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PHILOSOPHY AND PROPHECY

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Introduction

Islam is a revealed religion and for Muslims it began when Muḥammad received his first revelation some time around 610 C.E. in a cave outside of Mecca. Islamic tradition tells us that Muḥammad obtained his revelations either directly from God or through the mediation of the archangel Gabriel (Madigan 2004). Subsequently, Islamic thinkers developed different theories of how the process of revelation unfolds and what happened in the interplay between God, Gabriel, and Muḥammad. Such theories would also cover earlier messengers (singl. *rasūl*) such as Moses or Abraham, who are believed to have received revelations similar to the Qurʾān. Finally, there were also the smaller prophets to be considered, whom God had sent to warn different people. These had not produced revelations in the form of a text, yet still had the ability to foretell future events—i.e. divination—or to accurately predict the punishment of people who would neglect to heed God’s warnings. All these phenomena were understood as expressions of prophecy. Authors within the movement of *falsafa* developed theories that would explain prophecy (*nubuwwa*) and the process of receiving revelation (*wahy*) as part of the normal course in this world. Although a rare event in human history, prophecy was not understood as something extraordinary or even superhuman. It was considered a regular part of the way God created this world and therefore something we would call a natural phenomenon. Islamic philosophical explanations of prophecy should be considered “scientific” in the sense that they give rational explanations for various phenomena called prophecy, explanations that were seamlessly embedded in the physical, metaphysical, and psychological theories held by these thinkers.

Psychology here means “theories of the soul” or “explanation of processes within the soul” and has little to do with the modern sense of that word. Prophecy and receiving revelation were regarded as processes that happen within the human soul. They were, of course, not the kind of process that every human could perform. Yet for *falāsifa*—and subsequently also for many theologians who adopted the philosophical explanation—prophecy was a faculty (*quwwa*) of the prophet and thus embedded in his soul. More precisely, it was a combination of several faculties.

Aristotle's Psychology and the Corrupted Arabic Version of the *Parva Naturalia*

Psychological theories in *falsafa* were expressed in works that take their subject matter and much of their inspiration from Aristotle's (384–322 B.C.E.) book *On the Soul* (also referred to as *De anima*). It is interesting that Aristotle in his *On the Soul* does not mention prophecy or divination. In fact, Aristotle himself did not believe that people could foretell the future or receive messages from the gods. In some of his smaller writings on the subject of dreams and related psychological events, writings that became known as *Parva Naturalia*, Aristotle denies that dreams have a supernatural origin and that a dreamer can foresee events in the future. Aristotle did not deny that people experience veridical dreams, something we today refer to as *dejà-vu* experiences, where people dream of events that later take place in reality. He, however, explained this as pure coincidence or as cases where the dream is the cause of the event it predicts and prompts a human to act unconsciously towards its fulfillment. Dreams do not come from a god but are natural events in the human faculty of imagination (Aristotle 1957: 374–85). In a short work *On Dreams* that is part of the *Parva Naturalia*, Aristotle clarifies how dreams can reflect certain physiological processes that happen while a human sleeps. Other dreams are the residue of earlier perceptions in our sense organs and they are too subtle to be noticed except when we are asleep. They are like the spots we see after we look into a bright light (Aristotle 1957: 348–74). Aristotle did not believe in divination or clairvoyance and regarded people who pretended to have knowledge about the future as charlatans.

When Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* was translated into Arabic during the ninth century, his denial of any divine or supernatural involvement in human dreams was turned into its opposite. It appears that a philosophical scholar of the ninth century, who may have been the unknown translator of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia*, had both the Arabic translation of this text as well as the Arabic version of Book IV from Plotinus's *Enneads* in front of him and, for reasons that we can only speculate about, conflated passages from these two texts to one which circulated as the Arabic version of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* (Hansberger 2011: 73–80). In conscious opposition to Aristotle, the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus (d. 270 C.E.) had argued that dreams may indeed foretell the future. In their "spiritual faculties," humans may receive pure intelligibles from the celestial intellect and this process may convey information about events that will happen in the future. The Arabic text that purports to be an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* contains elements from Plotinus's and from Aristotle's texts on dreams. It teaches, for instance, that dreams are the residue of earlier perceptions, as Aristotle did, and that veridical dreams are caused by God through the mediation of a celestial intellect, as Plotinus did (Hansberger 2008).

This Arabic text that pretends to be by Aristotle draws on post-Aristotelian metaphysical and psychological theories and identifies, for instance, a celestial intellect as source of veridical dreams whereas Aristotle neither commits himself to the existence of such celestial intellects nor assigns to them any role in psychological or cosmological processes. Such intellects are, however, a hallmark of an understanding of Aristotle that formed in late antiquity and that aimed at reconciling his teachings with those of Plato. The tampering with the text of Aristotle during the earliest

Arabic reception of the *Parva Naturalia* is a rare and drastic illustration of the fact that when Arabic philosophers received Aristotle, they did so through the lens of the tradition of late antique commentators on Aristotle, some of them Neoplatonists. Alexander of Aphrodisias, for instance, was an important commentator on the works of Aristotle who worked at the turn of the third century C.E. While he was not a Neoplatonist, others such as Plotinus, Porphyry (d. ca. 304), and Proclus (d. 485) were and they were powerfully influential on the understanding of the texts of Aristotle (d’Ancona 2009). They aimed at reconciling Aristotle’s text in *On the Soul*, for instance, with the Platonic teaching that our knowledge consists of ideas and intellectual forms received from the higher realm of nous or “the intellect,” something also found in the *Paraphrase of the De Anima* by the Aristotelian commentator Themistius (d. 388), who followed teachings of the Neoplatonists in philosophical psychology.

Aristotle had written that cognition and thinking are processes where both active and passive components are present. The passive, says Aristotle, is mind, which “becomes all things,” meaning it has the potential to “become” every idea (Aristotle 1957: 171). Aristotle also writes that the passive part is similar to prime matter (*hylé*), which can also become all things. Commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias interpreted this to mean that the process of understanding is a combination of form and matter, where the individual human’s “material intellect” comes to attain universals through the active element, the “active intellect.” This active intellect was understood to be just one, shared by all humans, a separate, immaterial object that exists in the heavens. It is the repository of all forms and concepts, that is, all the “universals” humans would need in their actual thinking. Like light, the active intellect shines upon the individual objects of knowledge that we perceive with our senses and allows our individual material intellect to abstract universal qualities from those perceived objects. The late antique Greek commentators regarded the acquisition of theoretical knowledge as a process where the individual human material intellect receives the universal concepts thanks to the involvement of the celestial active intellect.

Al-Kindī on Prophecy

When in the ninth century, Aristotle’s *On the Soul* together with the commentaries of Alexander and Themistius as well as portions of the *Enneads* of Plotinus and some works of Proclus were translated into Arabic, these texts shaped the way Arabic philosophers thought about the human soul and the intellects. A number of works by Plotinus and Proclus circulated in Arabic under the name of Aristotle, most importantly the pseudo-Aristotelian *Theology*, and together with the mangled translation of the *Parva Naturalia* they gave an inaccurate impression of what Aristotle taught on matters of the soul, dreams, and divinity. Already a few decades before Aristotle’s *On the Soul* became available, al-Kindī (d. after 870) had written about prophecy and sided with the Neoplatonists. In his work *On Sleep and Dream Visions*, which seems to follow the modified text of Aristotle’s *Parva Naturalia* with its elements from Plotinus, al-Kindī teaches that some humans have the capacity to perceive future events in their dreams (al-Kindī 2012: 124–133). This theory is based on Aristotle’s position that in sleep the soul is still active and awake, while many other activities

that usually distract the soul, most importantly sense perception, are not taking place. The soul thus can come to itself and find within itself a kind of knowledge that also exists while awake but is usually only perceived while asleep. Following the text of the Arabic *Parva Naturalia*, al-Kindī teaches that the soul may tell of future events while we are asleep (Adamson 2007: 135–43). If the human soul “is purified, cleaned, and polished ... the forms of knowledge about all things appear in it,” and in the time of slumber, when it abandons the use of the senses, it finds this knowledge within itself (al-Kindī 2012: 115). These dreams may be of varying accuracy depending on, it seems, how receptive one’s organs are. In a less than optimal receptive state the human may see future events not as they will be but merely as a symbol (*ramz*). A dream of flying could, for instance, symbolize a journey (al-Kindī 2012: 129). Already in al-Kindī there is an aspect that will later become very important. The souls of those people who receive divination and prophecy must, in addition to having organs able to receive the dreams well, be pure and well prepared. The soul must have “attained a full degree of purity” (al-Kindī 2012: 116).

Al-Kindī does not explain why the human soul is able to foretell the future, nor does he in any way tackle the much more complex phenomenon of a revelation that produces texts such as the Qur’ān. This next step is undertaken by al-Fārābī (d. 950–951). In contrast to al-Kindī, al-Fārābī knew about Aristotle’s teachings in *On the Soul* and he had some important late antique commentaries at hand. His theories of prophecy are rooted in the epistemological tradition of the distinction between the “active intellect” (*al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*) that in some fashion causes all thought and the “passive intellect” (*al-‘aql al-munfa‘il*) of the individual human that receives universal concepts from the celestial active intellect.

Al-Fārābī on Prophecy

Al-Fārābī identifies the active intellect with the tenth intellect that governs the sub-lunar sphere, i.e. everything on earth. The *falāsifa* understood the numerous Qur’ānic allusions to the angels in the heavens as references to the various intellects of the heavenly spheres. The “angels,” i.e. the intellects of the heavenly spheres, act on behalf of God as intermediaries in His creation. In al-Fārābī the active intellect has a number of important functions, one of them is giving human souls the power that allows them to abstract intelligibles, i.e. universal concepts, from the things that they perceive with their senses. The active intellect is, thus, that which makes thinking possible. The active intellect is also the efficient cause of everything that happens on earth and it is the final cause for all the beings there. This means that all creatures in the sub-lunar sphere, particularly humans, strive to resemble the active intellect as perfectly as possible. This Aristotelian concept that the development and functioning of every organism is driven by entelechy, i.e. by a striving toward the full realization of its potential, had a firm hold on the philosophical tradition of the *falāsifa*. For humans, entelechy means that they endeavor to reach perfection in that faculty that distinguishes them from all other animals, i.e. thinking. For al-Fārābī this happens as humans acquire more and more universal ideas (i.e. “intelligibles,” *ma‘qūlāt*) by abstracting them from sense perceptions (Taylor 2006).

Given that the active intellect contains all universal concepts and ideas and can be understood as pure thought, humans strive to acquire as much of those universal ideas as possible. They try to develop their rational capacity to the extent that their individual material intellects will resemble the active intellect as much as possible. Doing so, the individual human intellect advances through different stages until it reaches a level that al-Fārābī calls the “acquired intellect” (*al-‘aql al-mustafād*). This is the highest stage of human perfections where the human intellect becomes almost identical to the content of the active intellect. It is reached when the human masters “all or most” intelligible thought (al-Fārābī 1967: 217). Al-Fārābī calls this stage the “conjunction with the active intellect,” when the active intellect enters into the human. Only very few humans can reach this stage and these are the best of the philosophers. After describing this stage, al-Fārābī continues:

When this occurs in both parts of his rational faculty, namely the theoretical and the practical rational faculties, and also in his imaginative faculty, then it is this man who is granted divine revelation (*yūḥī ilayhi*). God Almighty grants him revelation through the mediation of the active intellect, so that the emanation from God Exalted to the active intellect is passed on to his passive intellect through the mediation of the acquired intellect, and then to his imaginative faculty.

(al-Fārābī 1985: 244–5)

The perfect human, who has reached the stage of conjunction with the active intellect, receives divine revelation in the form of universal ideas from the active intellect via the mediation of his acquired intellect. That revelation (*wahy*), however, is immediately passed on to the imaginative faculty (*quwwa mutakhayyila*) where it produces the kind of prophecy that we know from the text of the Qur’ān. The imaginative faculty is part of the human soul and located in the heart. It is immediately below the rational faculty, yet it also contains sense perceptions and impressions even at times when the objects of that perception are no longer present. The imaginative faculty is particularly active while the body is asleep and while it is not occupied with the actual perception of objects. According to al-Fārābī this imaginative faculty is responsible for our dreams. Mostly, the imaginative faculty receives revelation while the body is asleep. In rare cases, however, that may also happen in the waking state. When the imaginative faculty is powerful and developed to perfection, and when it is not overpowered by sense perception or attending to the rational faculty, “then its state in waking life ... is like its state during sleep when it is relieved of these two activities.” It then represents the emanations received from the active intellect “as visible objects of sense perception that imitate (*yuhākī*) that which comes from the active intellect” (al-Fārābī 1985: 222–3). The imaginative faculty of the prophet thus transforms the rational and universal knowledge received from the active intellect into representations that express the purely rational universals by means of examples, parables, or metaphors. The imaginative faculty cannot help but recast what it receives in figurative images (Davidson 1992: 58–63).

While this is the highest level of prophecy, lower levels may affect people who have a less than perfect imaginative faculty and who may not have reached the level

of the acquired intellect. These people receive revelation only in sleep and in ways that the imaginative faculty represents distant or future events as if they were happening here and now. Still, even the lower level includes the figurative representation of theoretical truths. Al-Fārābī does not call this “revelation” (*waḥy*) but merely “prophecy” (*nubuwwa*), and the higher of these two levels is incomparably more superior to the lower (al-Fārābī 1961: 75, 167).

It is clear that while the lower level of prophecy largely follows along the lines of what al-Kindī had already established on this subject, the higher level accounts for precisely the kind of prophecy that the earliest generation of Muslims had witnessed in the actions of the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad and earlier messengers, such as Moses and Abraham, had reached a level of prophecy that far outstretched the mere foretelling and warning of future events or producing insights about past events. When verse 2:97 of the Qurʾān says that the archangel Gabriel “brings down” (*nazzala*) revelation to Muḥammad’s heart, the *falāsifa* understood it as a reference to the most important of the heavenly “angels,” i.e. the active intellect, which is the immediate cause of the revelation in the prophets’ souls. In addition, it was well established that Muḥammad not only received his revelations while asleep but also in his waking hours. Finally, al-Fārābī’s theory of prophecy explains characteristics of any revealed religion, according to a Muslim understanding of revealed religion. The Qurʾān and the earlier revelations are not cast as theoretical epistles that employ rational arguments, but they are full of figurative language, parables, metaphors, and visual descriptions of past or future events. Al-Fārābī’s theory explains how a divine message, which according to the philosophers can only come in the form of universals, is expressed in the form of a book that appeals more to the common folk than to the philosopher. It is clear that in al-Fārābī we find a distinctly Muslim development of earlier philosophical theories about prophecy that aims at answering questions and solving philosophical problems which were posed by the historical circumstances of Muḥammad’s prophecy and the revelation he brought.

For al-Fārābī, reaching the highest level of prophecy requires the development of an acquired intellect and the conjunction with the active intellect. Muḥammad, Moses, and Abraham were, according to al-Fārābī, not only messengers of God but also philosophers who had mastered all the theoretical sciences. They were also founders of political communities and each of them had brought a religious law that formed the legal foundation of the state they created. The prophets’ most important achievement is, according to al-Fārābī, their ability to cast theoretical knowledge in a figurative and metaphorical language that most people can understand. The only person fully qualified to govern a virtuous state is such a philosopher-prophet (al-Fārābī 1985: 244–7). Only he is able to hold authority over the ordinary people and the elite alike and to pass just legislation.

This latter aspect of al-Fārābī’s teaching on prophecy forms his political philosophy (Marmura 1979), and it can be understood as an Islamization of Plato’s concept of a philosopher-king from his *Republic*. The perfect ruler appears in al-Fārābī as a law-giving prophet-philosopher-king whose prime interest is to increase the knowledge and the virtue of his subjects. Revealed religion plays an important part in that project. While the intellectual elite of the perfect state needs no instruction in theoretical or practical matters, all others rely on revealed religion to achieve some kind

of training in metaphysics and ethics: “Since it is difficult for the public (*al-jumhūr*) to understand these things in themselves and the way they exist, instructing them about these things is sought by other ways—and those are the ways of representation [or imitation]” (al-Fārābī 2011: 45). Revealed religion is the most effective of those imitations. It is an imitation of philosophy, which also means there is no conflict between philosophy and religion. Still, while the true prophet is also a philosopher, only very few philosophers have the talent and ability to be astute statesmen and to direct the multitude by means of persuasive figurative speech and exemplary deeds.

In all this, al-Fārābī never mentions the name of Muḥammad, the religion of Islam, or the Islamic caliphate created by Muḥammad’s companions. While al-Fārābī’s theory of prophecy aims to explain all revealed religion, his identification of the prophet with the ideal ruler of the best state also legitimizes Muḥammad’s activities as statesman and lawgiver. Al-Fārābī’s political theory may be meant to describe the situation among the first generation of Muslims, but there is also a utopian aspect in it that applies to the Islamic state of his time. Al-Fārābī describes the political situation in the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate of the tenth century as a state where the theoretical opinions of the people are defective, yet where their actions are virtuous. Once the prophet-philosopher—that is Muḥammad—has revealed the law and established the virtuous state, he has been succeeded by rulers who are neither prophets nor philosophers, but who follow his example (*sunna*), adhere to the law, and by the use of analogical reasoning adopt it to new circumstances. The law that goes back to the prophet-philosopher still guarantees virtuous actions even if people hold utterly corrupt opinions. It would be better, of course, if the actions were virtuous and the theoretical opinions correct (Crone 2003). Al-Fārābī did not think that reaching such a state—maybe through a religiously led revolution—was impossible at his time. Later *falāsifa* like Ibn Bājjā (d. 1138) would be more pessimistic and would regard the society they lived in as corrupt both in actions and in opinions (Ibn Bājjā 1963).

Ibn Sīnā on Prophecy

Islamic philosophers after al-Fārābī accepted his distinction between prophecy (*nubuwwa*) and revelation (*wahy*) with the first roughly described as clairvoyance and divination, and the second as a higher capacity where the prophet receives a universal truth from a celestial intellect and represents it in figurative language. At the turn of the eleventh century, Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) significantly expands al-Fārābī’s explanation of prophecy and creates what will become the most elaborate theory on this subject that influenced many Muslim theologians and Sufis. Like al-Fārābī, he aims at explaining the kind of prophecy that brought about Islam as well as all other types of divination like clairvoyance or the experience of what we would call *déjà-vu*. Ibn Sīnā also addresses the question of the miracles performed by prophets and holy men, a subject that al-Fārābī, for instance, had not touched upon.

Like al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā sees two different processes at work that may affect different people or also affect a single person all at once. Al-Fārābī’s capacity of “prophecy” falls in Ibn Sīnā into the category of “imaginative revelation” (Rahman 1958: 36). Like al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā recognizes knowledge that results when an emanation from one of

the celestial beings—for Ibn Sīnā it needs to be a celestial soul—acts upon the human faculty of imagination. Such an emanation produces prophecy in the sense of knowledge of future or distant events. The celestial souls contain such knowledge and can reveal it to the imaginative faculty (*quwwa mutakhayyila*) of the human. Part of both al-Fārābī's and Ibn Sīnā's theories of prophecy is that the celestial beings—which are understood to be the Qur'ānic angels—have a foreknowledge of events that happen in the sub-lunar world. The disposition for these events passes from the cosmological higher being to the lower until it finally reaches the earth. In the process of imaginative revelation, prophets get a glimpse of the foreknowledge contained within the celestial souls. The imaginative faculty of the human enters in “conjunction with the world of sovereignty” (*ittiṣāl bi-l-malakūt*), meaning the souls of the celestial spheres. Such imaginative revelation is for Ibn Sīnā a natural phenomenon that differs in strength depending on the power of the human's faculty of imagination. In most people it manifests itself as an occasional vision of a future event in a dream that might later cause the experience of *déjà-vu*. Only extraordinary strong souls are able to cut out the distracting influence of their external senses and can experience imaginative revelation in their waking state when it may produce clairvoyance or divination. Prophets lack the impeding forces that in the case of ordinary people suppress visions while they are awake and have sense experience. Therefore, prophets receive in their waking hours visions that less gifted people at best receive in their sleep (Ibn Sīnā 1959: 173). At the top of the spectrum stands a phenomenon that Ibn Sīnā calls the “holy spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī*), where a high degree of imaginative revelation is combined with an optimal disposition for the second channel of prophecy in Ibn Sīnā: intellectual revelation.

Ibn Sīnā recognizes the possibility of attaining instantaneous theoretical knowledge without following procedures for the acquisition of this knowledge. Al-Fārābī had rejected such a possibility since for him a prophet first had to become a philosopher through assiduous learning. In Ibn Sīnā, the prophet can also receive intellectual revelation, which is the capacity to find the link that combines two independent propositions into a compelling rational argument. These propositions then become premises in a correct argument, a so-called syllogism. Intellectual insight is thus the capacity to hit on the middle term of a syllogism. Ibn Sīnā calls this capacity *ḥads*, which may be translated as “quick wit,” or “intuition.” The moment we exercise this capacity and hit on the middle term of a syllogism we have the flash of a connection with the active intellect. We more or less receive the middle term from the active intellect. Some people have a talent to find middle terms, while others are slow at this. Philosophers usually have a higher degree of *ḥads* than ordinary people. Like in the case of imaginative revelation, every human has a share in this capacity—and many have only a very small one—yet at the higher end of the spectrum it becomes part of prophecy. Ibn Sīnā argues that because there are people who have next to no ability to find such middle terms—meaning, because there are people who are very, very slow at learning—there must be people at the upper range who are “burning with insights, that is, with the reception from the active intellect.” The universal concepts in the active intellect regarding every object of knowledge are imprinted on these humans “instantaneously or almost so.” Again, reaching such a stage requires purity and training: “It is possible that there is a person amongst humans whose soul has

been rendered so powerful through extreme purity and intense contact with intellectual principles that he blazes with *ḥads*.” This person receives instantaneous scientific knowledge without having to expend any effort in learning to formulate arguments. People at this stage experience a conjunction with the active intellect; they possess a “holy spirit” or “holy intellect” (*‘aql qudsī*, Ibn Sīnā 1952: 35–7).

If such a strong power of intuition is combined with an equally strong imaginative faculty, then the effects of the “holy spirit” (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī*) emanate onto the person’s imaginative faculty. These effects are depicted in images that can be perceived by the senses. In other words, the person who combines imaginative with intellectual revelation is able to recast theoretical knowledge that he or she has received through conjunction with the active intellect as figurative images. These people are the prophets who receive revelation (*wahy*).

In addition to receiving knowledge from the heavenly realm through the two channels of intellect and imagination there is a third property (*khāṣṣa*) of prophets that distinguishes them from other people. Prophets have the ability to perform miracles by virtue of an exceptionally powerful “practical faculty of the soul” (*quwwa nafsīyya ‘amaliyya*). Since all souls have the capacity to effect physical changes in our own bodies, the extraordinary powers of the prophets’ souls have the capacity to bring about changes in natural objects outside of their own bodies. Prophets have the capacity to cause storms, let rain fall, cause earthquakes, or cause people to sink into the ground, but they are not capable of changing a piece of wood into an animal or of splitting the moon (Ibn Sīnā 1959: 199–201).

Prophecy in Ibn Sīnā thus consists of three elements: strong imaginative revelation, intellectual revelation, and a powerful practical faculty of the soul. These properties are not unique to prophets, indeed all people share in them to some degree. Through purity and training humans can increase the strength of these faculties in their souls. Revelation of the kind received by Muḥammad, however, requires the utmost degree of all three of these properties. The true prophet is for Ibn Sīnā also a philosopher. He may not have devoted as much time to learning as the philosopher has, but his power of intuition puts his theoretical insight at par with the most advanced among them. Both of them achieve the conjunction with the active intellect. Yet where the philosopher may teach his insights only to those who practice philosophy, the prophet can convey them in a figurative language and thus make them accessible to all people.

His ability to convey theoretical insights to the masses of the people makes the prophet the best of all rulers, and in his political philosophy Ibn Sīnā follows al-Fārābī closely. The prophet is the best of all lawgivers because if we compare his law with that of the laws passed by monarchic or even democratic states, we find that people have the strongest motivation to follow the prophet’s law. They follow this law because they aim at reward in the afterlife, and they avoid transgression because they fear punishment both in this world as well as in the next. Unlike al-Fārābī, who never explicitly refers to the prophet of Islam, Ibn Sīnā leaves no doubt that Muḥammad has fulfilled all requirements of what a prophet should do and what he should convey in his revelation and as a lawgiver in order to create the most benefits for God’s creation (Ibn Sīnā 2005: 365–78). In his philosophical psychology and his prophetology, Ibn Sīnā gives a distinctly Islamic expression to a theory that has its

earliest roots in the Neoplatonic understanding of Aristotle and the mangled text of the Arabic *Parva Naturalia*. For Ibn Sīnā Islam is “the true religion which was brought to us by our Prophet, our lord, and our master, Muḥammad—God’s prayer be on him and his family” (Ibn Sīnā 2005: 347–8). Whereas al-Fārābī gave a universal account of revealed religion as it is understood by Islam, Ibn Sīnā gives a specifically Islamic explanation that will have an enormous influence on almost all later Muslim thinking.

Al-Ghazālī on Prophecy

Ibn Sīnā’s prophetology was embraced even by thinkers who harshly criticized other teachings of *falsafa*, such as their metaphysics and who rejected Ibn Sīnā’s views on God as an expression of a merely impersonal creator who acts without choosing between alternatives, solely out of the necessity of His divine nature. The first Muslim theologian to adopt Ibn Sīnā’s teachings on prophecy was al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). He is best known for his critique of Ibn Sīnā’s metaphysics in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*). None of the 20 teachings that al-Ghazālī discusses—and often dismisses—in that book goes to the heart of Ibn Sīnā’s psychology. Al-Ghazālī tells us in his autobiography *Deliverance from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*) that for a long time he was undecided between the psychology of the *falāsifa* and that of his predecessors in *kalām*. At one point, however, it became clear to al-Ghazālī that the psychology of the *falāsifa*, which he identified with that of the Sufis, is the true one (al-Ghazālī 2000: 87).

Rather than adapting, al-Ghazālī appropriates Ibn Sīnā’s teachings on prophecy and he rejects some elements and transforms others to better serve the requirements of his own theological agenda. First, al-Ghazālī severely criticizes the *falāsifa*’s position that prophets only teach the masses while philosophers are not in need of divine revelation. While al-Ghazālī accepts the position that prophets convey their message in figurative terms, he also insists that this message goes far beyond what humans can acquire through other sources of knowledge. No rational argument, for instance, can tell us anything about what will happen in the afterlife. The prophets’ revelations are full of original information that humans cannot acquire through the practice of their reason. Revelation, therefore, is not just an imitation (*muḥākāt*) of philosophy as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā have taught. All humans, including the philosophers, must learn from the prophets’ revelations and study them closely. Al-Ghazālī alters the philosophical theories about prophecy in such a way that prophets now receive knowledge that goes beyond the rational faculties of the human intellect. Equally, he rejects the view that the benefits of prophecy are limited to their political activities of creating states and bringing laws. While these are important elements of the prophets’ actions, they are only a small part of the numerous benefits prophets bring to humanity.

Ibn Sīnā’s three properties of prophecy appear in many passages of al-Ghazālī’s theological works (al-Akiti 2004). Never, however, does he mention the source from where he took these ideas. When he expresses these teachings, al-Ghazālī does not use the technical terminology of the *falāsifa* but rather words and concepts that are familiar to Muslim theologians and Sufis. One such passage is a central chapter on

“The True Nature of Prophecy” in al-Ghazālī’s widely read autobiography *Deliverance from Error*. After giving a rough sketch of how humans acquire knowledge—a sketch that follows closely along the lines of Ibn Sīnā’s psychology—al-Ghazālī presents an explanation of how prophets receive imaginative revelation (in Ibn Sīnā’s sense) from the celestial souls. He avoids the terminology of Ibn Sīnā and casts his theory in a language that introduces some philosophical terms into the accepted parlance of Muslim theology and Sufism. In this passage, al-Ghazālī also stresses that prophecy reaches to insights otherwise unattainable to the human intellect:

Beyond rationality there is another stage, where another eye is opened that looks into what is unknown and what will happen in the future and other things from which rationality is far removed. ... God most high has made this understandable to man by giving him a sample of the prophets’ property, and that is sleep. For the sleeper perceives what will happen in the (otherwise) unknown future either clearly or in the guise of an example whose meaning is disclosed by dream-interpretation.

Just as rationality is one of the stages of the human in which he acquires an eye by which he sees various kinds of universals ... , so is prophecy an expression signifying a stage in which the prophet acquires an eye that has a light wherein the unknown and other phenomena, which the intellect cannot perceive, become visible.

(al-Ghazālī 2000: 84)

Shortly after this, al-Ghazālī introduces Ibn Sīnā’s intellectual revelation in a language that does not mention technical details such as the active intellect as its source. Al-Ghazālī calls this property of the prophets “divine inspiration” (*ilhām ilāhī*). It is a way to acquire theoretical knowledge without the help of a teacher and without pursuing empirical experience (*tajriba*). Inspiration (*ilhām*) is described similarly to Ibn Sīnā’s *ḥads*. Yet whereas in Ibn Sīnā *ḥads* is a rational method of acquiring theoretical knowledge that all humans can use, here in al-Ghazālī inspiration is a way to perceive theoretical knowledge that cannot be acquired by any other means, not even by the rational faculties of the soul. Inspiration (*ilhām*) is a super-rational faculty that only a few selected humans have. These are prophets, first of all, but also the “friends of God” (*awliyā*) who are considered Sufi masters.

For al-Ghazālī the inspiration of prophets—meaning their intellectual revelation through their strong *ḥads*—accounts for much of the knowledge that is current among humans. Al-Ghazālī teaches that medical knowledge, such as which medicine cures which disease, or astronomical knowledge about the size of the planets, for instance, cannot be achieved by means of the intellect or through experiments. Rather, it had once been revealed to earlier prophets from where physicians and astronomers have adopted it. For al-Ghazālī, prophecy is responsible for the human acquisition of a whole body of theoretical knowledge that the human intellect cannot arrive at.

Al-Ghazālī, however, was only the first Muslim theologian of a long line who would appropriate Ibn Sīnā’s prophetology. What attracted these theologians—and among them many Sufis—to Ibn Sīnā’s psychology was the comprehensive way with which it approaches phenomena like clairvoyance, divination, and prophecy. All these are

different degrees of strength of a single human faculty, namely the faculty of imagination (*quwwa mutakhayyila*). For Sufis, for instance, this opened up a way to explain the extraordinary insight achieved by those who have purified their souls and cleansed their hearts from the stains of bodily desires, immorality, and vice. If Ibn Sīnā teaches that purity and training can lead to a strengthening of the imaginative faculty, he also explains why an ascetic Sufi may have a deeper insight into the secrets of religion than one of the most learned among the rationalist theologians.

Ibn Sīnā's prophetology provided a congruent explanation of prophecy that satisfied the requirements of the scientific discourse of the day. It regarded prophecy not as a supernatural phenomenon but one that is rooted in the way God created the human soul. Al-Ghazālī shows how these teachings could be adopted to explain the superior insights of ascetics and "friends of God" (*awliyā*), i.e. Sufi saints. These were often said to be able to predict the future and have other kinds of clairvoyance (*kahāna*). They were also said to perform wondrous deeds (*karāmāt*) that border on miracles. According to Ibn Sīnā, the human soul's practical faculty and its readiness to receive insights increases with its purity. The practical faculty can become so strong that it might affect organisms and natural processes outside of its own body but still within its vicinity. Ibn Sīnā offered a welcome explanation of convictions held by many Sufi Muslims.

Conclusion

In the period after al-Ghazālī, many Sufi authors and many rationalist theologians were drawn to Ibn Sīnā's psychology and applied it in their works. Not always were they aware that the ideas they found in al-Ghazālī or in such prominent Sufis like Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240) had their roots in the writings of the *falāsifa*. Once they had found a way into the Muslim religious discourse, these ideas often shed their philosophical context and began a life of their own. This is particularly true in Sufism where the initial connection to Ibn Sīnā is almost immediately lost. Key doctrines such as the widespread assumption of a state of "dissolution" (*fanā*) of the individual Sufi and his or her ascent or union with the transcendent realm, Ibn 'Arabī's teachings on the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), or Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's (d. 1273) conviction that the distinguished Sufi (*walīy*) can receive revelation (*wahy*) and produce poetry that is on par with the Qur'ān (Rūmī 1925–1940, 3: 244–5, 4: 239–40), are unthinkable without the earlier philosophical concept of a conjunction with the active intellect. By proposing that prophecy is due to the extraordinary strong presence of faculties that exist in every human, the philosophical concept of prophecy brought down epistemological boundaries between the Prophet and his most pious followers. In Sufism this led to the construction of ever-closer affinities between the Sufi saint and the Prophet.

Note

This chapter is a revised version of my 2009 contribution "Muslim Philosopher's Rationalist Explanation of Muḥammad's Prophecy," in J. E. Brockopp (ed.), *Cambridge Companion of Muḥammad*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 158–79.

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