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Neoplatonism in the *Liber Naturalis* and *Shifā: De anima* or *Metaphysica* of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)

Avicenna or Ibn Sīnā was born circa 980 in Afshna, near Bukhara, in Persia. He worked briefly for the Samanid administration, but left Bukhara, and lived in the area of Tehran and Isfahan, where he completed the *Shifā* (*Healing* [*from error*]) under the patronage of the Daylamite ruler, 'Ala'-al Dawla, and wrote his most important Persian work, the *Dānish-nāma*, which contains works on logic, metaphysics, physics, and mathematics.

In the *Liber Naturalis* (*al-Tabi'iyyat*) of Avicenna, sensory thought, *virtus cogitativa*, is illuminated by the active intellect, *intelligentia agens*. Avicenna followed Alexander of Aphrodisias in defining the potential intellect, the *nous pathetikos* or *nous dynamei*, as the material intellect, *intellectus materialis*, in contrast to the *intelligentia* or *nous poietikos*. The material intellect is seen as a passive substratum of ideas and as a capacity for thought, as a pure potency in relation to act, by which intelligibles can be apprehended. Avicenna defines the capacity to apprehend intelligibles in the *anima rationalis* as incorporeal, though it is a capacity of material intellect. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "in man there is some substance that apprehends the intelligible by receiving it." Thus "the substance that is the subject of the intelligibles is not body nor does it in any way have being because of body, it being the power [*virtus*] in the body, or its form" (6.5.2).[1] That substance or *virtus* of the *anima rationalis* is eternal, to the extent that the active intellect is able to participate in it.

For Avicenna, the potential knowing of the material intellect is actualized when intelligibles are projected onto it from the purely intellectual and incorporeal, which is the active intellect, which is capable of abstracting intelligible forms. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "the cause for giving intelligible form is nothing but the active intellect, in whose power are the principles of abstract intelligible forms" (6.5.5). Avicenna calls the active intellect the

giver of forms. Forms emanate from active intellect constantly and eternally, but not as the result of any will on the part of active intellect. Forms in active intellect are indivisible and perfect in their incorporeality, but matter is not capable of receiving them as such, because it is not properly prepared for them in its particularities and differentiation. Forms thus emanate as differentiated, in sequential arrangements of terms which are particular to human discourse in discursive or cogitative knowledge.

Cogitative knowledge, connected to corporeals in sense perception, is different from knowledge of principles or intelligibles, which requires the participation of active intellect in actual intellect, as in the Intellectual Principle of Plotinus, in contrast to Reason Principle. Plotinus was not known to Arab scholars by name, but parts of the *Enneads* were paraphrased in the *Theology of Aristotle*. For Avicenna, cogitative reason is necessary to ascend from material intellect to actual intellect, as dialectic is necessary to ascend to intellection for Plotinus. In Avicenna this involves the stage which is called *intellectus in habitu*, habitual intellect. *Intellectus in habitu* is described as an intellect as a state, *nous kath hexin*, a state of preparedness for intellection, as in the thought of Alexander of Aphrodisias.

Intellectus in habitu is an intellect in act, *intellectus in effectu*, though not in constant act, only when turned towards active intellect. *Intellectus in habitu* operates according to principles or first intelligibles, in the participation of active intellect, when the intelligible is present in it, as reflected, illuminated or emanated by active intellect, in an acquired intellect, an *intellectus accommodatus*, or an intellect acquired from outside human intellect, *accommodatus ab extrinsecus*. The *intellectus in habitu* leads to an actualized intellect, which is able to separate itself from the corporeals of sense perception and the mechanisms of material intellect. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "Thus the rational soul, being in a certain kind of union with the forms, is capable of having present in it free from all admixture the forms that come from the light of the active intellect itself" (6.5.5).

First intelligibles lead to second intelligibles as the illumination of active intellect is more clearly received. In this process, *intellectus in habitu* leads to acquired intellect, intellect which operates according to the reflected forms or intelligibles of active intellect into the corporeal world and material intellect. Cogitative reason prepares the material intellect to receive the emanation of the active intellect, by allowing the *intelligentia agens* to correspond the sensible form with the intelligible form in perception. The sensible form is presented by the cogitative faculty, in the retention and assimilation

of the phantasm in the *sensus communis*, and this provides the substrate for the participation of active intellect in the *anima rationalis*. The phantasm or sensible form retained in *memoria* provides a source to which the *anima rationalis* can return continually for sustenance in its cogitative activities, as in *Enneads* IV.3.29 of Plotinus.

The *anima rationalis* does not need to return to the form image, though, and the more it develops in *intellectus in habitu*, the less dependent it becomes on corporeal sense perception, the less it needs to return to the image. Once the *anima rationalis* has achieved actual intellect, the sensible forms retained in the *memoria* are only distractions, and they should thus be ignored and excluded from the intellective process, as Avicenna describes in the *Shifā: De anima* (223) or *Metaphysica*, because by then the actual intellect is able to understand the a priori intelligible form as the basis for the sensible form, and its operation can become solely dependent on that which comes from outside it, in the emanation of active intellect. For Plotinus, the sensible forms fade away.

In the *Liber Naturalis* (6.5.6), knowledge of intelligible objects necessitates the ability of intellect to recall to mind the forms in *phantasia*, sensible and intelligible forms, and thoughts or intentions in *memoria*, the two retentive functions of sense perception. Knowledge of intelligibles also necessitates the ability of *intellectus in habitu* to be joined with active intellect, through emanation or illumination, in order for the intelligible thought, *ipsum intellectum*, to be formed, in the conjoining of the sensible and intelligible form. The intelligible thought though is not always present to intellect or formed in intellect; it is present eternally in active intellect, but its presence in actual intellect requires the development of intellect in *intellectus in habitu*. Through development in *intellectus in habitu*, the *anima rationalis* is able to conjoin with active intellect when it chooses to do so. When the *anima rationalis* is willing, the intelligible form flows into it from active intellect, in the capacity of actual or actualized intellect, made possible through acquired intellect, *intellectus adeptus* or *intellectus accommodatus*.

Avicenna compares the relation between active intellect and material intellect to the relation between the sun and the sense of sight. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "for just as the sun is actually seen through itself, and what before was not actually visible through its light, so also the disposition of the [active] intellect is in relation to our souls" (6.5.5). Active intellect makes intelligibles visible to the *anima rationalis*, if the *anima rationalis* is turned toward active intellect in actual intellect or acquired intellect, *intellectus ac-*

commodatus. The sun is seen by its own light, while objects perceived in vision are seen by the light of the sun. For Avicenna, the material intellect is able to see the form of the thing in the *oculus mentis*, by the light of the active intellect, which proceeds or emanates from a first cause and illuminates the form of the thing as the intelligible form, in the *irradiatio spiritualis*, the illumination or reflection in the *anima rationalis*.

In the *Shifā: De anima* of Avicenna, intelligibles are differentiated in the compositive imaginative faculty, as in *Enneads* IV.3.29. According to Plotinus, the object of sense perception, the sensible form, is preserved in memory as a representation, an intelligible form; the impression of the object passes away while the representation remains present to the imagination, the image-making faculty. For Avicenna, active intellect transforms sense perceptions into principles, which are the first intelligible thoughts. In *Enneads* I.3.5, the principles are provided by the Intellectual Principle, through which dialectic reaches intellection. In the *De anima* (3.7.431b2) of Aristotle, the human intellect thinks the forms in the images, and the sensible form is given by the intelligible form, which is formed in the imagination or *phantasia* and is presented to discursive reason in the process of perception. According to Avicenna, in the *Shifā: De anima* (235), the image or *species* is formed in the *sensus communis*, and is then received by the imaginative faculty, the *phantasia*, which combines the images in different configurations, according to the spatial and temporal sequencing of discursive reason in material intellect. Discursive reason then receives an abstraction of the *species* from the *phantasia*, a representation of the intelligible form which corresponds to the sensible form.

In the *Liber Naturalis* of Avicenna, "The rational faculty, illuminated in us by the light of the active intellect, considers the particulars that are in the imagination," and "in this way they are rendered free from matter and its appendages and are imprinted in the rational soul" (6.5.6). The active intellect is that which illuminates, the *ellampôn*, while potential intellect contains what is illuminated, the *ellampomenoi*, and the multiple particulars which illuminate, the *ellampontes*. The illumination of the particulars frees the particulars from their corporeal dependence, in that the incorporeality of light can participate in them, and the illumination allows the particulars to be transposed into universals or intelligibles, as they "do not move by themselves from imagination toward our intellect." The intelligible is not possible without the particular, but it is not the particular which causes the intelligible, nor is it the faculty of human intelligence, which alone cannot exceed its

corporeal mechanisms.

Because for Avicenna intelligibles cannot actually exist in the human intellect, because they are incorporeal and properties of active intellect, as Platonic archetypes, only knowledge of intelligibles can exist in human intellect, so the illumination of active intellect is not of the intelligibles themselves, differing from Aristotle, but of the faculty in the *anima rationalis* to know the intelligibles. The illumination is of the *phantasia*, the mechanism of the *anima rationalis*, and not of the potential intelligibles in *phantasia*. The illumination is not of the intelligible form in the *oculus mentis*, but of the perception of the intelligible form in the *oculus mentis*, in actual or acquired intellect as active intellect participates in it through emanation or illumination. The *species* does not become an intelligible in its being transported from the compositive imagination, but rather in its being perceived by acquired intellect, which is so disposed because it is in conjunction with active intellect through illumination, as described in the *Shifā: De anima* (235–236). It is the *oculus mentis* rather than the *species* itself which is illuminated, the flashlight rather than the object which the flashlight makes visible.

In the *Shifā: De anima* (247), Avicenna compares the ability of intellect to achieve acquired intellection through the illumination of active intellect with the eye which has been made healthy in its vision through treatment, so it is able to see clearly. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "learning for the first time is like the healing of an eye, which, having been made healthy, can, when it wants to, apprehend a form by looking upon some individual" (6.5.6). The healthy eye, like the healthy *anima rationalis*, is able to perceive the intelligible form in the sensible form.

Avicenna also compared the ability of intellect to achieve acquired intellection to a mirror. Intellect can only achieve acquired intellection if it is turned towards active intellect and is able to perceive reflections of intelligibles, as in a mirror. The intelligibles are not actually in intellect in the same way that corporeal forms, or sensible bodies, are not actually in a mirror. In *Enneads* IV.3.30, "the verbal expression" in discursive reason, "unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power," in the formation of the intelligible form in acquired intellect, "and so shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror, and this is how there is apprehension and persistence and memory of it" (IV.3.30).[2] Discursive reason in material intellect mirrors the intelligible in acquired intellect, the Intellectual Principle of Plotinus, which for Avicenna is already a mirror reflection of the

intelligible in active intellect. Thus in *Enneads* I.4.10, discursive reason "becomes like the reflection resting on the smooth and shining surface of a mirror." The phantasm or sensible form exists in sense perception as a reflection of the *principia conoscendi*, the intelligible form in intellection, from acquired intellect.

For Plotinus there can be no immediate sense perception of an object, without the mediation of the mirror reflection of the intelligible form of the object in intellect; the same can be said for Avicenna. In *Enneads* I.1.8, the intelligible form in intellect becomes the sensible form in sense perception, "not by merging into body but by giving forth, without any change in itself, images or likenesses of itself like one face caught by many mirrors," in the same way that active intellect presents the intelligible to acquired intellect. Acquired intellect is only capable of receiving the intelligible to the extent of its limitations, as differentiated or sequentially arranged, in the same way that the mirror is only capable of receiving an image according to its corporeal state, adjusted in size and position.

In the *Liber Naturalis* of Avicenna, the *anima rationalis* consists of five internal senses. The *sensus communis* is sensory representation in the common sense, which coordinates the five external senses. The retentive imagination or *phantasia* preserves the sensations processed by the *sensus communis*. The sensations preserved in *phantasia* are then processed in a compositive imagination. Memory or *memoria* preserves the perceptions of the *vis aestimativa* as traces or mnemic residues. The *vis aestimativa* or *vis existimationis* is the intuitive faculty which performs sensual judgment.[3] The internal senses are also explained in the *Shifā: De anima* (44–45). Both the *phantasia* and *memoria* are seen as a kind of "storehouse" for what is apprehended; *phantasia* stores the forms apprehended by sense perception, the sensible form, while *memoria* stores the *intentiones* connected with the *species*, the capacity for discernment of intellect, apprehended by the *vis aestimativa*, as what might be the verbal expression of discursive reason for Plotinus, in the formation of language.

The *intentiones* would correspond to the signified in language, as the phonetic form of the word as signifier is received in sense perception as the sensible form, and is then retained as a mnemic residue in *phantasia* as the *intentio*, into which it has been transformed by the *vis aestimativa* of the actual intellect or *intelligentia agens*. Once the word in language has become the intelligible form in the *memoria* as the *intentio*, once the signifier has been connected to the signified, then intellect is able to reinsert it into the

corporeal particulars of language in the mechanics of discursive reason, as it is able to see it as illuminated by active intellect as signified, separated from the corporeal. In the *Liber Naturalis*, "learning is nothing but the attainment of a perfect disposition for uniting oneself with the active intellect until this becomes a cognition that is simple," in the unification of the signifier and signified, sensible and intelligible form, "and from which emanate ordered forms by virtue of the thought activity of the soul" (6.5.6). As the unified cognitions are stored in *memoria* as *intentiones*, they will pass as a sensible form in *phantasia* unless the illumination of active intellect is turned toward them through the mechanisms of actualized intellect, through *intellectus in habitu*.

In the *Liber Naturalis*, "That which receives is not the same as that which preserves. The storehouse of that which is apprehended by sense is the faculty of imagination," *phantasia*, "while the storehouse for that which apprehends intentions," *thesaurus apprehendentis intentionem*, "is memory" (6.4.1). *Phantasia* and *memoria* are not active participants in intellection; the memory traces are present in them only when they are not participating in intellection, when the *anima rationalis* is not aware of them. Thus the image "is preserved in its preserving faculty whenever the soul averts its attention from it," and "these preserving faculties do not apprehend," rather, "they are a storehouse," and "if the apprehending or judging faculty (*vis aestimativa*) of either the intellect or the soul turns towards it, then they encounter that which is already in possession…" When the *species* or *intentio* is not playing a role in the processes of actual intellect, it can be found in the *phantasia* or *memoria*, in the inert substratum of potential intellect. "A storehouse is assigned to those *forms* that at certain times are not contemplated by the estimative faculty," the *species* in *phantasia*, and "a storehouse is also assigned to those *intentions* that, at certain times, are not considered by the estimative faculty," the *intentiones* in *memoria*.

When a perception is forgotten it is preserved in the *phantasia* or *memoria*, but is inaccessible to conscious thought. The forgetting of a perception is a result of the inability of the *anima rationalis* to be able to receive the illumination of the active intellect, to be able to function according to higher intellectual faculties. The memory of a sensory perception is different from the memory of an intelligible. The intelligible, in that it is indivisible, cannot be present in a corporeal organ, or known through a physical faculty, as it cannot subsist in a divisible substratum, as explained in the *Shifā: De anima* (209). Intelligibles can thus not be retained by an internal sense such as the

phantasia or *memoria*, and not be present in material intellect. The intelligible is only present in active intellect, as an incorporeal; it is accessible to material intellect, and it can participate in material intellect, but material intellect cannot participate in it. Thus for Avicenna the intelligible is more of a Platonic archetype, existing separately from human intellect, than the Aristotelian intelligible which subsists in human intellect, to be illuminated by active intellect. The intelligible emanates to the *anima rationalis* and participates in it according to the Plotinian model. The intelligible is able to participate in material intellect by acquired intellect, which allows the *anima rationalis* to overcome the defects and limitations to which it is subject in its connection to corporeality. The intelligible is eternally and consistently accessible to material intellect, but material intellect is not always capable of receiving it, as it is subject to temporal and spatial limitations.

In the *Liber Naturalis* of Avicenna, active intellect and material intellect are mediated by an intellect which is both active and potential, *intellectus in habitu*, which is a state of preparedness for intellection in the participation of active intellect. It is a precondition for knowledge of both sensibles and intelligibles in material intellect, in the connection between the *anima rationalis* and the corporeal. Once the *anima rationalis* is separated from the corporeal, it no longer requires the preparatory sensory potencies assimilated in the *sensus communis*, and is capable of union with the active intellect, insofar as it can receive the participation of active intellect. "But when the soul is once freed from body and from the accidents of body, it will be capable of union with the active intellect, and in this intellect it shall find intelligible beauty and eternal delight" (6.5.6).

In *Enneads* II.9.16, if the actual intellect in the *anima rationalis* is able to perceive intelligible beauty in active intellect, then the *anima rationalis* is able to perceive manifestations of that beauty in the sensible realm, in sense perception, in the reflection of intelligibles. Intelligible beauty is perceived in sensible objects "by recognizing in the objects depicted to the eyes the presentation of what lies in the idea." In seeing intelligible beauty in the beauty of a body, for example, "the sight of Beauty excellently reproduced upon a face hurries the mind to that other Sphere," of the archetypal intelligible in active intellect, as described in the *Symposium* of Plato.

It is possible in Plotinus that intelligible beauty, that which is the source of corporeal beauty, can be represented in the sensible world, or, at least, that forms in the sensible world can suggest intelligible beauty, or the possibility of such beauty. For Plotinus it is the contemplation of sensible forms in per-

ception, and the consciousness of perception as distinct from the sensible forms, and the distinction between the sensible form and the intelligible form, as in actual intellect, which leads to the contemplation of the intelligible in sense perception. While the perception of intelligible beauty is only possible for the *anima rationalis* which has been disciplined for it in *intellectus in habitu*, intelligible beauty is present always in every intellect as a potentiality. Intelligible beauty may be perceived in a sensible object in the understanding in actual intellect that the beauty of a form has nothing to do with the form itself, but with how the form corresponds to the idea of beauty, the intelligible beauty, in the intellect.

This is illustrated by Plotinus in *Enneads* V.8.1 by comparing two blocks of stone, one of which is carved into a statue by a craftsman, so that in which "the form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters into the stone…" The beauty of the stone preexists the stone as intelligible beauty, as the intelligible form preexists the sensible form, and the sensible beauty in the stone is just a "derivative and a minor" of that prior beauty, the intelligible beauty, as material forms are shadows and reflections of intelligible forms. The material form of the stone, because it is tied to the corporeal, is limited as to how much it can participate in the intelligible beauty.

[1] Franz Brentano, *The Psychology of Aristotle: In Particular His Doctrine of the Active Intellect* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 6–8.
[2] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[3] Franz Brentano, *The Psychology of Aristotle: In Particular His Doctrine of the Active Intellect*, pp. 7–8.