

CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE (2.1)

PRÉCIS OF REASON UNBOUND: ON SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN ISLAMIC PERIPATETIC PHILOSOPHY¹

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This work is a critique of the modern receptions of Islamic Peripatetic philosophy and a justification of the importance of Islamic Peripateticism for modern philosophy. Islamic Peripatetics are represented by Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī (Alfarabi) as the primary architect of this philosophical project and Abū ‘Alī Ḥussain ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), as the one in whose work the project came to fruition. These Peripatetics are in alliance with their Greek predecessors in their understanding of philosophy as a practice of spiritual exercises. However, they differ from the Greeks in the importance assigned to prophecy. The Islamic philosophical account of the cultivation of the soul to the point of prophecy unfolds new vistas of intellectual and imaginative experience and allows the philosopher an exceptional dignity and freedom.

It is perhaps undisputed that certain forms of Islamic philosophy stress the connection between spiritual practice and philosophical discourse, but Islamic *Peripatetics* are often understood as philosophical rationalists pure and simple. In order to establish this form of Peripateticism as inextricably bound to the practice of spiritual exercises, I draw from Pierre Hadot’s insightful readings of Greek philosophy. To put it rather briefly, Hadot advances the view that, for the Greeks, philosophy – Aristotelian and otherwise – was primarily the practice of spiritual exercises aimed at the transformation of the self and the acquisition of wisdom.² I accept this account, which seems to fly in the face of the modernist understanding of philosophy – past and present – as abstract rational discourse, and interpret it as privileging ethics in the thought of the ancients and assigning it a foundational role vis-à-vis the other so-called “fields” of philosophy. I then place the Islamic Peripatetics, the inheritors of the Greek philosophical tradition, within this

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² See Hadot 1995 and 2004.

interpretative framework. I submit that the Peripatetic philosophers are in alliance with the Greeks in their commitment to the practice of spiritual exercises for the transformation of the self and its orientation towards the things themselves.

I relate this conception of philosophy to an Aristotelian account of ethical expertise as involving a kind of knowledge, in order to overcome the modernist's divide between mind and world. In this view, virtue involves a sensitivity to the ethical requirements imposed by the situation. But this is not a naïve realism, because the virtuous judgments, as the active exercises of our relevant concepts, are answerable to a world that is experienced by means of a passive operation of those concepts.³ This refined realism contains important consequences for modern ethical theory as well as (the crisis-ridden) modern foundationalist epistemology (and its opponents who deny the rational bearing of the world on the mind).⁴ In this relation, I explore Heidegger phenomenology – through the readings of Islamic philosophy set forth by his disciple, Henry Corbin – for a pertinent account (inspired by Aristotle) of the mind that is always already in unmediated contact with things in the world, but requires the practice of philosophy to scour the obfuscations clouding its awareness. I argue that a more refined version of Heidegger's view is available in the texts of the Islamic Peripatetics.

In their concern with philosophy as the practice of spiritual exercises and a metaphysics that does not eschew access to things themselves, Islamic Peripatetics draw from Greek philosophy. However, to repeat, they differ from their Greek predecessors and their modern successors in the importance they assign to the power of prophecy. This is how they bring the Greek philosophical tradition into contact with the Islamic tradition. Prophecy bridges the divide between the human and the divine, the rational and the super-rational; it is what Muhsin Mahdi refers to as the unity of the rational and the poetic and the imaginative.⁵ Prophecy has legal, ethical, intellectual, and imaginative dimensions, and the treatment of each of these dimensions enriches the philosophical tradition inherited by these thinkers.

Islamic Peripatetics give a psychological account of the various dimensions of prophecy, drawing on the Peripatetic accounts of the faculties of practical and theoretical intellect, and the imagination. In this work, I discuss each dimension of prophecy in relation to the relevant psychological faculties and the notion of philosophy as fundamentally transformative. In this connection, I bring out a heretofore unappreciated aspect of the Peripatetic account of prophecy which is a philosophical appropriation of the Islamic art of interpreting (*ta'wīl*) the figurative dimension of the Qur'an. Beginning with Avicenna, a significant moment in the Peripatetic cultivation of the soul involves the use of sacred poetry and philosophical symbolism. In my analysis, I relate this aspect of Islamic Peripateticism to the

³ See McDowell 1998a.

⁴ In his Locke lectures: *Mind and World*, 1994, and his Woodbridge lectures: "Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant, and Intentionality," 1998b, McDowell has attempted to steer a course between the Myth of the Given (e.g., the empiricist's appeal to sense-data) and the efforts to recoil from the Given into an epistemological coherentism (advocated by philosophers like Rorty and Davidson).

⁵ Mahdi 1990, 97.

modern European philosophical exploration of the faculty of the imagination and the analytic of the concept of the sublime. I maintain that Islamic philosophers, following Avicenna, develop a transformative way of engaging the sublime that bypasses the Kantian paradox (imagining the unimaginable) without historicizing the sublime (*pace* Hegel). For the Islamic Peripatetics, the hermeneutical engagement of the sublime liberates the interpreter from the grip of the mundane and, in refining her feelings of pleasure and awe, culminates in an experience of the unconditional good.

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