

Ibn Sīnā's Practical Philosophy

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This article is a brief review of Ibn Sīnā's practical philosophy. It begins with a discussion of the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neo-Platonic influences on Ibn Sīnā's practical philosophy, as well as the influence of Fārābī and of Islamic religious teachings. The creative synthesis invented by Ibn Sīnā requires a particular view of the relation between religion and philosophy in such a manner that religion shapes the direction of philosophical inquiry, and philosophy opens the way to a more profound and esoteric understanding of religion.

Keywords: Aristotle, Avicenna, Ibn Sīnā, Fārābī, ethics, neo-Platonism, Plato, practical wisdom, prophet, revelation, virtue.

What is Practical Philosophy?

Aristotle defines practical wisdom (φρόνησις, *phronesis*) as a kind of excellence or virtue:

The distinction between virtues also reflects this difference. For some virtues are called virtues of thought, other virtues of character; wisdom, comprehension and intelligence (*phronesis*) are called virtues of thought, generosity and temperance, virtues of character. (Aristotle 1985, 1103a 4-6)

So, if we begin with excellences or virtues, we may divide them into intellectual and moral virtues. Among the intellectual virtues will be found both theoretical and practical wisdom, that is, *sophia* and *phronesis*. In Arabic, these are called *al-ḥikmat al-naẓariyya* and *al-ḥikmat al-amaliyya*. The manner in which Ibn Sīnā uses these terms shows that he was following Aristotle's usage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²

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2. See Morewedge (1973, 213) and Rahman (1952, 84).

Since it is evident that Ibn Sīnā was making use of Aristotle's theory, some of the main points of Aristotle's views of practical wisdom may help us to understand Ibn Sīnā. Unless Ibn Sīnā explicitly or implicitly indicates disagreement with Aristotle, we should assume that he is in agreement. (Of course, one should keep in mind that implicit disagreement may be difficult to recognize.) Furthermore, in the extant works of Ibn Sīnā, practical philosophy is not a primary focus. Ibn Sīnā is much more concerned with metaphysics and logic than with ethics.³ This is also reason to assume that where there is no evidence to the contrary, he is in general agreement with his sources. If there were serious disagreement, we would expect to find evidence of it either in his extant writings or by way of references to the disagreement by others.

Practical wisdom is excellence in deliberation about goal-directed action. Deliberation about goal-directed action requires both instrumental reasoning and the proper specification of one's goal. There is controversy about whether Aristotle considered the setting of a goal to be a matter of practical wisdom or theoretical wisdom. It is through theoretical wisdom that one knows the natural ends of things. However, theoretical wisdom identifies goals only in a very general way; the specification of a particular goal will be made through the employment of practical wisdom. Through theoretical wisdom it is known that what all desire are existence and the perfection of existence (Avicenna 2005, 283), and these goals are further specified through theoretical wisdom by considering the definition of whatever it is that seeks perfection (284), and still further by study of the functioning of the faculties, their ranking, and their perfections (348ff.); nevertheless, practical wisdom is needed to specify the definite goals that are to be set in particular circumstances.⁴ In this way, there can be deliberation over the choice of a (specific) goal or over the choice of a means to achieving a goal. In those who are wise, such deliberations are guided by reason.

Goals and the means of reaching them are the concern of both the individual and the community, and so, practical wisdom will have application in the three areas into which the practical sciences were divided by Aristotle and his followers: individual ethics, management of the home and family, and politics.⁵

3. See Gutas (1988, 257-258) and McGinnis (2010, 209).

4. See the discussion of this issue with respect to Aristotelian ethics in Russell (2009, 6-11).

5. Gutas observes that in *al-Mashriqīyyūn*, Ibn Sīnā added a fourth division to the practical sciences: "the discipline of religious legislation," but this section of the book is no longer extant (1988, 260); see the discussion of the relation between the beginning and end of the *Shifā'* in Morris (1992, 167-170).

Practical wisdom requires knowledge of particulars, which generally comes with experience. Elders are expected to make wiser decisions than the young in practical affairs because of their greater experience. Practical wisdom is the virtue of mind that enables one to use one's reason to deliberate excellently. Good deliberation, according to Aristotle, is a kind of correctness of thought "that reflects what is beneficial, about the right thing, in the right way and at the right time" (Aristotle 1985, 1142b27). Although practical wisdom is an *intellectual* virtue, it also requires *moral* virtue, because vice perverts our judgment when we try to identify the best ends and to reason about the best means to achieve these ends; and because vice produces false views about the principles of action (1144a33).

Intellectual Background

Plato

Along with Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā holds that the law should be given by one who has reached the summit of practical wisdom. For Plato, this would be the philosopher-king; in Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, it is the prophet.⁶ Many commentators have puzzled over whether Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā took the idea from Plato and modified it to fit the religious beliefs of their societies, or whether they sought to justify their religious beliefs by using the ideas of Plato. Rather than wading through such debates, it would be preferable to use the principle of charity to take our philosophers at their word when they profess faith, unless we are presented with a very strong argument to the contrary. So, to recognize that there is a (modified) historical antecedent to the views of Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā in Plato's *Republic* is not to commit oneself to the view that the Muslim philosophers merely took over or adapted what they had accepted from Plato.⁷

The idea that the lawgiver resembles a god is to be found in Plato, the neo-Platonists, and the Stoics. It is difficult to imagine that Ibn Sīnā could have ended the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Shifā'* with the following remark if there had not been this precedent:

[But] whoever combines theoretical wisdom with justice is indeed the happy man. And whoever, in addition to this, wins the prophetic qualities becomes almost a human god. Worship of him, after the worship of God, exalted be He, becomes almost allowed. He is indeed the world's earthly king and God's deputy in it.⁸

6. Cf. Rahman (1958, 55-7).

7. Ibn Sīnā was not unwilling to offer general criticism of Plato's philosophy. Cf. Gutas (1988, 287).

8. See Avicenna (2005, 378) and Plato (2004, 500c, 590c-d); also in the *Theatetus*, Plato (1997,

But Ibn Sīnā does not merely repeat what he found in Plato or Aristotle, and the idea that the prophet-lawgiver is almost divine becomes more emphatic given the strictures in Islam against associating anything with God. Just a few sentences prior to this, we find an allusion to the Platonic tripartite division of the soul of *Republic IV* into appetitive, irascible (or spirited), and rational parts (Plato 2004, 443d), except that Ibn Sīnā refers to these as motivating powers (*dawā'ī*) rather than as parts of the soul, and instead of the rational he mentions the “administrative” (*tabbīriyyah*). To each of these there is a corresponding virtue, explained as an Aristotelian mean between extremes: moderation in the appetites, moderation in the irascible passions, and moderation in administrative affairs. He puts the Aristotelian cardinal virtues at the head of these: temperance (*'iffah*), wisdom (*ḥikmah*), and courage (*shajā'ah*), whose sum is justice (*al-'adālah*).

Ibn Sīnā explicitly cites the precedent of Plato, the legend of his rebuke of Aristotle in this regard, and Aristotle’s apology, with regard to the method of writing in such a way as to hide that which might not be properly understood by those who lacked sufficient wisdom.⁹ The Platonic legacy of an esoteric teaching is thus carried over into the Avicennan tradition.

Aristotle

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the most important background for Ibn Sīnā’s views on practical wisdom, because it defines the subject and provides key elements. Ibn Sīnā adopts an Aristotelian psychology of the faculties and temperaments and describes virtue and vice in terms of the operation of these faculties and the dispositions of a noble temperament. Ibn Sīnā’s major departures from Aristotle are related to his views about the nature of the rational soul (Gutas 1988, 254). For Aristotle, the soul is the form of the living body and is inseparable from it.¹⁰ Ibn Sīnā sides with Plato against Aristotle on this issue and holds that the soul is not merely the form or entelechy by virtue of which a body has life; rather, it is a separable substance. This difference with Aristotle plays an important part in Ibn Sīnā’s ethics, because he holds that all vice occurs because of dispositions that stem from the corporeal nature of

176b-d) is called the *homoiōsis theō* or ‘likeness to God’ passage. In Aristotle, there is also reference to this theme (Aristotle 1985, 1177b).

9. Rahman (1958, 88n90), citing Avicenna, *Tis' rasā'il* (Cairo: 1908), 124, 23-25, 4. Ibn Sīnā’s source for the story is Fārābī; see Gutas (1988, 229).

10. See *De Anima* 413a 3-4.

humans, and that by keeping to the mean one may ascend beyond the animal level of human existence. What distinguishes humans from animals, according to both Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā, is the faculty of the intellect. Ibn Sīnā characterizes ultimate human happiness in terms of the perfection of this faculty.

The Neo-Platonists

While the debt of Islamic philosophy to neo-Platonism that is most often cited is the theory of emanation, there are also other themes from the neo-Platonists that are decisive for the shape of Ibn Sīnā's practical philosophy. Morewedge, however, points out that we should not be too quick to consider pure metaphysics as theoretical in contrast to the practical, for in neo-Platonic (and Platonic) systems, metaphysics provides practical norms in terms of which judgments of good and evil are made.

In the metaphysical depiction offered by both Neoplatonism and Islamic mysticism, norms play a twofold role. First, every entity, including the ultimate being, has Its Goodness essentially related to its essence, or actualization. Second, the aim of philosophy, far from being a descriptive metaphysics, is personal self-realization; philosophy is for mystical union, for authentic encounter with the ultimate being in the system. (1992b, 53)

Morewedge explains that similarities in neo-Platonic and Avicennan schemes of thought relevant to practical philosophy include doctrines of emanationism and return and the identification of the One with the Beautiful and the Good. According to Morewedge,

Perhaps the most important similarity between the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Ibn Sinian notions of the ultimate being is that, whereas in Aristotle (according to Cherniss) individuals have a separate existence in the manner of being particular entities, in the three former systems the ultimate being is the sustainer of individuals. (1992b, 56)

It is because of this difference—that is, because Ibn Sīnā holds with the neo-Platonists that the ultimate being is the ontological sustenance of the individual—that one may seek union with the One. This is crucial to the ethics of mysticism. Morewedge observes,

Perhaps for such reasons the Muslims adopted and modified the logic and the physical sciences of Aristotle as their first teacher, but in ethics, political theory of prophecy and mysticism, they derived their views from Plato and Neoplatonic developments of Platonic doctrine. (1992b, 56)

This is an oversimplification. As we have already seen, Ibn Sīnā makes use of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for the division of wisdom into theoretical and practical, including the definitions of each, and at least for some of his ethical views, such as his list of the cardinal virtues; but we may grant that on the whole Islamic logic and natural science is Aristotelian while Islamic practical philosophy is more Platonic and neo-Platonic than Islamic theoretical philosophy.

If we consider, once again, the last paragraph of *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, we find an incredible fusion of elements drawn from Platonic, Aristotelian, and Islamic sources: Platonic tripartite division of the motive powers, Aristotelian virtues as means between extremes, and a theory that places the prophet at the summit of virtue.

Morewedge also emphasizes the role of the mediator in Ibn Sīnā's system, and in Islamic mysticism, generally. While the mediator is not personalized in Plotinus or Proclus as it is in Ibn Sīnā, the neo-Platonists also posit processes or acts of mediation. For Ibn Sīnā, just as Gabriel is the mediator between God and the prophet, the active intellect mediates between the sub- and superlunary worlds, and the mystic mediates between the disciple and ultimate being. In each of these cases, there is a link between the outward and the inward, or between the manifest and the hidden. In a text, also, there are clues that serve as links between outward and hidden meanings.

As McGinnis observes, the human soul, according to Ibn Sīnā, is Janus-faced; it mediates between the higher realm that it cognizes through theoretical reason and the lower realm of particulars to which practical reason is directed. In his *al-Najāt*, Ibn Sīnā writes,

The human soul, though one substance, has a relation and reference to two sides, one below it and one above it, and for each side there is a faculty through which the connection between it and that side is ordered. The practical faculty, then, is the one that the soul possesses for the connection with the side below it, that is, the body and its maintenance. The theoretical faculty is the one that the soul possesses for the connection to the side above it, to be affected by it, learn from it, and receive from it. So, it is as though our soul has two faces, one directed to the body—and this is the one that must not endure any effect of a type entailed by the body's nature—and another one directed to the lofty principles—and this is the one that must always be receptive to and affected by what is there. It is from the lower side that the moral dispositions (*akhlāq*) are produced, whereas it is from the higher side that the sciences are produced. (McGinnis 2010, 211-212; Rahman 1952, 33)

Fārābī

One can only begin to grasp the importance of Fārābī for Ibn Sīnā's practical philosophy by considering a few of the features of practical wisdom about which they agreed. Practical wisdom is deliberative excellence (*jayyid al-rawiyyah*); it requires a truly good rather than apparently good end; and it is accompanied by moral virtue.¹¹ According to Fārābī, the first principles of practical wisdom, in contrast to those of theoretical wisdom, require practice and experience. Nevertheless, Fārābī holds that while practical wisdom is a unique and distinctive intellectual virtue, it is subordinate to theoretical wisdom. As Deborah Black analyzes his position, there are two types of practical principles recognized by Fārābī:

one type is dependent upon experience and acquisition, and it pertains to the accidental characteristics of the virtues which their concrete enactment realizes; the other type is directly acquired from the Agent Intellect [i.e., the active intellect], and it is indistinguishable from the theoretical intelligibles (Black 1995, 455).

It is with reference to the goal of theoretical perfection provided through the active intellect that Fārābī distinguishes the virtuous city from other forms of government. Ibn Sīnā takes up Fārābī's vision of the virtuous city as that governed by prophetic legislation as rationally interpreted (Morris 1992, 171). On the nature of prophecy itself, however, Ibn Sīnā modified Fārābī's account considerably, for while Fārābī sought to explain prophecy in terms of the imagination, Ibn Sīnā adds to this an account of prophetic practical wisdom. In this way, prophecy is interpreted as including philosophical ideals, and the prophetic imagination may also be understood to take shape as it does due to the overflowing of the prophet's knowledge from the intellect to the imagination (Walzer 1957, 148). Furthermore, Ibn Sīnā introduces the innovative expression *'aql qudsī* (holy intellect) to describe the distinctive feature of the prophets' employment of reason (Akita 2004, 195).

To read Ibn Sīnā on practical wisdom is to become acquainted with a synthesis of these and other elements, brought together in a uniquely creative manner; but the synthesis is not only one of bringing various elements together in a coherent manner; in addition, Ibn Sīnā presents us with a view of practical wisdom that is completely integrated in his philosophical system through its relations to metaphysics, cosmology, religion, and mysticism.

11. See Black (1995, 452), citing Fārābī's *Epistle on the Intellect*.

In order to better understand Ibn Sīnā's relation to the classical heritage as it was developed by other thinkers, James Morris identifies four stances on the relation between philosophy and tradition that were not taken up by Ibn Sīnā: the school of Kindī, the Ismā'īlīs, the Baghdad Aristotelians, and the position of Bīrūnī. In contrast with the school of Kindī, Ibn Sīnā refused "to reduce the goal of philosophical inquiry to ethics or to identify ethics with the standpoint of Islamic law or nascent Sufi disciplines" (Morris 1992, 154). Contrary to the Ismā'īlīs, Ibn Sīnā would not offer a philosophical defense of prophetic knowledge and authority as lying beyond human capacities. Instead, he argued that revelation, if properly understood, would be supported by the natural exercise of intelligence, and, in particular, that revealed law could not but conform to that which reason would also confirm. Unlike the scholastic commentators on Aristotle in Abbasid Baghdad, Ibn Sīnā would not keep philosophical and religious discourse separate. Likewise, Ibn Sīnā distinguished himself from Bīrūnī by his concern with the political role of philosophical aims in the Islamic community, and by his refusal to accept the patronage of the warlord, Maḥmūd of Ghazna (361/971-421/1030).

As we will see below, Morris correctly identifies the key to Ibn Sīnā's creative adaptation of political philosophy to the Islamic society of his day as "his treatment of prophecy, particularly his brief, puzzling assertions concerning the existence of an intellectual inspiration underlying the cognitive aspects of prophetic revelation" (Morris 1992, 159). Ibn Sīnā's major contribution to Islamic theology is thus to have interpreted the prophetic legacy in such a manner that divine revelation is to be seen as neither arbitrary nor inaccessible to reason.

The Relation between Practical and Theoretical Wisdom

According to Aristotle, practical and theoretical wisdom both make one who possesses them felicitous. To be wise is to be felicitous. There are two ways of being wise, practical and theoretical, and thus we may speak of two kinds of felicity or *eudaimonia*: one that is realized with the possession of practical wisdom, and another that is realized with the possession of theoretical wisdom (Reeve 1995, 97). The two, in Aristotle's view, are not equal. Among the aims to which practical reason directs us is theoretical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom and the felicity that is its actualization are prior to practical wisdom and the felicity that is realized with it. This view has been contested by scholars, and there seems to be some inconsistency in Aristotle himself on this point (97n49), but the interpretation of Aristotle that

dominated Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā's was that theoretical wisdom is higher than practical wisdom and that the latter is for the sake of the former.

Contrary to the received view, there is a sense in which theoretical wisdom is also for the sake of practical wisdom, since theoretical reason serves the practical faculty by providing it with ethical universals. Theoretical reason or *nous* also provides knowledge of the supreme goal, *telos*, toward which action is to be directed. Practical reasoning, however, cannot direct action unless the *telos* is specified with attention to the particular circumstances in which alternative courses of action may be carried out. Because of its judgments about the particular, practical reasoning cannot be reduced to theoretical reasoning.

The practical faculty is the principle of movement of the human body, which urges it to individual actions characterized by deliberation and in accordance with purposive considerations... Finally, its own dual character is that with the help of the theoretical intelligence it forms the ordinary and commonly accepted opinions concerning actions, as, for instance, that lies and tyranny are evil and other similar premises which, in books of logic, have been clearly distinguished from the purely rational ones. (Rahman 1952, 32)

The prominence of the distinction between practical and theoretical wisdom have led some commentators to claim that Ibn Sīnā holds a subjectivist position on morality. This is a misreading of his view. Ibn Sīnā is perfectly willing to admit that the cognitive faculties alone—without the benefit of experience, social relations, education, and moral feelings—would be unable to deliver moral truths. Moral truths require a social context in order for concepts such as lying, stealing, and justice to be understood. Black comments that the position is quite Aristotelian:

ethical norms are grounded in human nature, but they are also radically dependent upon the cultural context in which they unfold and hence do not attain the status of self-evident principles, which are necessary and invariable. (Black 1995, 457)

Since practical wisdom guides actions, and actions take place in the corporeal world, it must attend to particulars and universal principles will not suffice for it. For reasoning to be applied to particular situations, it requires cooperation from imagination and estimation.

Since actions take place in a social context and are judged in accordance with conventional beliefs and norms, there will be a conventional element in the principles according to which the practical intellect makes judgments. In saying that direction comes

from conventional norms, however, Ibn Sīnā does not hold that what is conventional is arbitrary; rather, he provides a theoretical foundation for conventional norms: it is through the cooperation between the practical and theoretical intellect that norms can gain acceptance, such as that lying and injustice are base (Black 1995, 458).

Esoterica

Following Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā's philosophical writing contains exoteric and esoteric elements (Gutas 1988, 225-34). Sometimes the difference is made explicit through the use of allegories. The difference is explicit here because it is obvious that allegories have hidden meanings. Allegories have an important history in Islamic literature; and Ibn Sīnā's mark an important milestone in a tradition that from the first important allegories, such as *Kalila wa Dimna* by Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 139/756), through the *Rasā'il* of the Ismā'īlī Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' of the 4th/10th century and the Sufi teaching stories, contained moral and political messages for those who could decipher them.¹²

The difference between exoteric and esoteric gives rise to a number of possible interpretations, among which are the following:

- 1) Truth is to be found at the esoteric level alone; and where there is conflict, exoteric teaching is given some prudential justification without affirming its truth.
- 2) Truth is to be found at the exoteric level, and philosophical interpretations of religious beliefs are given for those who cannot accept religious truths except as guided by the stick of reason.
- 3) Truth is to be found at both the exoteric and esoteric levels, and a proper understanding of them allows the acceptance of both.

In what follows, I will defend (3) in contrast to (1). Since Ibn Sīnā considers the philosophical virtue of wisdom to be necessary for perfect human happiness, I do not think that it is plausible to ascribe (2) to Ibn Sīnā, and will therefore not consider this view any further.

Because of the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric, some have understood the reason for keeping esoteric doctrines secret is solely due to their heretical nature and prudence. If the philosopher were known to teach the heretical esoteric doctrines he holds, he

12. See Heath (1992, 4).

would be in danger. This is the view advocated by Leo Strauss.¹³ I think that Strauss is partly right and partly wrong. The right part is the emphasis on the exoteric/esoteric distinction. The wrong part is about why there is an esoteric part. It is true that there is an element of danger in presenting views that would be seen as heretical, but Strauss assumes that the heretical views indicate that the philosopher rejects the exoteric teaching in favor of the heretical. To the contrary, it is essential to Ibn Sīnā's view that the exoteric should be preserved and affirmed, albeit in a reinterpreted form. The esoteric does not abrogate and supplant the exoteric; rather, it refines and provides meaning for the exoteric.

The teaching of Ibn Sīnā that he may have sought to hide because of opposition to it from the Sunni *'ulamā'* of his day is nothing so preposterous as a hidden atheism, but his agreement with the political vision of Fārābī—namely, that the religious law is best understood through philosophical analysis, as supported by intellectual science, and cannot provide the direction needed for proper governance if considered solely through the tools of the narrative sciences (Morris 1992, 171ff.). Morris comments,

[Ibn Sīnā] remains silent precisely where open reference to al-Fārābī would draw attention to the inner logic and intentions of his elaborate strategy for encouraging the pursuit of philosophy in the interpretation and elaboration of the symbols and institutions of Islam. (173)

Ibn Sīnā does not secretly reject the exoteric dimensions of Islam; rather he seeks to promote an esoteric philosophical understanding of religion that is consonant with its exoteric teachings. A key passage in the *Metaphysics of the Healing* facilitates an understanding of how Ibn Sīnā accepts the exoteric teachings of religion, and begins as follows:

13. Strauss (1952) is Strauss's most famous statement on the problem; Strauss (1954) answers critics of Strauss (1952). The issue is also treated in Strauss's essay on Lessing, "Exoteric Teaching", in Strauss (1989). I'm not sure whether Strauss would object to my criticism as stated thus far, for his point in these essays was more to introduce the idea of an esoteric doctrine hidden in a text than to examine all possible reasons for doing so. His focus on the restrictions that might lead writers in non-liberal societies to hide their true views is presented in order to convince his readers that it would have been reasonable for great writers to be less than forthright. The idea, however, that Maimonides, Fārābī, or Ibn Sīnā thought of themselves as esoteric atheists seems rather farfetched. What is in question here is whether this is an appropriate occasion to apply the principle of charity, and consider the self-understanding of the philosophers to be authoritative. To Strauss's credit, he ends his *Notes on Philosophy and Revelation of 1948* by mentioning only the *possibility* of a refutation of revelation implied in Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy. "What their specific argument is, we cannot say before we have understood their whole teaching. Since I cannot claim to have achieved this, I must leave the issue open" (Meier 2006, 179).

Know that most of what the populace confesses, takes refuge in, and upholds is true. It is only those who are pseudophilosophers who reject it, due to ignorance on their part of its grounds and causes. (Avicenna 2005, 362).

One who holds that Ibn Sīnā considered the exoteric teaching false will have difficulty explaining this and similar passages. If it is held that such passages are a part of his dissimulation, one would not expect them to be tucked into relatively obscure positions such as this one, near the end of the first chapter of the tenth book of the *Metaphysics of the Healing*. Furthermore, the passage continues by showing how the exoteric and esoteric can be joined without contradiction. The position is reinforced at the end of his *Remarks and Admonitions*:

Beware that your smartness and detachment from the commoners do not make you go on denying everything (p. 902), for that is rashness and weakness. Your strong rejections of that whose clarity is not yet made evident to you is no less a mistake than your strong belief in that whose evidence does not lie in your hands. (Inati 1996, 107)

In order to explain his view, Ibn Sīnā refers his readers to his *al-Birr wa al-ithm* (Goodness and Sin), which unfortunately has been lost.¹⁴ He goes on to mention that the answer to supplications and rewards of the righteous in this world are due to matters whose principles terminate in three things: nature, will, and coincidence. All three rest on causes and causal principles that lead back to God. In short, God has predetermined by His ultimate will and the causal principles He established that prayers would be answered and vice would lead to ruin.

It would seem to follow that in Ibn Sīnā's view, the fact that we cannot find any direct causal principle linking A and B (e.g., vice and ruin), although such a link seems to be assumed in religious belief, does not mean that we should deny religious claims. This is the mistake of the pseudo-philosopher. If he cannot find the causal mechanism by which revelation, for example, is miraculously given to the prophets, he denies it and claims that the revelation is the work of the prophet's own creativity. He fails to see that there could be causes that have predestined that revelation would come to the prophets in a way that seems miraculous, or prayers would be answered in such a manner that the causal connections between the prayer and the answer must be hidden to us. The pseudo-philosopher thinks that in the absence of any causal mechanism to link A and B, A and B must be

14. See Gutas (1988, 94).

independent, because he fails to consider that there could be some hidden agency C which causes both A and B, and causes B to occur subsequent to A, such as may occur through a collision of causes.

Ibn Sīnā's own discussion continues from the mention of predestination to a rejection of astrology. Even if the principles by which the astrologers make their predictions were entirely correct—which Ibn Sīnā takes to be dubious—the predictions would not be reliable, because the collision of causal chains is so complex that the destined outcome could never be predicted on the basis of some limited number of principles and the observed positions of heavenly bodies.

So, while the ordinary exoteric understanding of issues sees immediate causal ties where there are none (e.g., between virtue and victory) the idea that virtue is victorious is not to be denied, because it may well be predestined by divine will that such a connection will hold, despite the inability of any human grasp of the laws that would govern this, other than to say that it all goes back to God. This means that according to Ibn Sīnā, the masses only affirm religious truths by supposing causal relations that do not exist; the pseudo-philosophers discover the absence of these relations and then deny religion; while the true philosopher understands that the exoteric religious claims are to be affirmed despite the absence of the supposed causal relations because of divine predestination. Why the philosopher should believe in a divine predestination that would affirm prophetic revelation, however, requires us to consider Ibn Sīnā's view of the prophet's wisdom.

Before turning to prophetic wisdom, however, let us take note of the fact that the relation between exoteric and esoteric outlined above is repeated throughout Ibn Sīnā's philosophy, and not only in his discussions of practical wisdom. The ordinary people understand the attributes of God in an anthropomorphic manner. The pseudo-philosopher understands that anthropomorphic attributes cannot be truly applied to the Necessary Existent, and hence denies them. The true philosopher understands the proper way in which to interpret the divine attributes so that they truly apply to the Necessary Existent.

The masses are to be limited to the exoteric teachings, not because they would threaten the philosopher, who would be seen as a heretic, but because their inability to understand philosophy would result in a loss of faith:

The generality of mankind cannot imagine these things as they really are except by hard toil; few indeed are they who can conceive the truth

of this Divine Unity and Sublimity. The rest are soon apt to disbelieve in this sort of Being....¹⁵

Another reason given by Ibn Sīnā for keeping philosophical truths from the masses, is that social disorders would result from disputes about theoretical issues among those lacking philosophical training and temperament.

Esoteric teaching takes place on a number of levels. First, religious teachings and texts have an exoteric and esoteric dimension. For example, the common people believe that prayer is instituted by God through His Prophet in order to win divine favor, avoid hell, and reach heaven in the afterlife. Ibn Sīnā explains that the purpose of prayer, however, is to focus the mind on that which is immaterial, so that humans may approach the contemplative state that is their proper perfection (McGinnis 2010, 215-216).

The Prophet's Wisdom

There is an important and striking difference between the exoteric theologians' understanding of revelation and that presented by Ibn Sīnā. According to the theologians, the prophet receives the revelation passively, for if he had an active part in it, it could not be said to be entirely from God. In Ibn Sīnā's view, however, it is the prophet rather than God who is described as the law-giver (*sānn*). There is a reason for this. The law-giver needs to take into consideration conventional norms and particulars in order to issue appropriate laws. In Ibn Sīnā's view, the theoretical intellect is passive, receiving universal concepts from the active intellect, while the practical intellect is active, generating the voluntary movements of the body.

This leads to an apparent contradiction between Ibn Sīnā's view and what Islam teaches about revelation: according to religion, God gives the law to His prophets through revelation; according to Ibn Sīnā, the laws given through revelation are formulated by the prophets through deliberation. The deliberation of the prophets is no different from that of other human beings except insofar as it is lightning fast and does not require the stumbling search for middle terms that is characteristic of ordinary human deliberation. The union with the active intellect is not exclusively for the prophets, for even when ordinary people reason correctly, they can be said to have united their intellects with that of the active intellect. All human intellectual perception is nothing more than the reception of an emanation from

15. Arberry (1979, 44), from *Kitāb al-Najāt*.

the active intellect, even if the reception of that emanation requires sensation, abstraction, and much mental cogitation.¹⁶

Ibn Sīnā describes prophecy in terms of three properties, although these properties are not listed as such in his works: (1) revelation as perceived through the imagination in a sensible form, such as the appearance of the angel Gabriel; (2) union with the active intellect; and (3) miracles.¹⁷

According to Avicenna, none of these properties is exclusive to prophets. Any human being can be born with, or acquire, each of the powers concerned to varying degrees. Avicenna tells us in the *Aḥwāl* that a powerful prophet must therefore have perfection in all three properties. He will share the perfection of the second property with the accomplished philosopher, from whom he is distinguished by the perfection of the first property. Having perfection in the first property (an example given by Avicenna is natural diviners) results in having knowledge of the *ḡayb* [occult], by being in touch with the celestial souls. Having perfection in the second property results in having no need for a human teacher and in fact becoming a genius and an excellent teacher of other people. Having perfection in the third property results in having the ability to perform miraculous acts in this world, as in the case of saints (or, as Avicenna tells us in the *Iṣārāt*, such a performer could be a malicious sorcerer).¹⁸

Examples of the laws that Ibn Sīnā ascribes to the practical wisdom of the prophet include those explicitly stated in the Qur'an. Does this mean that Ibn Sīnā holds that the revelation of the Qur'an itself is the creative act of the Prophet (s) rather than of God? This would be the reaction of those characterized by Ibn Sīnā as pseudo-philosophers. For Ibn Sīnā, however, the prophetic wisdom admits of no error or arbitrary elements because of the union of the prophet with the active intellect, which in religious terms is the angel Gabriel.

This idea is already expressed by Fārābī, who maintains,

“[S]ince the active intellect itself emanates from the existence of the First Cause, the First cause” or “God” can be named “as the source of revelation for man, through the active intellect.” “The active intellect emanates” its light upon the man’s “acquired intellect,” whence the emanation descends to the man’s “passive [potential] intellect” and from there to his “imaginative faculty.”¹⁹

16. See McGinnis (2010, 131-7).

17. See Morris (1992, 178); Akiti (2004, *passim*). Akiti also gives a table with the location of passages in the works of Ibn Sīnā where the three properties are mentioned (Akiti 2004, 193).

18. Akiti (2004, 190-191); also see Morris (1992, 181).

19. Davidson (1992, 61), citing Fārābī's *Madīnah al-fāḍīlah*.

The laws issued by the divine legislator or prophet are designed in such a manner as to allow for discretion. No set of laws can be given that will determine the proper judgment of practical reasoning with regard to all cases, because circumstances change, and changes in circumstance require changes in practical judgments. If various kinds of circumstances could be exhaustively surveyed, laws could be given that would specify exactly what to do in each circumstance. Ibn Sīnā, however, holds that such a procedure would be impossible, and hence, that discretion is needed.

In the final chapter of the *Metaphysics of the Healing*, Ibn Sīnā discusses political affairs: how the prophet is to ensure that the citizens will obey his prescriptions, how authority is to be passed on to qualified successors, just and unjust war, proper and improper punishment, and other practical issues relating to the administration of a political community. Butterworth continues:

Here, too, his apt recasting of Muhammad's revelation in a manner that highlights its political import is readily discernible. Even though all of these considerations provide a general idea of how the prophet sets about establishing justice in political association, Avicenna insists that he must also lay down laws about the moral habits and traits which lead to justice. Presenting justice as a balance or mean, he further explains that this balance or mean is sought either to break the hold of the passions so that the soul may be purified and liberated from the body or to use the passions with respect to the concerns of this world. (Butterworth 1987, 240)

Notice that there is a combination here of the political and the spiritual. On the one hand, there are the prominent discussions of how a community is to be administered in accordance with a perfected practical wisdom, and on the other hand there is the discussion of justice as breaking the hold of the passions and the liberation of the soul from the body.²⁰

Butterworth also explains that in his essay *‘Uyūn al-ḥikmah* (Sources of Wisdom) Ibn Sīnā identifies practical wisdom as what enables one to distinguish between what ought and ought not to be done, and between the noble and the base, with respect to particular things. However, in this essay, it is the theoretical intellect that enables the prophets to acquire divine emanations in a non-corporeal union with a divine source, presumably the active intellect (Butterworth 1987, 244).

20. See Inati (1996, 82-83).

The concept introduced by Ibn Sīnā to explain prophetic wisdom and the union with the active intellect is the unique idea that may serve as an emblem for his synthesis of the religious and philosophical traditions: the holy intellect (*al-'aql al-qudsī*).²¹ As Davidson explains,

At the outset, insight permits the soul to establish conjunction with the active intellect without the effort required when conjunction is established through cogitation. Cogitation must labor to effect the first conjunction with the active intellect *vis a vis* a given thought, and then, after conjunction has been established once, the soul can reestablish conjunction *vis a vis* the thought without resorting to cogitation again. But the *first episode* of conjunction with the active intellect, which cogitation has to work for and which gives man the perfect disposition for reestablishing conjunction in the future, is as effortless for the man of insight as reestablishing conjunction is for the man lacking the gift. While still nominally at the stage of material intellect, which is ordinarily an empty potentiality, the man of insight thus already has a perfect disposition for thought equivalent to the standard stage of intellect in habitus. Once the man of insight does control the principles of thought belonging to the stage of intellect in habitus, his gift enables him to frame syllogisms and infer further propositions without the effort needed when syllogisms are framed through cogitation. The cogitative faculty has to rummage about for an appropriate image, present the image to the intellectual faculty, prepare the soul for conjunction with the active intellect and reception of the active intellect's emanation, and differentiate the middle term of a syllogism out of the emanation. Insight produces the middle terms of syllogisms instantaneously and without recourse to images, probably because of the perfect disposition for conjunction which it brings the soul. Cogitation, moreover, itself draws the conclusion of the syllogism, and being a physical faculty, is subject to error. Insight, by contrast, receives the conclusion together with the middle term, all—undoubtedly—from the active intellect. **Avicenna intimates that insight therefore does not err.** Securing not merely the conclusion of a syllogism but the middle term as well is essential, for if insight furnished the conclusion without the rest of the syllogism, it would not provide genuine scientific knowledge. Finally, men vary in their degree of insight, and those who have it to the highest degree are said to possess a “holy faculty” or “holy intellect.”

We shall see that insight in the superlative degree is, for Avicenna, the “highest of the powers of prophecy.”²²

21. This point was emphasized by Lenn E. Goodman in his teaching.

22. Davidson (1992, 101-102), my emphasis.

What is explained here is the foundation of intellectual prophecy. The finding of middle terms (which in modern parlance would be said to constitute a kind of *abduction*)²³ is needed for the prophetic wisdom to provide scientific knowledge. Thus, the prophetic revelation is not merely a “religious experience” for which one would have to find justification to believe in its divine origin. It is scientific knowledge, knowledge that is backed by demonstration, but provided in a flash for one who is “burning with insight, that is, with the reception of inspiration from the active intellect” (Davidson 1992, 117). The connection with the active intellect is not sufficient to explain revelation, however, for in the “first episode” anyone who is in possession of scientific knowledge may be said to have established this connection, albeit falteringly. What distinguishes the prophetic connection with the active intellect from that of lesser minds is that for the prophets the connection is firmly established, is intuitive, and comes without any hesitation, in a flash, and always hits the mark.

In addition to intellectual prophecy, there is imaginative prophecy.²⁴ This occurs when the compositive imaginative faculty receives emanations from the active intellect through which the soul obtains perceptions of hidden things, either as they are or in figurative images (Davidson 1992, 118-120). This is what enables the prophets to see angels and hear divine words, even when there is no object present that others could see or hear.

The highest form of prophecy is achieved by those in whom intellectual and imaginative prophecy are combined.

At all events, the man endowed with both categories of prophecy utilizes his figurative recasting of theoretical truths to instruct the masses. The majority of mankind is incapable of grasping fundamental metaphysical truths as, for example, the incorporeality of God; and the prophet who accepts political and educational responsibilities teaches his people about God in pictorial images. (Davidson 1992, 120)

Finally, there is yet a third aspect of prophecy, in addition to the intellectual and imaginative, which might be called volitional, appeal to which is used to explain the miraculous deeds of the prophets (Davidson 1992, 120).

23. “Law-abductions can already be found in Aristotle, and they correspond to what Aristotle has called the mind’s power of hitting upon the middle term of a syllogism (*An. Post.*, I, 34)” (Schurz 2008, 211).

24. See Inati (1996), 100-101.

Without examining the details of Ibn Sīnā's theory of prophecy, enough has been said to recognize the following points in the theory that are relevant to Ibn Sīnā's views on practical wisdom.

1. A prophet enjoys the highest degree of the virtues, among which is wisdom, which is divided into theoretical and practical wisdom.
2. Since practical wisdom is excellence in deliberation, the prophets possess this excellence in the highest degree.
3. Correct practical reasoning is characterized as a connection with the active intellect.
4. While practical reasoning in ordinary mortals is faulty, that of the prophets is intuitive, very fast, and impeccable.
5. The divinely aided reasoning of the prophets is "holy reason."
6. Revelation occurs by means of the special connection of the prophet with the active intellect, that is, through intuitive, fast, and impeccable deliberation.
7. Revelation is not exhausted by intellectual activity, for it also has imaginative aspects.

The Spiritual Journey

If the religious understanding of the Muslim theologians is flawed, and its correction—and with it the coordination between the exoteric and esoteric—is to be achieved only through the postulation of a causal agency whose detailed workings are beyond the capacities of human cognition, the esoteric endorsement of religious truth will require the accomplishment of two major tasks: (1) a metaphysics of causation linking the phenomena to divinity and (2) an argument for the trustworthiness of the specific religious law as it has been given to us through the Prophet Muhammad (s). Ibn Sīnā's attempt at the first task constitutes the bulk of his metaphysical system. It is a task to be accomplished through philosophical demonstration. The second task is much more difficult. This task is not completed by Ibn Sīnā. What Ibn Sīnā does give us is a sketch of how it could be possible for the prophet/lawgiver to achieve the excellence that would justify trust in him and in his revealed law, coupled with a proof that a gracious God would not abandon His creation without such a lawgiver. To put the matter in philosophical terms, the prophets achieve a special kind of union with the active intellect.²⁵ How this should occur in such a manner as to warrant trust in purported revelations is provided by a description of how virtue is to be achieved by faring a spiritual path

25. For a discussion of the prophetic union as symbolized in the *Visionary Recitals* in comparison with the neo-Platonic tradition, see Westra (1992, 106).

leading to the highest levels of beatitude. Allusion to such a description is given in the *Metaphysics of the Healing*; but its culmination is provided in the *taṣawwuf* of the *Remarks and Admonitions*.²⁶

In the *Remarks and Admonitions*, Ibn Sīnā discusses many of the themes to which mere allusion was made in the *Healing*: union with the active intellect, the types of prophecy, the different capacities of people for esoteric knowledge, and so forth. In the *Healing*, there are only very brief remarks about how those with greater virtue are free from preoccupations with corporeal matters. These remarks are expanded upon significantly in the *Remarks and Admonitions*. Virtue leads one from the material to the spiritual, and virtue is acquired by faring this way. There is a circle here, but it is not vicious, for it is not moral virtue alone that leads to the achievement of the goal of contemplative perfection; also needed are the intellectual virtues through which philosophy can distinguish demonstrative truths from spurious claims to inspired intuitive unveilings.²⁷

The book concludes with advice not to divulge its contents to the ignorant, but to teach what is appropriate to those who display a capacity for it.

Conclusions

Practical wisdom, for Ibn Sīnā as for Aristotle, is an intellectual virtue that is actualized in excellent deliberation. Ibn Sīnā's practical philosophy draws not only from Aristotle, but is a unique creative synthesis of Islamic teachings with the Aristotelian, Platonic, and neo-Platonic traditions that preceded him, and the work of Fārābī and elements of the Sufī tradition with which he was familiar. Although practical wisdom is in one respect for the sake of theoretical wisdom, for it seeks to secure the conditions through which the contemplative life is made possible, in another respect theoretical wisdom is at the service of practical wisdom, for theoretical wisdom provides the universal moral concepts and knowledge of the ends of man, the supreme good, required by practical wisdom. What distinguishes practical wisdom from theoretical wisdom is that it guides action, and in order to do this it must take into account various particulars: the particular circumstances in which actions are to be performed, the particulars of social relations, education, and moral feelings. As such, practical reasoning requires cooperation from imagination and estimation.

26. On the connection between spiritual knowledge and virtue, see Innati (1996, 90).

27. See Morris (1992, 175).

His understanding of practical wisdom enables Ibn Sīnā to develop an esoteric understanding of the revealed religious law. The law is divine because it is revealed through the union of the prophetic intellect with the active intellect. The esoteric teaching does not really conflict with the exoteric teaching, although the ignorant consider this to be the case. As a result, the esoteric teaching must be hidden from those who would misunderstand it: those incapable of philosophical understanding, and those who would deny religious truth because of their misunderstanding of its relation to philosophy. If religion and philosophy are to be reconciled in the manner suggested here, Ibn Sīnā must explain why trust should be placed in the pronouncements of the prophets. Ibn Sīnā provides this explanation by considering how practical wisdom reaches a peak of excellence in the prophets.

Because of the holy intellect with which they are endowed, the prophets attain scientific knowledge through which they unerringly may judge what legislation is most appropriate given their particular circumstances, as presented to them through imaginative visions and auditions.

The use of figurative images is also used by the prophets to present religious truths. Since the majority of mankind cannot grasp fundamental metaphysical truths, such as that God is the *wājib al-wujūd* (Necessary of Existence) and that the prophet must guide people spiritually and politically, he will teach the people about God through the use of pictorial images (Davidson 1992, 120).

In order for the prophet to attain the superlative degree of practical wisdom appropriate to the holy intellect and union with the active intellect, the prophet undergoes a spiritual purification that for ordinary people requires step by step spiritual wayfaring, which is described in the *taṣawwuf* of the *Remarks and Admonitions*.

Because of the disparity between the prophetic intellect and that of the majority, religion itself comes with an exoteric/esoteric distinction. The emphasis on this distinction became a prominent feature of several intellectual and religious traditions in the Islamic world, including that of the Shī'ah, the Sufis, and the philosophers. From within each of these traditions, there is no ultimate conflict between revealed religious truth and philosophical truth. Practical wisdom discerns the need for an exoteric teaching, and the clues that can guide those who have the ability to discern the esoteric truths are expressed figuratively in religious symbols. Ibn Sīnā's esoteric doctrine is that the esoteric is not a mystery or talisman, but is the fact that the rationale behind divine revelation and prophetic legislation is best understood and interpreted by the experienced philosopher who lives virtuously.

Ibn Sīnā's synthesis is not only a bringing together of strands from the Aristotelian and neo-Platonic traditions together with religious traditions; he also reconciles political and mystical views of religion through his understanding of practical wisdom. The law brought by the prophets must serve to order society, and so, the deliberation involved in the justification of divine law is essentially political. At the same time, if this deliberation is to be effective and result in normatively authoritative pronouncements, it must be recognizably impeccable. We can understand how such deliberation could be impeccable by considering the sources of error and how they can be overcome through the discipline of spiritual wayfaring. In this way, the political and mystical views of prophecy are seen as different facets of the same reality that is best understood and interpreted through philosophy.

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