H. M. Versteegh, Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking, Leiden 1977, p. 83f.

\(^2⁰\) Elamrani-Jamal, Logique aristotélicienne, p. 134. Interestingly enough, when the grammarians wish to externalize an agent pronoun in the participle they seem to prefer a different word order in the paraphrase, e.g. mararti bi-raṣūlin ma'ahu mna'atun dāribūbā ḥuwā placing the pronoun after the participle (Ṣībawayhi, Kitāb I, 208/243, cf. Carter, ZAL 1985 p. 58).

\(^2¹\) What follows is drawn from Elamrani-Jamal, Logique aristotélicienne p. 135f and the same writer’s “Verbe, copule, nom dérivé.” op. cit. note 16.
unless some connecting feature is assumed (note that in qā'imūna for example, the āna suffix is not a pronoun but a plural marker, and the linking element is still to be inferred). al-Fārābī is here taking into account the fact that qā'imun also occurs in other functions than predication, unlike verbs, which can only be predicates. However, his ideas were subsequently attacked by Ibn Rušd, who makes a difference kind of distinction between verbs and participles, namely that verbs predicate extrinsically (muğarrad) of their subjects while participles predicate intrinsically of their subjects and inherently denote the meaning in the object they qualify.

Ibn Rušd sees a contradiction in al-Fārābī’s position: if, as al-Fārābī claims, the reference of qā'imun to its subject is different from the linking element it is assumed to contain, then the same word is both subject (by reference) and predicate (by rābīta) of itself. Conversely, if predication is only by linking element then the quality predicated need not be intrinsic to the subject but may be in the relationship of substance to accident, which Ibn Rušd will permit for the verb but not the participle. We cannot know to what extent this line of argument is determined by strictly logical considerations but it is clear that there are parallels with the discussions of the nature of God’s attributes which raise the same difficulties in hylomorphic terms. When Ibn Rušd insists on the unicity of the qā'imun word class we must assume he was at least aware of its implications for theology even if we cannot say that this was the reason for his view.

By way of conclusion to this section a short digression may be permitted on two contemporary problems of the copula. It should be obvious that any modern treatment of Arabic syntax which treats the verb kāna as a copula is a lamentable confusion of two entirely unrelated syntactic systems. The only medieval grammarian who ever made this equation probably took it more or less directly from Greek and his
views were never generally adopted. Secondly it should be equally obvious that the growing tendency to use a *damîr al-faṣl* in modern Arabic as if it were a copula is an awesome demonstration of the cultural impact of Western syntax on Arabic thought patterns which has now become so ingrained that it is unlikely that any Arab is aware of the extreme irony of referring to the *damîr al-faṣl* (whose purpose is to keep things apart) as a copula (whose purpose is to link things together)!

Returning to the topic in hand, we now consider the controversy over the attributes of God in the light of the above information. Two solid points may be cited as a foundation for the approach taken by this paper, the first being the generally acknowledged fact that theological arguments in Arabic are inescapably linguistic in nature. This contention need not be elaborated, it surely suffices to appeal to the authority of Michel Allard.

The second point is rather more delicate and crucial for the present case. It is that in Aš’arite theological debate the attributes of God are seemingly always expressed in participial form: thus when God’s knowledge, for example, is under discussion He is said to be ‘ālimun. We presume that this preference for the participle is not a random choice.

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22 az-Zaγγαγγ (d. 949 A.D.), in his *Gurnal* (ed. Muhammad Ben Cheneb, Paris 1957), p. 53 refers to *kāna* and its related verbs as *burīf*, which has evidently been taken by later grammarians as meaning that they are “like *rawābit*”, q.v. in M. G. Carter, *Arab Linguistics*, Amsterdam 1981, p. 208, where this view is ascribed to “the Kūfans.”

23 Since this paper was submitted for publication the present writer has examined the copula problem in more detail, cf. M. G. Carter, “Copula in Arabic Grammar”, to appear in the Proceedings of the 17th Congress of the Union of European Arabists and Islamicists, St. Petersburg, August 22-25 1994.


25 Cf. Allard, *op. cit.* pp. 115, 197, 241 etc. In the same work, p. 115, it is mentioned that al-Ġubbā’ī preferred participles to nouns, and cf pp. 197-199 for more on the reasons for this.
As it happens, verbs would be a singularly inappropriate vehicle for expressing God’s attributes. Whether we follow the indigenous grammatical tradition or the Aristotelian categorization which was later absorbed into Arabic grammar, there is an indissoluble connection between verbs and time which rules them out as useful tools for formulating ideas about God.26

Moreover it is not so much what God does which interests the theologian but what God is, and it is precisely this concept for which Arabic lacks a verb! Admittedly adjectives could be used, but all adjectives are reducible to participles anyway, and there is also the objective fact that many of God’s attributes are already expressed in the Qur’an as participles which do not have truly adjectival equivalents.

Nouns, on the other hand, are used in theological discourse: we read labu ‘ilmun and the like in the context of God’s attributes. But we must be very careful to distinguish the logical status of such expressions. A closer look reveals the unbridgeable gap between huwa ‘alimun and labu ‘ilmun: both refer to God, but in huwa ‘alimun we have a statement directly about God while in labu ‘ilmun we merely have a statement about huwa ‘alimun which is thus of an entirely different order. In fact the periphrastic labu ‘ilmun is completely unacceptable as a definitive theological formulation since it blatantly externalizes the very dualism which was at the root of the problem. It contains two linguistically and semantically discrete entities and, to make matters worse, an explicit relational term.27

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26 On the built-in dualism of verbs cf. B. Weiss, “Subject and predicate in the thinking of the Arabic philologists”, JAOS 105, 1985, 613 (the article has many other useful insights relevant to the topic of the present paper, especially the notion of the “linking symbolism” in predication).

27 It is to the credit of the theologians that they apparently did not consider resorting to the nonsensical *huwa ‘ilmun to escape from this predicament. No matter how much they may have wanted to prove that God’s nature and attributes were identical they could never bring themselves to do violence to the common sense enshrined in normal linguistic usage. This would have immediately caused them to be ejected from the linguistic community, either by ridicule or silence.
From what has just been said it may well appear that the theologians were compelled to use the participle in the absence of any acceptable alternatives (which would conform very nicely with the Ašʿarite doctrine of *kastal*), but even the inevitable must be plausible, and the purpose of this paper is to show that there was already a solid grammatical and philosophical tradition to predispose the theologians to favour the participle in this particular context.

The participle has all the features necessary to solve the theologians' difficulties: it denotes attributes intrinsically without any formal dualism, and unlike verbs, which also denote attributes, it has no reference to time. It is thus a perfect linguistic analogue of the divine *tawḥīd*, a unity of subject and attributes that are integral with its essence. The theological statement *huwa ʿālimun* has exactly the same structure as Sībawayhi's symbolic sentence pattern *huwa huwa*: the subject and predicate are identical, the latter however is enhanced by an attribute joined by an invisible link. This kind of sentence can thus be restated symbolically in the form *huwa* (*huwa + sīfa*), where the bracketed element is as much a single entity as *huwa* by itself. The obvious echo of the Old Testament "I am that I am" seems worth mentioning at this point, as *huwa ʿālimun* in the end means no more than "He is what He is" until we ascertain the real nature of His attributes.

It was, after all, the Ašʿarīs who maintained that since God spoke to us in human language His words and our discourse about Him are both subject to linguistic criteria no matter how transcendent the themes. Otherwise, says al-Ašʿarī himself, it would not matter what we or God said as it would all be equally meaningless. What this paper has tried to show is that the Ašʿarite position is in fact fully consistent with the grammatical and philosophical level of enquiry which, as hardly needs proving, was already the context out of which Ašʿarism

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28 Here we must disagree with Weiss, *JAOS* 1985, p. 617, that the particle shares with the verb the function of attributing a *hadat* to a *đāt*. There is no "event" in the participle: all it implies is eternal potential, cf. the "Kūfan" term *fi l dāʿim* for the participle.

evolved. We may invert al-Aslāfī’s proposition and claim that if any of the theological arguments had been incompatible with or not up to the standard of the very sophisticated grammatical theories of the time they would have been totally rejected. The use of the participle, therefore, is not just a theological convenience but a recognition that theology must conform to the principles of the language sciences as well as those of abstract thought.

30 This may look like a truism, but it is surprising how often the linguistic contribution to theological argument is downgraded to “mere grammar” (G. E. Hourani, Reason and Tradition in Islam, Cambridge 1985, p. 120) to quote one example.

31 Two recent works, F. M. Zimmermann, Al-Fārābī’s Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, Oxford 1981 (pb. 1987) and S. B. Abed, Aristotelian Logic and the Arabic Language in Al-Fārābī, Albany 1991, contain extensive discussions of predication, copula and the participial form. However, neither author addresses the specific issue of predication tests in relation to divine predicates.

Philosophy was introduced into the Islamic world in the third century A.H. (the ninth century A.D.), an expression in part of the cultural efflorescence of the period, tolerated and even encouraged by the ruling ‘Abbāsid circles in Baghdad. It is worth recalling that al-Kindī (d. 870), the first philosopher in Islam, was patronized by the caliphs al-Ma‘mūn and al-Mu’tasim, and that he was the tutor of the latter’s son. A number of al-Kindī’s treatises are dedicated to the nobility of his day, and they are written as responses to queries put to him on scientific and philosophical matters.

Though his patrons and auditors may have been genuinely interested in such issues, they were not for the most part equipped to follow elaborate or sophisticated explanations, and al-Kindī wisely refrained from boring them overly with such. He often wrote essays of relatively short length, some just a few pages long, geared to the limited education and understanding of the addressee, whose limitations al-Kindī unhesitatingly proclaimed. Fa-ḥādā ʿimā saʿalā kaḥin bi-hab mawdūdīka min an-nazār (“Of what you inquired about, this, then is sufficient, corresponding to your attainment [literally, “place”] in speculation”), is a not uncharacteristic closing remark of his, al-Kindī’s successors thought scarcely more of him than he thought of his contemporaries, viewing his oeuvre as extensive but limited in depth and philosophical acumen. Once the Aristotelian corpus in translation had been assimilated, al-Kindī’s initial response to it seemed inadequate, to later generations.