

Notes on Matter: Ibn Arabi, Bernard Silvestris, and Other Ghosts

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Abstract : Between something and nothing, a bit of both, neither/nor, a figment of the imagination, the womb of the universe - questions of what matter is, where it exists and what it means continue to surge up from the bottom of our concepts and theories. This paper looks at divergences and convergences, intimations and mistranslations, in a lineage of thought that begins with Plato's Timaeus, travels through Arabic Spain and Syria, finally to end up in the language of science. Up to the 13th century, philosophers in Christian France based such inquiries on a questionable and fragmented translation of the Timaeus by Calcidius, with a commentary that conflated the Platonic concept of khora ('space' or 'void') with Aristotle's hyle ('primal matter' as derived from 'wood' as a building material). Both terms were translated by Calcidius as silva. For 700 years, this was the only source for philosophers of matter in the Latin-speaking world. Bernard Silvestris, in his Cosmographia, exemplifies the concepts developed before new translations from Arabic began to pour into the Latin world from such centers as the court of Toledo. Unlike their counterparts across the Pyrenees, 13th century philosophers in Muslim Spain had access to a broad vocabulary for notions of primal matter. The prolific and visionary theologian, philosopher, and poet Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi could draw on the Ikhwan Al-Safa's 10th Century renderings of Aristotle, which translated the Greek hyle as the everyday Arabic word maddah, still used for building materials today. He also often used the simple transliteration of hyle as hayula, probably taken from Ibn Sina. The prophet's son-in-law Ali talked of dust in the air, invisible until it is struck by sunlight. Ibn Arabi adopted this dust - haba - as an expression for an original metaphysical substance, nonexistent but susceptible to manifesting forms. Ibn Arabi compares the dust to a phoenix, because we have heard about it and can conceive of it, but it has no existence unto itself and can be described only in similes. Elsewhere he refers to it as quwwa wa salahiyya - pure potentiality and readiness. The final portion of the paper will compare Bernard and Ibn Arabi's notions of matter to the recent ontology developed by theoretical physicist and philosopher Karen Barad. Looking at Barad's work with the work of Nils Bohr, it will argue that there is a rich resonance between Ibn Arabi's paradoxical conceptions of matter and the quantum vacuum fluctuations verified by recent lab experiments. The inseparability of matter and meaning in Barad recall Ibn Arabi's original response to Ibn Rushd's question: Does revelation offer the same knowledge as rationality? 'Yes and No,' Ibn Arabi said, 'and between the yes and no spirit is divided from matter and heads are separated from bodies.' Ibn Arabi's double affirmation continues to offer insight into our relationship to momentary experience at its most fundamental level.

Keywords : Karen Barad, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, primal matter, Bernard Silvestris

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