Avicenna: The Metaphysics of the Rational Soul

Dimitri Gutas
Yale University

The subject that animates—literally—Avicenna’s philosophical system and lends to it unity and coherence is his theory of the rational soul, i.e., the part of the soul which is distinctively human, the intellect by which we think. The background of this development certainly lies in Aristotle’s *De anima* III.4–5 and the long series of commentaries in the Greek tradition which it generated, as well as in the enhancement of the ontological role played by the intellect, *nous*, in the philosophy of Plotinus and especially in the Neoplatonism of the Athenian school. This tradition was continued, in Arabic this time, in the work of al-Fārābī (d. 950), in whom noetics plays also an integrating role, and it was perfected in Avicenna, who considered himself a successor to al-Fārābī, at least certainly in this respect. The study of the different aspects of the rational soul in Avicenna unites most branches of his philosophy and in addition incorporates into the same rational whole such traditionally religious subjects as prophecy, revelation, miracles, theurgy, and divine providence. It therefore constitutes more than a mere theory of the soul but is a veritable metaphysics of the rational soul, and it clearly appears as the primary purpose and goal of all philosophical praxis.

The rational soul, according to Avicenna, is a substance subsisting by itself which is imprinted neither in a human body nor in anything else corporeal; it is completely separable and abstracted from matter. This he establishes empirically by the self-awareness that the rational soul has of its existence, together with its independence and substantiality in the famous flying man argument. The rational soul comes into

---

existence together with the human body, not before, and it maintains a certain association with it as long as a person is alive. This association Avicenna defines in strictly Aristotelian terms by calling the rational soul “the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs,” and explains the “rational” part by adding, “insofar as it is up to it to perform acts by rational choice and deliberative discovery, and insofar as it perceives universals.” The rational soul thus clearly has two functions, one theoretical, perceiving the universals, and another practical, making rational choices and deliberations that lead to actions. This dual function of the rational soul constitutes the point of contact for humans between the transcendental world and the world of nature and thus represents all human experience of the universe: the theoretical part perceives the supralunar world of metaphysical reality — the intelligibles, as will be stated below — and the practical part manages the individual’s relationship with the sublunar world of natural coming to be and passing away. Elsewhere Avicenna elaborates on the function of the rational soul by saying that its association with the body is to be understood as the relation of the wielder of an instrument to the instrument, not as that of a thing to its receptacle; the rational soul, in other words, is not in the body but is in a position where, through its perception of the universals and the rational choices that flow therefrom, it manages and coordinates the body.

The substance which is the rational soul is immortal: when the body with which it was associated dies, the rational soul survives either in happiness or in misery, depending upon whether, while in association with the body, it had actualized, or perfected itself. The actualization of the rational soul is described, in accordance with its dual function, as having had the correct knowledge and having performed the correct actions. An analysis of what and how the rational soul knows leads to Avicenna’s metaphysics, ontology, and cosmology, as well as to his epistemology, while the question of its actions leads to his understanding of ethics and related practical sciences, as well as to medicine.

Avicenna understands the concept of correct knowledge along Aristotelian lines, in that he considers happiness, the Aristotelian eudaimonia, to consist of the eternal and unobstructed contemplation of the intelligibles, as follows. In the emanationist scheme of Avicenna’s cosmology, there proceeds from the godhead, or the necessary being (wājib al-wujūd), one intellect, from which there proceed in succession the remaining intellects of the celestial spheres with their souls. The last in this procession is the sphere of the realm of the earth and its intellect, known as the active intellect (al-‘aql al-fa’āl), with which the human rational soul can be in contact. Since all these intellects are immaterial and fully actual without a trace of potentiality in them, their activity can be nothing else but incessant intellection. Their objects of thought are the intelligibles,

3 In his final opuscule On the Rational Soul, translated in Gutas, Avicenna, 74.
which are universal concepts expressing themselves: the order and contents of the universe, its emanation from the necessary being, the principles of one and the many, necessity and contingency, motion and rest, etc., and the mathematical; in other words, the intelligibles as a whole comprise the contents of the sciences of theoretical philosophy: physics, mathematics, and metaphysics.

It is significant to note that these intelligibles, though thought atemporally and all together by the celestial intellects, nevertheless have an essential order in which they are thought by them: this is the order of the terms of the propositions making up the conclusions of the syllogisms which express the individual intelligibles. Thus the essential order of the intelligibles is syllogistic, i.e., according to the consecutive steps of the arguments which, starting from the very first premise, proceed successively to prove the rest of the statements describing reality. And since these intelligibles collectively represent the structure of the universe as discussed in theoretical philosophy, the essential structure of the universe is also syllogistic.

Human happiness consists, then, of the rational soul contemplating, i.e., perceiving, these intelligibles, in imitation of the immortal intellects of the celestial spheres. An analysis of the relation which the human intellect bears to these intelligibles and of the ways in which it can acquire them reveals Avicenna’s epistemology.

The human rational soul, or the intellect, has four different relations to the intelligibles. When it is first associated with a human being, as in the case of an infant, its relation to the intelligibles is one of pure potentiality: it has the capacity to acquire them but it has not done so yet. When it has this relation to the intelligibles it is called material intellect (‘aql bayūlānī), in the sense that it is potential like pure matter, not because it has any mixture with matter. When the intellect has later acquired the primary intelligibles, which are axiomatic and self-evident universal concepts, its relation to the secondary intelligibles (the intelligibles described above) is one of possible acquisition, one in which it has the disposition to acquire them; it is then called dispositional intellect (‘aql bi-l-malaka). When the relation of the intellect to the intelligibles is that it has at some point acquired them and is therefore able to call them to presence whenever it wishes but is not at the moment thinking them, it is called actual intellect (‘aql bi-l-fił). And when its relation to them is that it is actually thinking them it is called acquired intellect (‘aql mustafād).

The central question in the discussion of the relation of the human intellect to the intelligibles is naturally the precise way in which it acquires them, i.e., how the intellect proceeds from being a material and dispositional intellect to an actual or acquired

---

intellect. Avicenna answered this question by adhering closely to the Aristotelian logical tradition. Conclusions of syllogisms, i.e., the statements that express the intelligibles, are explained and understood when the middle term that is common to the two premises of the syllogism is found, and Avicenna built his epistemological theory on the discovery of the middle term; but since human happiness depends on knowledge of the intelligibles, as already mentioned, he erected his soteriology, or the purpose of the philosophical praxis, also on the same concept.

The modalities of discovering the middle term occupied Avicenna throughout his career and he constantly refined the concept and elaborated on its implications. To begin with, the intelligibles exist actually, i.e., are the objects of actual and continuous intellection, only in the celestial intellects, as already mentioned, insofar as their intellection constitutes the eternal activity of these intellects. This means that all the intelligibles which may serve as middle terms, depending on the syllogism to be constructed, also exist in the celestial intellects and, more specifically for the purposes of human knowledge, in the intellect of the sphere of the earthly realm known as the active intellect. These middle-term intelligibles cannot uninterruptedly exist anywhere else: Avicenna will not accept Platonic ideas, and they obviously cannot exist in the human intellect while it is not thinking them; in other words, once acquired, they cannot be stored in the mind because being stored in the mind is in their case identical with their being thought by the mind. But since we obviously do not think them all the time, they must exist somewhere else, and the only place is in the active intellect. Consequently, discovering the middle term for the human intellect means acquiring it from the active intellect. And this is precisely what Avicenna meant by the “contact” (ittiṣāl) of the human with the active intellect. This process of contact Avicenna described in two ways, depending on whether he was talking from the point of view of the active intellect or the human intellect. In the former case, the process is what he called the “divine effluence” (al-fayd al-ilāhī), the emanation of the intelligibles upon the human intellect. From the point of view of the human intellect, however, Avicenna described the process of discovering the middle term as guessing it correctly, or intuition (ḥāds) in this sense. Inspired by Aristotle’s discussion in the Posterior Analytics (I,34 89b10–11) of intuition as the ability spontaneously “to hit correctly upon the middle term” (eustochia in Aristotle’s Greek, ḥusnu ḥadsin in the Arabic translation), Avicenna made it the cornerstone of his epistemology.

Since then all the middle terms come from the active intellect, the question is how humans can gain access to them, or, how intuition in this sense, i.e., guessing them correctly, precisely works. Avicenna initially maintained that all learning, i.e., all

---

6 As Avicenna explains, these last two descriptions of the relation of the intellect to the intelligibles are essentially of the same state (i.e., one of having acquired the intelligibles) except that the former is potential (i.e., the actual intellect is not actually thinking the intelligibles) and the latter actual (i.e., the acquired intellect is actually thinking the intelligibles).
acquisition of the middle terms, is accomplished either through instruction or by intuition; but since he realized that instruction ultimately was also dependent on intuition (the theoretical very first teacher necessarily had to learn by intuition only), he later dropped mentioning instruction and introduced instead reflection. Reflection and thinking, based on abstraction and logical analysis, prepare the intellect for intuition, i.e., to hit upon the middle term or receive it from the active intellect. As he describes the process in a hunting metaphor in the *Discussions*, reflection casts a net in the probable area where the middle term might be in order to snare it. What Avicenna’s numerous statements in this regard make absolutely clear is that the “divine effluence” is never automatic and never initiated by the active intellect; as a matter of fact, the whole concept of the emanation of the intelligibles is never developed in Avicenna beyond this mere description, while the reasoning process culminating in the discovery of the middle term is analyzed thoroughly and in depth in a number of works. From this point of view, the active intellect appears to serve no other purpose than to be the depository of the middle-term intelligibles; otherwise it is completely inert in the process of human intellection.

The ability of people to hit upon the middle term, however, varies, depending on how fast and how frequently they can intuit it. Some people are completely helpless, others need a lot of instruction, or preparatory logical analyses before they are successful, while still others need but little reflection, being able to intuit the middle terms in a short time. At the other extreme there is the rare and unique individual with a “powerful soul”, as Avicenna says, who can intuit all the middle terms in record time without any need for reflection at all. This person is the prophet. In his case, the intelligibles contained in the active intellect are imprinted in his intellect almost at once; Avicenna is careful to point out, however, that this process also is not an “uncritical reception of the intelligibles merely on authority” but follows the strict syllogistic order of the intelligibles as they exist in the active intellect, “an order which includes the middle terms.” In this fashion, the procedure whereby the prophet gains his knowledge is shown to be no different from that in other humans except that the prophet has a fully

---


8 Avicenna is explicit about this issue, something which has not been appreciated by modern scholarship in which the human intellect is portrayed as the passive recipient of the bounty of the active intellect. Avicenna actually says, “The active principle [i.e., the active intellect] lets flow upon the [rational] soul form after form as the soul itself demands” (yakîmu l-mabda’u l-fa’âlu yuṣﬃda’ ala l-nafsi sūratan ba’da sūratin bi-ḥasabi talabi l-nafsi); Avicenna’s *De anima* 245, last line, ed. Rahman; emphasis added).

developed power of hitting upon the middle terms; because of that, his dispositional intellect (\textit{\textit{\textit{aql bi-l-malaka}}}), at which level intuition in this sense operates, is most powerful, and is called by Avicenna the sacred intellect (\textit{\textit{\textit{aql qudsi}}}). The prophet's intellection of the intelligibles thus vouchsafes him the contents of revelation, which turn out to be identical with the contents of philosophy. It is therefore to be noted that Avicenna's use of the term “sacred” (\textit{\textit{\textit{qudsi}}}) for the intellect at this level does not at all imply a divine or otherworldly provenance for the intellect but merely points to the fact that its contents are those which are presented by the prophet as revelation.

This is the intellective aspect of prophecy. Avicenna, however, recognizes two more aspects of prophecy, one relating to the imaginative and the other to the motive faculty of the prophet, both of which are also developed in him beyond the average level of common man. The intelligibles relating to revelation that are acquired by the prophet's intellect syllogistically, and in an order which includes the middle terms, from the celestial spheres are then transmitted to his imaginative faculty; this latter in turn reproduces them in terms of perceptible and audible messages which are recited to the people and constitute the text of the revelation. This is necessarily so because syllogistic discourse, the form in which the prophet's theoretical intellect received the intelligibles, is unintelligible to the masses. This mechanism whereby the imaginative faculty, through the intellect, is ultimately receptive to influences from the supernal world of the celestial spheres is also the one through which veridical dreams and other “paranormal” experiences, such as the prognostication of the future, are had by individuals. The prophet, finally, has also fully developed motive powers, and his soul can accordingly set into motion and influence not only parts of his own body — this is something that all souls do— but also other bodies outside the person whose soul it is. This is a kind of telekinesis (influence without physical contact) which can be observed in other areas as well, like the influence of the sphere of the moon upon the ebb and flow of the tides on earth, the effects of the evil eye, and, in case of evil men, magic. In the prophet, this ability is used for salutary purposes, namely, to produce miracles which prove the prophet’s veracity. It is thus clear that Avicenna’s concern in all this is not to point to the uniqueness of the prophet, which would make him philosophically and scientifically inexplicable, but to discover and elaborate, within the context of the scientific theories of the soul in Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy, the basic operations of the human soul which account for all observable psychic phenomena — like veridical dreams, the evil eye, etc. — and which can also accommodate, in extreme cases, prophecy as well.

To sum up the intellective process, then, the dispositional intellect, armed with the primary intelligibles and after reasoning processes involving abstraction and thinking, is able to hit upon the middle term in any given syllogism, find the cause for the conclusion which represents an intelligible concept, and as a result attain the state of actual or acquired intellect. In this way, by means of logic, the human intellect is able to think the intelligibles also thought by the celestial spheres and thus reproduce in itself the structure of reality reflected in them.
However, this reproduction of the intelligibles in the human intellect is not perfect. There are many reasons for this. In the first instance, as humans are bound by temporality, so also is the sequence of their discovery and perception of the intelligibles, as opposed to the atemporal perception of the intelligibles enjoyed by the celestial spheres. More important than this, though, is the fact that the human intellect is affiliated with the body, which proves to be a hindrance to the intellect’s thinking of the intelligibles and distracts it in numerous ways from it. At this point Avicenna introduces medical, ethical, and political considerations in his further analysis of the rational soul.

It was mentioned above that one of the two functions of the rational soul was to make rational choices that lead to correct actions which, as a consequence, help bring about its actualization or perfection. These rational choices, however, have to be acceptable, so to speak, to the other powers governing the body, the appetitive and the irascible, in order for the correct action to be performed by the person. Or, in other words, the rational soul has to subjugate the appetitive (ἐπιθυμητική, šahwānī) and irascible (θυμωειδής, ghabḥābī) souls. This can happen when a person has what is described in popular terms as good habits and excellent qualities of character. But in scientific, or medical terms, habits and qualities of character are a function of the physical constitution of the body; that is, in the Galenic humoral medicine practiced by Avicenna, they depend upon and follow the temperament of the body, or its particular mixture of the four humors, blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. The preponderance of one humor over the others causes the particular dominant characteristics of individuals, such that the phlegmatic is he whose temperament is dominated by phlegm, the melancholic he whose temperament is dominated by black bile, etc. This imbalance in the humoral constitution of individuals is what causes imbalance in character, i.e., bad character, while the excellent character is the result of a balanced temperament or equanimity.

Now it is a known fact that temperaments are subject to change, in which case it follows that qualities of character also are subject to change thereby. The clue to changing the bad character of a person for the better, therefore, is to change his temperament. This is accomplished in a number of ways, both “chemically” and behaviorally, as we would say today. Medication and diet are the obvious means to effect a change in somebody’s physical constitution; thus a melancholic person, for example, would consume warm liquids to counterbalance the prevailing characteristics of his predominant humor, black bile, which is cold and dry. Change of behavior, on the other hand, can be regulated by following the strictures enjoined in books on ethics and by performing the duties and exercises specified in the religious law laid down by the prophet. Virtuous conduct, prayer, fasting, pilgrimages, and the like, are all intended to balance the temperament and give a person an excellent character and thereby make the bodily faculties of the soul, the appetitive and the irascible, subservient to the rational soul. With the bodily faculties thus subjugated, the rational soul can then concentrate on its main task on its way to happiness, intellection, that is, the discovery of the middle terms or intuition. This, incidentally, explains why Avicenna says in his autobiography that when he had difficulties finding the middle term in a syllogism he would go to the
mosque and pray and then go home and study with the help of a little wine. In ancient and medieval pharmacology — and we should not forget that Avicenna was a physician — wine was used as medication in order to equalize and moderate the various humors of the body. The closer a temperament is to a balanced state, therefore, the more is a person predisposed to develop excellent traits both in his conduct and his knowledge.

Avicenna argues in favor of this position by considering the specific difference between the rational soul and the celestial spheres. They are both substances whose essence is to think the intelligibles; where they differ is in the nature of the bodies with which they are affiliated. The human intellect is affiliated with a body which is constituted from a mixture of the four sublunar elements which, in combination, produce the four humors and their opposite qualities (hot, cold, moist, and dry). The celestial spheres, on the other hand, whose intellection of the intelligibles is continuous and perfect, are not so constituted, and they are accordingly completely lacking in these opposites. It is thus clear that it is the involvement with these opposites, and the resulting imbalance in the constitution of human bodies, that hinders the rational soul from the intuition of middle terms or, stated differently, from receiving the divine effluence from the active intellect. So it is for this reason that the closer a temperament is to a balanced state the more predisposed is a person to receive this effluence. And yet, human beings, no matter how balanced their temperaments may be, are not completely free from flaws that arise because of their involvement with the opposites. As long as the rational soul is associated with the human body, no one can be completely ready to intellect perfectly all the intelligibles (or to receive the divine effluence), but can come asymptotically close to it by expending all his efforts, through study and virtuous behavior, to acquire a balanced temperament that lacks these opposites which hinder reception of the divine effluence. When this happens, there comes about in him a certain similarity with the celestial spheres. At this stage, if he is not actually thinking the intelligibles (acquired intellect), he is ready to call them to presence whenever he wishes, the relation of his intellect to them being that of the actual intellect. The rational soul becomes, as Avicenna mentions a number of times, “like a polished mirror upon which are reflected the forms of things as they are in themselves [i.e., the intelligibles] without any distortion.”

This constitutes practicing the theoretical philosophical sciences.

Perfect and continuous intellection of the intelligibles is accomplished by the rational soul only when its association with the body is severed through death and only after it had acquired the correct knowledge and performed the correct actions while alive. In this posthumous state, the rational soul will intellect the intelligibles precisely like the intellects of the celestial spheres and will become similar to them. This is its final state of bliss.

In this system, the agent of intellection (the human intellect), the process of intellection (discovery of the middle term), the method of intellection (logic), and the

---

10 On the Rational Soul, in Gutas, Avicenna, 74–75.
objects of intellection (the intelligibles) are brought together in an interdependent and mutually explanatory relationship, and various branches of the Aristotelian philosophical tradition are harmonized and interrelated: the theory of the soul provides the framework within which epistemology, through logic, reproduces cosmology (or ontology), which in turn posits the theory of the soul. Practical philosophy in the form of ethics and religious law is also incorporated into the system, as is medicine, which lends a biological basis to the whole analysis of the rational soul.

This is a compelling theoretical construct reflecting an integrated vision of the universe and man’s position in it, and it is rendered all the more powerful on account of its thorough rationalism, the cornerstone of Avicenna’s philosophy.