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Neoplatonism in the *Risala (De intellectu)* of Alfarabi

The Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus played an important role in the development of the Aristotelian concepts of intellect and perception in the Arabic commentators on Aristotle. Plotinus was not known to Arab scholars by name, but books Four to Six of the *Enneads* from the third century, as compiled by Porphyry, were paraphrased in the text called the *Theology of Aristotle*, which was translated between 833 and 842 by the circle of al-Kindi in Baghdad. The translation combined Aristotle, Plotinus, and Christian and Islamic doctrines, and had a significant effect on early Islamic philosophy. The al-Kindi circle also translated the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus in the ninth century. An Arabic work derived from the *Elements of Theology*, called *Kitab al-khayr al-mahd*, was believed to have been written in an early school of Neoplatonism in the eighth or ninth century in the Near East. It was translated into Latin as the *Liber de Causis* or *Liber Aristotelis de Expositione Bonitatis Purae*, by Gerard of Cremona in 1180.

Three Arabic philosophers in particular, called Commentators on Aristotle, incorporated Neoplatonism into their philosophies. Abu Nasr Alfarabi is considered to be the first Islamic philosopher to incorporate Neoplatonism, in the early tenth century in Baghdad. He is called the “Father of Islamic Neoplatonism.” Avicenna or Ibn Sina is considered to be the most important philosopher to combine Neoplatonism and Islamic philosophies, at the beginning of the eleventh century in Persia. Averroes or Ibn Rushd is considered to be the last important Arabic philosopher to incorporate Neoplatonism, in the twelfth century in Seville. The formation of thoughts and images in perception, brought about in material intellect by agent intellect, as described by Alfarabi in the *Risala* or *De intellectu*, Avicenna in the

Liber Naturalis and *Shifa: De anima*, and Averroes in the *Long Commentary on the De anima*, correspond to passages in the *Enneads* of Plotinus.

In the *Risala fi'l-'aql* (25–27), also known as *De intellectu*, or *Letter Concerning the Intellect*, Alfarabi wrote that the light of the sun, or transparency (from Aristotle, *De anima* 2.7.418b9–10), makes the eye, or potential vision, transparent or illuminated itself. When both the eye and the medium of the sensible world are transparent, that is, when they are illuminated and can see the intelligible, then vision is possible. Colors become actually visible, and potential vision becomes actual vision. In the same way, active intellect makes potential intellect transparent, and *nous* make discursive reason transparent. The transparency of light and color illuminates the intellect in the process of perception, making intelligibles transparent to reason. Alfarabi compared what he called the “agent intellect” to the sun, and the potential intellect to the eye in darkness; it is the agent intellect which illuminates potential intellect and allows it to be active intellect.¹

Alfarabi distinguishes between a potential intelligible and an actual intelligible, and it is the agent intellect which is necessary as an entelechy, like the light of the sun, to make the potential intelligible understandable to the potential or material intellect, as a transparent medium, or mediating device. Darkness is potential transparency, and transparency is defined as illumination by a luminous source, that is, the sun. It is the agent intellect which thinks the archetypes and intelligibles, mathematics and geometry, abstractions of material forms. The divisible and impermanent form in matter, the form in vision, becomes the eternal and indivisible form in the agent intellect, as the particular becomes the universal.

In Alfarabi’s interpretation there are in fact four intellects, or four senses in intellect: in potentiality, in actuality, acquired, and agent. The potential intellect can be seen as the material intellect, and the agent intellect can be seen as the active intellect. Intellect in actuality is intellect which knows actual intelligibles, and acquired intellect is intellect which knows that it knows actual intelligibles, or self-conscious reason. Intellect in potentiality contains an essence which is prepared to “abstract the quiddities” of existing things, as he describes in the *Risala* (Hyman, p. 215), and to abstract form from matter. In abstracting the essence of material things, intellect makes “a form for itself,” that is, it understands the material thing as a form, and the

material thing ceases to exist as matter and comes to exist as form to intellect. The form of the material thing is the intelligible; intellect in its acquired state understands that it understands the thing not in its matter but in its form, which is not the product of perception but rather the product of intellection. The material thing itself does not define its own existence to intellect as an intelligible, rather it is intellect which defines it as an intelligible, so the material thing does not exist other than as being understood as an intelligible by intellect.

Alfarabi uses the analogy of the impression in the piece of wax to describe the difference between the intelligible and the material. The essence of matter is that element of matter in which “form comes to be,” the potential for matter to be understood by intellect as form, in the same way that the essence of potential intellect is its capacity to understand the form. When an impression is stamped on a piece of wax, the impression takes possession of the matter, and the matter becomes the form in its totality. Even the part of the wax which does not take the impression is defined in relation to the impression. The totality is especially complete if the impression on the wax transforms the wax in three dimensions, in the form of a cube or sphere for example. In that case, there can be no distinction between the quiddity or essence of the wax in its material existence and the quiddity of the form of the wax. In the same way, the essence of intellect in potentiality cannot be distinguished from the form of the intelligible in intellect. In both cases, the form takes possession of the material in all dimensions, sinks through it completely, and achieves a complete identity.

In the *Risala*, Alfarabi defines thinking itself as the process of intelligibles becoming forms for intellect, in intellect in actuality, and as a result intellect itself becoming the forms of the intelligibles, in acquired intellect. In the *Enneads* (IV.3.30), of Plotinus, “an image accompanies every intellectual act.”² The image as mnemonic residue, the impression abstracted from the material, is a “picture of thought” in Plotinus’ words. The mechanism by which the intelligible is incorporated into thinking or intellection, defined as the image-making power, must be, according to Plotinus, language, as in the *Enneads* “the reception into the image-making power would be of the verbal expression which accompanies the act of intelligence.” The word belongs to discursive thought, revealing what lies hidden within, beneath the conceptual processes in intellect in potentiality or intellect in actuality, which can be apprehended by thought itself, in acquired intellect. Ac-

According to Plotinus, “the intellectual act is without parts and has not, so to speak, come out into the open, but remains unobserved within...” within the mechanisms of potential and acquired intellect in language. The intellectual act, actual intellect or Intellectual Principle of Plotinus, is without parts just as the material object is without parts once it has been understood as an impression in abstraction and processed in the imagination.

Following that, for Plotinus, “the verbal expression unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power, and so shows the intellectual act as if in a mirror, and this is how there is apprehension and persistence and memory of it.” In the *Enneads* of Plotinus, while perception grasps the “impressions printed upon the Animate by sensation” (I.1.7), through the mnemonic residue, “nothing will prevent a perception from being a mental image for that which is going to remember it, and the memory and the retention of the object from belonging to the image-making power” (IV.3.29), or the imagination, in the process of thinking or intellection. In the representation in the mnemonic residue, “what was seen is present in this when the perception is no longer there. If then the image of what is absent is already present in this, it is already remembering, even if the presence is only for a short time.” In discursive reason the presence of the image is ephemeral, while it is permanent in the intellectual, or active intellect. It is through memory that an image accompanies every intellectual act.

The function of language, or the extent to which language can function, is as the mirror reflection of discursive reason, in the facilitation of memory. The mechanism of perception mediates between the sensible world of objects in nature and the inaccessible intellectual, or *nous*, in a dialectical process between the subject and the world. There must then be according to Plotinus an “affection which lies between the sensible and the intelligible,” which is seen as “a proportional mean somehow linking the two extremes to each other” (IV.6.1). In the perception of an object, “we look there where it is and direct our gaze where the visible object is situated in a straight line from us...” In other words, the material object which is being perceived is already apprehended by the perceiving subject in relation to the perceiving mechanism, in the mechanism of intellect involving the mnemonic residue and representational forms in language.

The formation of the image is the process by which sensible forms

are recognized as manifestations of ideas of forms in perception, and are thus able to participate in the universal through perception, in the same way that forms in the Reason Principle of Plotinus are transformed in the Intellectual Principle. In the Intellectual Principle, forms are self-generating and self-supporting, and it is in the image of picture-thinking, through perception, that forms in matter are possible. Forms in matter depend on the development of Reason Principle to form; all mental images are pre-generated by the reasoning process, through perception. In the *Enneads*, “The faculty of perception in the Soul cannot act by the immediate grasping of sensible objects, but only by the discerning of impressions printed upon the Animate by sensation: these perceptions are already Intelligibles, while the outer sensation is a mere phantom of the other (of that in the Soul) which is nearer to Authentic-Existence as being an impassive reading of Ideal-Forms” (I.1.7). The discerning of impressions printed upon the soul by sensation is the function of reason, not perception, while perception is also a function of reason. Since the sensual impressions in perception are copies and derivatives of intelligible forms, perception itself is a copy and derivative of Reason Principle, which is closer to the intellectual, and thus absolute.

In the *Risala* of Alfarabi, intelligibles as forms, as abstracted from matter, are actualized intelligibles, as opposed to intelligibles in potentiality, *in re* in matter, corresponding to the states of potential and actual intellect. Actualized intelligibles achieve a separate existence from potential intelligibles, as not subject to place and time, or the corporeal. Actualized intelligibles are intelligibles without categories, as they are not subject to discursive reason in potential intellect, and the categories attached to potential intelligibles are understood differently in relation to actualized intelligibles. The distinction between the potential intelligible and the actual intelligible can be found in the function of words in language.

The ability of intellect to grasp the intelligible is the product of the cooperation of the material intellect and the agent intellect, the corporeal and incorporeal in the *anima rationalis*. The sensible phonetic form of the word is received in sense perception as the sensible form but it is only retained as an ephemeral mnemonic residue in *phantasia* or imagination as an intelligible form, into which it has been transformed by the agent intellect, combining the potential intellect and the actual intellect. Once the word in language has become the intelligible form

in the *imaginatio*, then the material or actual intellect is able to reinsert it into the present particular of language use, as it is able to see it as illuminated by agent intellect. The dialectic of the sensible form and the intelligible constitutes thinking or intellection, constructs meaning, and makes communication possible.

In the *Risala*, the actualized intelligible becomes an object of thought in discursive reason, in actualized intellect; it becomes a concrete form of the abstract. The actualized intelligible would be as mathematics in the system of Proclus, in which mathematical thought is dianoetic, combining dialectical and discursive processes. Mathematics in dianoetic thought corresponds to the type of thinking which exists between sense perception and intelligibles, as in the *Republic* of Plato the thought of mathematicians is like “reason but not intelligence, meaning by reason something midway between opinion and intelligence” (511),³ and for Proclus it “traverses and unfolds the measureless content of *nous* by making articulate its concentrated intellectual insight, and then gathers together again the things it has distinguished and refers them back to *nous*” as described in the *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements* (4).⁴

The actualized intelligible is the articulation of the intellectual insight, which becomes the subject of mathematics, which can be counted and included in a totality, as Alfarabi says in the *Risala*, “when [the intelligibles] become intelligibles in actuality, they become, then, one of the things existing in the world, and they are counted, insofar as they are intelligibles, among the totality of existing things” (Hyman, p. 216). As opposed to perceptions of sensible objects, which “fix their attention on external things and concern themselves with objects whose causes they do not possess” (*Commentary* 18), according to Proclus, mathematical thinking begins with numbers, which are copies of eternal ideas in the material world, actualized intelligibles, and then proceeds by dialectical processes towards the “ideas that it has within; it is awakened to activity by lower realities, but its destination is the higher being of forms.” The actualized intelligibles lead discursive reason back to the intelligibles themselves, which are their source, as the sensible form or mathematical symbol leads discursive reason back to its source, the intelligible or mathematical concept. The motion of understanding in mathematics is not a physical motion given by the senses, according to Proclus, but a motion which “unfolds and traverses the immaterial cosmos of ideas, now

moving from first principles to conclusions...referring its results back to the principles that are prior in knowledge,” the intelligible of the intelligible form, the source of the sensible form or the word.

In the *Risala*, when the actualized intelligible becomes the object of the thought of the actualized intellect, the actualized intelligible and the actualized intellect are identical, as “that which is thought is then nothing but that which is in actuality an intellect” (Hyman, p. 216). When intellect has separated the intelligible from the object, the intelligible becomes something other than the object, as identical to intellect. In the hierarchy of intellects, acquired intellect functions as a template for actualized intellect, which is matter for acquired intellect, while actualized intellect functions as a template for the perception of matter. While in active intellect form is separated from matter, in actualized intellect form descends into matter, which is why active intellect is compared to light, which bridges the immaterial and material and makes all things materially visible, and actualized intellect is compared to illumination, the activity of the active intellect. The active or agent intellect “is a separated form which never existed in matter nor ever will exist in it” (p. 218), following Aristotle in the *De anima*, and which makes matter possible, as it actualizes intellect.

In the *Risala*, the “relation of the active intellect to the intellect which is in potentiality is like the relation of the sun to the eye which is sight in potentiality as long as it is in darkness” (Hyman, p. 218), not illuminated by the intelligibles of the agent intellect. Illumination is the equivalent of transparency, following Aristotle, who defined light as a transparent medium, and transparency is the equivalent of the rarefaction of light. The process of the rarefaction of light in matter is equivalent to the illumination of matter by form. Sight becomes actuality in the presence of light in the same way that potential intellect becomes actual intellect in the presence of agent intellect. Sight becomes actuality “with the coming into being of the forms of visible things in the sight,” just as intellect becomes actuality with the coming into being of the forms as objects of intellect. Light becomes transparent in actuality because it is prepared by the light of the sun itself. Through the transparency which it provides, agent intellect becomes the principle or template for actualized intelligibles.

For Alfarabi, intellect ascends from the material to the agent intellect as it ascends from the particular to the eternal, from the multiplicity of divisions to the unity and simplicity of that which is indivisible.

In the ascent to agent intellect, we ascend “to the things which are more perfect in existence,” and we ascend “from that which is best known to us to that which is unknown” (Hyman, p. 219). The knowledge of things which are most accessible to intellect is the lowest form of knowledge; in order to develop, intellect must come to grasp the knowledge which is least accessible, must challenge its own limitations. The more difficult something is to comprehend, the higher form of intellect it requires. The indivisible forms of agent intellect project a likeness of themselves onto matter, but they are only received in matter as divided and corrupted, following Aristotle.

Though the forms of agent intellect are received as divided and corrupted, matter is nevertheless perfected in its reception of the archetypal forms; the sensible form is perfected by the intelligible form, though it can only be an inferior copy. The closer the sensible form can come to the intelligible form, the more it is perfected, as it is more incorporeal, and is illuminated more clearly in the *oculus mentis*. For Alfarabi, the ultimate perfection of intellect, the ultimate incorporeality in the corporeal, is “the ultimate happiness and the afterlife,” in which state the becoming of a substance, and substance in intellect, is achieved through a completely external force. For Alfarabi, acquired intellect requires no corporeal subsistence, and intellection is perfected when it is independent of sense perception and its own material mechanisms, that is, when it receives subsistence only from outside itself, when it knows what it knows only as itself and is in no way in itself.

¹ Alfarabi, *The Letter Concerning the Intellect*, trans. Arthur Hyman, in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, ed., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 218–219.

² Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

³ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1955).

⁴ Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, trans. Glenn R. Morrow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).