Introduction: The Ontology of the Soul in Medieval Arabic Thought

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The nine articles that comprise the present volume explore a range of theories of philosophical and theological anthropology in medieval Arabic sources, concentrating in particular on discussions surrounding the ontology of the human soul. They began as papers that were presented at a colloquium entitled “The Ontology of the Soul in Medieval Arabic Thought”, which was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in September 2010. By investigating a broad and inclusive spectrum of views on this rather narrowly-defined, though hugely-important, topic, the colloquium aimed to provide a cross-section of philosophical and theological opinions from the classical and early post-classical periods of Arabic thought (4th/10th–7th/13th century). I am delighted, thanks only to the quality and coverage of the contributions that follow, that the intended objectives that drove this project have been far exceeded.

The foremost problem encountered in discussions of the ontology of the human soul is the basic question, as the theologians often put it, “What is man?”, to which a broad range of answers were tabled. The philosophers generally advocated dualist theories, while the classical kalām tradition opted for strictly monist, physicalist models.

The latter view is examined closely in my study of classical Ashʿarī anthropology, in which I show that the Ashʿarīs conceived of man purely as a body composed of atoms with various accidents inhering in them. All the vital and cognitive functions of human beings, including those features that constitute the individual person’s identity, were explained in terms of “attributes” engendered by a special class of accidents that are specific to animate beings, chief among which is the attribute of life. Aside from these corporeal attributes, there was no theoretical need to postulate the existence of an additional component in man. The spirit was affirmed only as a concession to the explicit eschatological teachings of scripture, and even then it was viewed in different ways, each with its own theoretical difficulties, as a perfectly material thing located within the human body.

The same physicalist anthropology is defended by Baṣrān Muʿtazilism, the other major school of classical kalām. In his article on Rūkn al-Dīn al-Malāḥīmī (d. 536/1141), the early sixth/twelfth-century member of the school of Abū I-Ḥusayn al-Bašrī, Wilferd
Madelung examines the criticism advanced by this theologian against the philosophical theory of the rational soul as a self-subsisting, non-physical entity connected to the human body. In the chapter on the soul in his refutation of philosophy entitled Tuhfat al-mutakallimin, al-Malaḥimi takes a reductionist stance by arguing that Avicenna’s description of the soul does not require that such an entity be postulated. He supports this view by both providing arguments against body-soul dualism and confuting several arguments adduced by Avicenna in defence of this doctrine.

Not all exponents of physicalist anthropologies, however, were theologians. Some were atheists, who denied the existence of anything beyond the physical world, as the fascinating text studied and translated by Peter Adamson and Peter Pormann illustrates. In his Epistle on Soul and Intellect, the philosopher Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) disproves the views of an unnamed contemporary who dismisses categorically all notions of non-physical “spiritual” entities as delusional. Using both the philosophical and medical traditions to support his position, the opponent instead explains the vital functions of the soul solely by the physical principle of heat and its cognitive functions by the principle of physical light. Though it appears that this curious theory was largely thought up by its unnamed exponent in fourth/tenth-century Baghdad and then died with him, it is nonetheless typical in some respects of the atheistic physicalism that flourished in some scientific and philosophical circles of the period. As such, it puts the challenges faced by the dualist anthropology current within the mainstream Neoplatonic-cum-Aristotelian philosophical tradition, and represented by Miskawayh, into fuller perspective.

The most eminent and influential figure in this tradition is, of course, Avicenna (d. 428/1037). Dimitri Gutas shows the extent to which his theory of the rational soul both unifies most branches of his philosophical system and allows him to incorporate into the same system typically-theological subjects, such as prophecy, revelation, miracles, the afterlife and theodicy. The former feature of Avicenna’s theory of the soul is exemplified in his soteriological principle that human happiness lies in the rational soul’s contemplation of the intelligibles, which “as a whole comprise the contents of the sciences of theoretical philosophy: physics, mathematics and metaphysics”. The soul acquires these intelligibles from the celestial intellects, particularly the active intellect, in which they are thought atemporally and, as Gutas explains, “have an essential order in which they are thought”, the same as the “order of the terms of the propositions making up the conclusions of the syllogisms which express the individual intelligibles”. As such, reality, according to Avicenna, has a syllogistic structure, and the perfection of man is realised when his intellect reflects, “like a polished mirror”, this structure in imitation of the perfect and eternal celestial intellects.

A significantly different soteriology is found in al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), whose theory of the soul has long been recognised as owing much to the influence of Avicenna. This, however, had remained a largely unsubstantiated notion, but has finally been corroborated in detail by Taneli Kukkonen, who illustrates that al-Ghazālī’s cognitive psychology is indeed thoroughly Avicennan. He shows how, following Avicenna and the broader Peripatetic tradition, al-Ghazālī embraces the view that the cognitive capacities
of the soul — the sensory faculties, the inner senses and intellection — mirror distinct aspects of reality. Yet, as Kukkonen explains, al-Ghazālī differs from his philosophical sources on one crucial point. To him, human happiness consists of the contemplation, not of the intelligible order of reality, but of God’s attributes: a stance that betrays the influence of both Sufism and traditional theology.

The Avicennan influence on another major Ashʿarī is studied in Jules Janssens’s article on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) who, in marked contrast to the elusive Ghazālī, has no qualms to engage openly with his philosophical sources. Concentrating on sections dealing with the generalities of the soul and its non-physical nature in two of al-Rāzī’s works, al-Mabāḥīth al-mashriqiyya and al-Maṭālib al-ʿāliya, Janssens meticulously identifies their exact Avicennan sources, revealing in the process both the nuances in emphasis and doctrine exhibited in al-Rāzī’s treatment of the subject and the criticisms he levels against his predecessor’s views. This careful, but critical reading of Avicenna very much sets the agenda for discussions of the soul in later Arabic thought.

Two other articles investigate further episodes in the rich Avicennan tradition in which the philosopher’s teachings were criticised and developed. Focusing on the discussion of the soul in Kitāb al-Tahṣīl, the philosophical summa of Avicenna’s student Bahmanyār ibn al-Marzubān (d. 458/1066), Meryem Sebti shows that although he preserves the ontological underpinnings and overall structure of his teacher’s theory of the soul, he nonetheless introduces certain significant modifications. Sebti argues that Bahmanyār “confers greater importance to the topic of sense knowledge, and also that he reduces the strict separation made by Avicenna between sense and intellectual knowledge”, a stance that hinges on his view that the foremost perception of the soul is self-consciousness, that is, the reflexive act through which the soul knows itself as the centre of all cognitive activity, both intellectual and sensory.

In a later episode, the philosopher Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284), the subject of Lukas Muehlethaler’s article, highlights what he considers to be problems in Avicenna’s proofs for the eternity and non-physicality of the rational soul. He argues that these proofs can be sustained only if another premise is conceded, namely that the rational soul is pre-eternal, rather than generated in time as Avicenna had maintained. Muehlethaler contextualises Ibn Kammūna within earlier critical approaches to Avicenna, explores the reasons that led him to abandon the consensus of his predecessors and contemporaries by taking this unconventional view, and outlines the proofs that he adduces for it.

The immortality of the human soul is also the focus of Richard C. Taylor’s article on Averroes (d. 595/1198), who criticises Avicennan philosophy for making various concessions to theology. Taylor begins by examining Averroes’s commentaries on the De Anima of Aristotle and shows that they contain no claim that the soul survives the death of the body, but contrarily offer no grounds on which this doctrine may be held. The problem, of course, is that in some of his religious writings Averroes appears to affirm the afterlife. After considering several possibilities to reconcile these different positions, and by appealing to the principles of interpretation that Averroes puts forth in his Fāṣl al-maṣqāl, Taylor argues that, in accordance with the conclusions of the demonstrative
discussions found in his commentaries on the *De Anima*, Averroes must have denied the afterlife, though he never articulates this denial explicitly in his other writings.

The articles published in the present volume offer illuminating probings into the rich tradition of philosophical and theological anthropology in medieval Arabic thought, and into the broader cosmological frameworks within which man and the soul were theorised. They amply testify not only to the diverse influences that informed the various theories and debates, but also to the philosophical and religious considerations and implications — ontological, noetic, epistemological, eschatological and scriptural — that animated them.

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