

AVICENNA (Abū 'Alī al- Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī ibn Sīnā)—a renowned philosopher and medical doctor, b. 980 in Afshan near Bukhara, d. 1037 in Hamadan.

Avicenna come from a family with Iranian roots. The Banū Sīnā family must have have been faithful subjects of the Samanid dynasty (ninth and tenth century), known for their concern for culture and good economic practices. Certainly for this reason, Avicenna's father was name ruler of Jormitan and moved to Bukhara. Although Avicenna says that this took place during the reign of Emir Nuḥ III ibn Mansūra (976–997), the text of his autobiography does not agree with these dates. Avicenna's father must have moved to Bukhara during the reign of Nuḥ II ibn Naṣra (943–954). According to Avicenna, his father was an Isma'elite.

As a young man, Avicenna was already remarkable for his intelligence. He was sure of himself, although for a long time he remained in the shadow of his teacher of philosophy, Abū 'Abd Allāh Natelī. He studied Islamic law under Abū Muḥammad Isma'īl ibn al-Ḥusayna al-Zahīda (d. 1012), who taught him the mazhab hanafī (hanafic law). His masters in medicine were Abū Mansūr al-Ḥasan ibn Nuḥ al- Qumri and Abū Sahl 'Isā ibn Yahya al-Masihi. It was his medical knowledge that first brought him renown when the physicians of the court of Nuḥ III ibn Mansūra called him to seek his advice because the emir was ill. Since his advice proved effective, the emir as a sign of gratitude gave him access to the right royal library.

Soon thereafter Avicenna's father died. Avicenna worked in the court until qarajani Ilag Naṣr ibn 'Alī took over Bukhara and removed the Samanid dynasty. Probably in 999, Avicenna went to Gurganj, the capital of Chorasmia (Khwarazm), not wanting to live under Turkoman rule. There he was under the protection of Abū-l- Ḥusayn Sahl ibn Muḥammad Suhīlī, the vizier Ṣah Abū-l-Abbās 'Alī ibn Ma'mūn ibn Muḥammada whom he served with his legal counsel. Around 1009 Avicenna left Gurganj. With his brother and a Christian medical doctor Abū Sahl 'Isā ibn Yahya al-Masihi, he crossed the wild black Karakum Desert, thus beginning a time of wandering that would last many years, because he did not want to fall into the hands of the Turkoman conqueror Maḥmud al- Gaznawī. He came to Nas and wandered to Bawarda and Tus. He must have visited Nishapur and spent time in Shakan, Samagana, Dadjurma, and Urgand.

Avicenna was seeking a court into which he could be of service with his learning. When he came to Gurganj, the emir Ṣams al-Ma'alī, Abū Ḥasan Qabus ibn Vosmḡir was overthrown and thrown in prison where he died. Avicenna once more had to flee to the steppes of Dagestan on the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea. After 1011, when the situation calmed, Avicenna returned to Gurganj and served Caliph Falak al-Ma'alī Munayihra. There he met his future biographer and faithful friend, Abū Ubayd 'Abd al-Wahīd ibn Muḥammad Gowzḡanī. He next went to Ray where he served with the ruler who ruled in the name of his son, Abū Talib Ruṣṭam ibn Fajr Magd al- Dawla Buwayhī, who was still too young to wield power. Political conflicts forced Avicenna to moved to Qazvin and then to Hamadan. The Emir Ṣams al-Dawla summoned Avicenna to accompany him on military campaigns.

After the death of Ṣams al-Dawla, Avicenna intended to enter the service of the emir of Isfahan, 'Alā al- Dawlat Abū Ga'far Muḥammad el Duumanzara, but when his intention was discovered he was imprisoned in the fortress of Fardidzan. He was freed from the prison but confined in Hamadan to the home of Abū Talib 'Alawī. He fled from there in the garb of a

Sufi with his brother and two slaves. He arrived in Isfahan where Emir 'Ala al-Dawla gave him shelter and made him his counsellor and physician. He made many journeys with the emir and fled from or battled with the Ghaznavids. When the Ghaznavids took Isfahan, they looted Avicenna's home and even took some of his manuscripts.

As for Avicenna's personal traits, Gowzganī describes him as a strong man tireless in work and writing, but also as a man who like nocturnal diversions which began after the day's work was finished. He died and was buried in Hamadan, probably on the first Friday of Ramadan in 1037. His grave has been preserved and a monumental mausoleum has been built over it.

Yahyà Mahdavi's work *Fihriṣi nusjaha-yi musannafat-i Ibn-i Sina*, (Tehran 1954) contains the most complete biography of Avicenna. Ergin's biography (1937, in Turkish), and Anawati's (1959, in Arabic and French) are out of date. A list of the most recent editions and publications may be found in J. L. Janssens' work, *An Annotated Bibliography on Ibn Sina* (1970–1989), Lv 1991, 3–74.

Avicenna's most important works are as follows: *Al- Sifa'* (*Book of Healing*, ed. Tehran 1886, ed. *del Millenario*, I–XXII, K 1952–1983; *Avicenna latinus*, I–VI, Lei 1972–1989); *Al- Nagat* (*Book of salvation*; ed. K 1913, 1938², ed. M. Danes Pazhuh, Tehran 1985; ed. M. Fajri, Beirut 1985); *Danes Nameh 'Ala'i* (*Book of knowledge* [dedicated] 'Ala'-[I-Dawla]; ed. M. Mo'in, M. Meskar, I–III, Tehran 1952, repr. 1972; French trans. M. Achena, H. Massé, *Avicenna. Le Livre de Science*, I–II, P 1955–1986); *Kitab al-issarat wa-l-tanbihat* (*Book of indications and admonishments*; ed. Forget, Lei 1892; ed. S. Dunya, I–III, K 1957–1960; repr. I–IV, 1968–1971; French trans. A. M. Goichon, *Le livre des directives et remarques*, P 1951; partial trans. in Spanish, M. Cruz Hernández, *A. Tres escritos esotéricos*, M1 1998); *Kitab al-insaf* (*Book of justice and right division*); ed. 'A. Badawi, *Aristu'ind al-'arab*, K 1947, repr. Kuwait 1978; partial French trans. G. Vadja, *Les notes d'Avicenne sur la Théologie d'Aristote*, RThom 51 (1951), 346–406); *Kitab al-hidaya* (*Guide of wisdom*); ed. M. 'Abduh, K 1974); *Al-Mabda wa-l-ma'ad* (*Book of the beginning and return*; ed. A. Nurani, Tehran 1984); *Mantiq al-masriqiyyin* (*Eastern logic*, ed. K 1910, repr. Beirut 1982); *Kitab al-hudud* (*Book of definitions*; ed. Goichon, K 1963; French trans. A. M. Goichon, *Introduction à Avicenne: son Epître des définitions*, P 1933); *Al-Mubahat* (*Discussions*; ed. A. Badawi, in: *Aristu'ind al-'arab*, K 1947, 122–239; ed. M. Bidarfar, Qom 1992; French trans. J. R. Michot, Bru 1994); *Risala Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (*The story of Hayy ibn Yaqzan*; ed. Mehren, in: *Traité mystique d[...]* A., Lei 1889–1899; ed. H. Corbin, *Avicenne et le Récit visionnaire*, I–II Tehran- P 1952–1954, repr. Tehran 1987); *Al-Qanun fi-l-tibb* (*Canon of medicine*, K 1877; ed. Al-Qass, I–V, Beirut 1987).

According to Gowzganī, his master Avicenna told him that there was not enough time to finish writing the commentary on the *Corpus aristotelicum*. Instead he wrote a book in which he summarized the doctrine of the *Corpus aristotelicum*. This book was the *Sifa'*. For the contemporary researcher who knows the many medieval summas, *Sifa'* seems to be one of them. We should remember that it was the first work of this kind of such breadth and depth. In it Avicenna expounded his own doctrine and resolved controversial questions, since he was regarded as the arbiter in establishing opinion.

UNDERSTANDING OF PHILOSOPHY. In the way he ordered and expounded his knowledge, Avicenna remained faithful to Aristotle. He divided knowledge into theoretical and practical. Theoretical knowledge includes three sciences: the highest, the middle, and the

lowest. First philosophy (falsafat al-ulā), metaphysics (ma ba'd al-ṭabi 'īya) or divine science ('ilm al-ilāhiya) is the highest science. Mathematical knowledge (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, optics, and theoretical music) is the middle science. Physics, or the science of nature ('ilm al-ṭabi 'īya), is the lowest. Practical doctrine includes ethics and politics.

Avicenna was not an original thinker in logic, but in the field that medieval thinkers called physics (include *On the soul*), and in metaphysics, the Arab thinker is simply outstanding. His harmonious order of being, his vision of the cosmos, and his iron dialectic became a definitive point of reference for the three scholasticisms: Christian, Islamic, and Jewish. Only Averroes was able to break this synthesis, but his interpretation was not completely received by St. Thomas, despite the dialectical talents of the latter.

UNDERSTANDING OF BEING. Avicenna elevated being to the rank of the fundamental substrate of everything that exists. He emphasized the role of the science concerning the analogy of being. When we predicate of concrete beings or even before we speak of being as concrete in itself or possible in itself, and necessary by reason of another being, we first possess the concept of being as being, which is the broadest concept. Avicenna did not state in precise terms what type of analogy occurs here, but the doctrine of the intentional existence of the idea of being throws light on his conception. The analogical distinction between being that is necessary in itself, being that is possible in itself, and being that is necessary by reason of another being, is not so much a principle that allows one to limit analogy as a consequence of the concept itself of being.

The concept of being as being is not reducible to a simple dialectic opposition of being and non-being. The expression “ḥal al-wuḡud” means the disposition of being as such in relation to its realization in a concrete being (mawḡud). The distance between being that is necessary in itself and being that is possible in itself, and being that is necessary by reason of another being, is a further dialectical step. On the basis of a neo-Platonized Peripatetic tradition and his sources, Avicenna thought that the only possible philosophical position is a compromise between the Aristotelian substantialism of concrete being (τοδε τι [tode ti]—first nature) and the Platonic essentialism (το καθολου [to katholou]—second nature). We cannot know anything about being in a direct manner—we need mental schematics. That of which a man can think is being necessary in itself and being possible in itself. We know that nature of being that is necessary in itself later, but being that is possible in itself contains by definition three essential moments: it is being as being, it is possible in itself, and it is necessary by reason of another being. The first moment expresses only that it is a being rather than nothing. In the second stage we should analyze the meaning and degrees of possibility. The third moment includes the degrees and modes (modalities) of necessary existence received from another being. The existential state of the third moment is expressed by “quidditas” (maḥyīa), which is distinguished from essence in a strict sense (dat). This existential state is not something constitutive for being, but something that constantly accompanies being.

Besides Avicenna's conception of essence, we should remember the elements that make possible or give structure to concrete being. These are the four causes (efficient cause, material cause, formal cause, and final cause). In relation to their effects these causes have primacy in the essential order, but not in the temporal order. They may exist *per se* or *per accidens*, in potency or in act, they may be further or closer, particular or general. To know the structure of concrete being, we should begin by an analysis of first matter or pure potency. To exist in act, matter needs to receive a physical form. Despite this, matter is

regarded as substance, because it does not have a subject of receptivity apart from itself or a subject in which it could exist. Matter taken in itself always exists in potency. Its essence consists in pure receptivity. Matter should be understood as the privation of a real essence in potency. In a concrete being, it is secondary matter (*madda*) which makes first matter (*hayūla*) into a subject of form.

For corporeality to be constituted in full, an essential form belonging to the category of substance and differing from the form of corporeality that belong to the category of quantity must come to the elements of the first order: the first matter of the subject (*mawdu*), the secondary matter of the receptive element (*'unsur*), and the partial element (*ustuqus*). The essential form, which is necessary to constitute a concrete being, is not sufficient. The role of individuation belongs to matter, which is the only real principle of individuation, while accidents are only its expression (or sign). Insofar as matter is common, in becoming the principle of individuation it is quantified by receiving the form of corporeality and quantitative definition. Therefore the essential form is the principle whereby matter receives a definite quantitative determination. Matter that is defined in this way quantitatively individualizes form, and therefore at the same time matter receives and is received; thereby matter cannot be imparted.

The internal dialectics of Avicenna's thought is guided by the concept of necessary being. Simple possibility is inseparably joined with the realization of concrete being since pure possibility refers to the essence of concrete being. What is possible is the opposite of what is necessary, namely that which taken in itself does not entail the necessity of existence. Therefore everything that exists may be divided into two fundamental groups: being that is necessary by itself, namely being in relation to which the negation of its existence would be contradictory, and possible being, in relation to which the supposition of its non-existence entails no contradiction. If possible being really exists, it is so because it became necessary by reason of another being.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. Avicenna shows four ways of demonstrating God's existence: (1) from motion; (2) from causality; (3) from a distinction between what is possibility and what is necessary; (4) from an analysis of the understanding of being. The first two possibilities are ordered to the third. He gives a physical meaning to the first. The second is a detailed analysis of the understanding of causality. The third demonstration was constantly being refined. His arguments for the existence of a necessary being, in distinction from merely possible beings, was interpreted by Latin scholasticism as explicit demonstrations for the existence of God. They also saw in Avicenna the source of Thomas's argument from contingency.

Creation, as Avicenna conceived it, is the fruit of knowledge. The action of the divine intellect is one eternal act whereby God has direct knowledge of all things. This knowledge does not cause any change in God's essence. From this knowledge in God, which eternally knows the essence of all beings, come all things. These things come from God not as an emanation of God's nature, since creation is not a physical effect of the divine being. God knows that from the cognition that is proper to his knowledge a being is created. Knowing eternally essences and what arises from them, God loves the order of the good. This order flows out of eternal wisdom. This love is indirect, since God is pure will, is free from all imperfection, and cannot have any desire. Therefore, although creation is a good, God cannot will it directly, since otherwise he would be determined by the creation, whereas God can be determined, or determine himself, only by the power of his own essence. Therefore

God knows only his own essence, but this knowledge includes the order of good and being, which exists and develops, insofar as it is known by God. Creation, however, occurs eternally, since if it took place in time, then before creation God would have been lacking in the perfection that is proper to the effect that results from its cause. For the same reason creation must be perfectly maintained in existence, because a better creator is one whose works endure longer.

From the creative stream all created beings flow out according to a strict order. Only one being can come immediately from God. In this way one avoids the appearance of plurality in God's essence. This being is immaterial. It is the logos, the first intelligence, which is quantitatively one, but is plural in view of its essence. Its essential plurality consists in being possible in itself and necessary by God's act of creation. From this first intelligence all other created beings emerge in the following way. From that which the first intelligence knows in the essence of the first being emerges the second intelligence. From what it knows in its essence as necessary by God's reason, emerges the soul, i.e., the form of the first sphere. From what it knows in its essence as possible in itself, the proper celestial sphere emerges. In this way ten spheres arise with ten moving souls and ten intelligences. The tenth is the agent intellect. The mission of the agent intellect is not to produce any celestial sphere whatsoever, but to direct the sublunary world, that is, the world in which men live.

THE UNDERSTANDING OF MAN. In the hierarchy of the earthly world, man occupies the chief position. The soul has primary significance in man's hylemorphic structure. Following Aristotle, Avicenna states that the soul in its primary meaning is the principle that animates all living beings. Taken in itself, the soul is the proper form of the most noble created being and as such it is an incorporeal substance and the perfection of the body it moves. There are two classes of souls that always act as separated forms: the souls of angels, and the divine soul. The soul is the perfection of the human body. It actualizes and maintains the body, and it operates through the body's organs. As a form it is a separated substance, but it does not always exist in act, but also in potency, and it is given as joined with the body.

Among the faculties of the soul, the highest and most important are the rational faculties. These constitute the apex of vital operations and have specific functions in intellectual cognition. Avicenna accepted and developed the Greek doctrine of the intellect. He arrived at his own conception. This conception would later have an important influence on Latin and Jewish scholasticism. It begins with an analysis of two meanings of the term intellect. In its everyday sense, it means knowledge that is acquired by experience that allows one to act effectively. We regard those who possess it as knowledgeable about something. In a philosophical sense we must distinguish three types of intellect: (1) the separate intellect of scientific cognition (knowledge) of which Aristotle speaks in the *Posterior Analytics*; (2) the practical intellect (which Aristotle discusses in the *Ethics*), which enables one to know concrete things and directs our action to a defined goal. The task of the practical intellect is to make a right judgment concerning human actions, which are directed to the realization of the good. The role of the practical intellect therefore is not only to formulate ordinary practical judgments, but to achieve knowledge useful for life, and therefore its final end is the good; (3) the speculative intellect, of which Aristotle speaks in the treatise *De anima*.

In the framework of the speculative intellect, we must distinguish the following degrees: (a) the intellect in potency or the material intellect, which is a faculty capable of receiving forms abstracted from matter; it is called material because equally with prime matter it can receive any form; (b) the intellect in act, which contains in itself potency (habitual in potency) and

permits the knowledge and the intellectual appropriation of intelligible forms; (c) the habitual intellect, which realizes the highest degree of perfection possible for our cognition, and so is called the holy intelligence. The agent intellect is external to the human intellect and actualizes it. By the agent intellect, the human intellect passes from potency to act. The speculative intellect is therefore a potency that is realized by the reception of intelligible forms. The intelligible forms make it pass from potency to act. Its role is to achieve the knowledge of the truth, hence it possesses universal judgment and knowledge.

The intellect in potency or the material intellect, as the first degree of the speculative intellect, exists in absolute potency in relation to forms. In order for the material intellect to be actualized and become intellect in act, abstracted forms must be impressed in it. The process of abstraction includes the following degrees: (a) sensuality—here begins the process of abstraction; it is not, however, in a condition to release sense impressions from matter and material features; (b) the imagination separates sensual forms from matter, but not from the material features that accompany it; (c) estimation (*aestimativa*) produces completely immaterial intentional forms; (d) cogitation receives these forms. When these abstracted forms are received by the intellect, the intellect passes from potency to act. This process, however, requires the participation of the agent intellect, since human faculties are subject to the general principle that nothing can pass from potency to act without the participation of another being in act.

The action of the agent intellect is incessantly repeated. Therefore the intellect in act can change into a habitual potency or perfection in potency, which is constituted by the habitual intellect. If such a union is precisely and correctly continuous, then we may speak of acquired intellect, which is the highest degree of human cognition. Avicenna compares it with a lamp that casts its light upon the intellect in potency. However, when the acquired intellect has been achieved, the actualization of what is found in potency in the human intellect requires the intervention of the agent intellect.

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Miguel Cruz Hernández