

The Cosmology of the Arab Philosophers

The Arab philosophers—and this includes all those whose works were written in Arabic—have often been accused of having inextricably woven Platonic elements into the Aristotelian heritage which they passed on to the Christian West, as if by so doing they were guilty of misrepresentation. In reality, this “mingling” for which they are censured, represents an outstanding work of adaptation, a synthesis in the true sense of the word, without which the intellectual flowering of the Christian Middle Ages would scarcely have been conceivable. The fertile union of intellectual discipline and contemplative spirit, for which the schools of Paris, Chartres, Oxford, and Strasbourg—to name but a few—were renowned in the 12th and 13th centuries, is largely the outcome of that very same “mingling” found in the works of the Arab al-Kindî, and the Persians al-Fârâbî (Alpharabius) and Ibn Sînâ (Avicenna), and their Spanish successors, such as Ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) and Ibn Bâjja (Avenpace). All these philosophers combined the strictly methodical thought of Aristotle, proceeding from premise to premise, with the contemplative Platonic approach which was directed immediately to the essence of things. Obviously the Arab scholars were sometimes mistaken about the authorship of Greek doctrines. But what concerned the philosophers named above was not so much the question of which writings should be attributed to Plato or to Aristotle, as from which viewpoint one master or the other reasoned. For the Arabs were convinced that the great sages of antiquity did not simply construct a system of ideas, but took as their starting point a direct vision of reality, so that any contradictions were simply like one and the same scene painted by two different artists. If we are familiar with the subject of the painting, it is possible to reconcile the apparent discrepancies of the different renderings. It was possible for the Arab scholars to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with that of Plato, because they themselves possessed a firm axis to which they could refer all essential aspects of reality. This axis was the doctrine of the oneness of God. Moreover, this doctrine has two facets: on the one hand it maintains that God is unique and exalted above the entire universe, and, on the other, it implies that everything that exists necessarily partakes of the Divine Being. There is only *one* Being. Thus, multiplicity springs from unity and never sup-

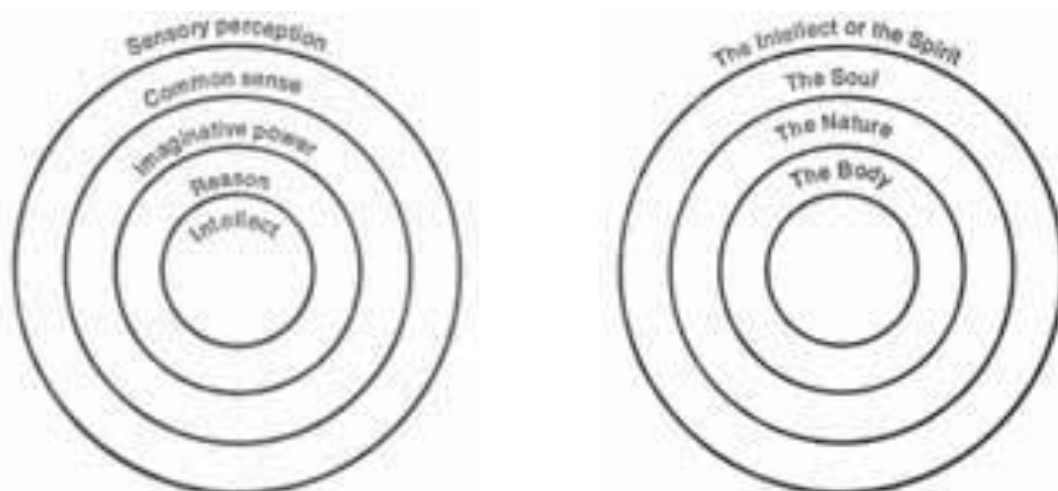
plants it; the one Being is reflected in manifold ways and, by degrees, appears increasingly fragmented, limited, and ephemeral, while nevertheless remaining one. The Arabs took the outlines of this doctrine largely from the metaphysics of Plotinus, although in essence it is set out in the Koran.

One fundamental ingredient of this doctrine is the hierarchical structure of the universe: multiplicity in unity and unity in multiplicity—this is the law of hierarchy.

An awareness that reality embraces innumerable levels of existence was common to all the cultures of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, whether this was expressed in mythological or philosophical form. That the whole of reality should consist of the physical world which can be comprehended by our five senses is a very recent concept, and one which is basically contradicted by any knowledge of oneself. For man readily discovers that the “stuff” (so to speak) of which his soul is made is different from that of his body, and that for all its ties to the physical world, it possesses qualities that the body does not possess, such as perception, thought, and independent action. Endowed with these faculties, the soul is not, however, the only non-physical condition of human existence. For the soul, with its constant changes, is itself an object of knowledge, and this presupposes that there is something like an inner eye that sees the soul, while itself remaining constant. This is the Intellect in the medieval acceptance of this word. To try and comprehend it would be as hopeless as an attempt to see one’s own faculty of vision. It transcends thought, yet it lends all possible certainty to thought. All rational evidence would be nothing without the truths that are a direct “illumination” from the Intellect. The medieval philosophers refer to the “active intellect” (*intellectus agens* in Latin, *al-‘aql al-fâ‘âl* in Arabic), because the Intellect consists, as it were, of the pure act of knowing, and never itself becomes the passive object of perception.

For man, the soul is his inner being, and the Intellect is the innermost part of that inner being. The physical world “outside” him is, so to speak, received and transformed into something “inward” by the sensory organs and the corresponding mental powers. Common sense, the *sensus communis*, collates the external impressions, imagination translates them into images, the intelligence sifts and presents them to the intellect, which makes the final distinction between true and false. Accordingly, the various conditions or layers of human nature can be thought of in terms of a

varying number of concentric circles, with the outer circle corresponding to the physical condition, and the center to the Intellect.



The advantage of this schema, which was well-known to medieval philosophers, and to which we shall return later, is that it illustrates the order of basic realities in the simplest way. However, its limitations, and its partial fallacy are immediately evident in that the very element representing supra-personal and universal truth—namely the Intellect—appears as the smallest thing—a mere point. The reason for this is that the entire scheme with its differentiation between “external” and “internal” is determined by an individual or “subjective” point of view. As the object of perception, the physical world appears comprehensive to subjective experience, while the Intellect, which is to the physical world what the source of light is to an illuminated room, appears as an elusive, invisible point.

But taking the different levels of reality, as revealed in man, not in their subjective role, but in their actual existence, it becomes clear that the higher must include the lower, the knower must include the known, the universal must include the individual, and the free the less free. The applied schema can thus be reversed: the Intellect then corresponds to the outer circle, because in its knowledge it encompasses everything (not in any spatial sense), just as the soul with its consciousness and its mental powers encompasses the body. This is also a manner in which the system of concentric circles—one encompassing the next one—was applied by the medieval philosophers. They saw in it not only a reflection of the essential structure of man, but of the entire universe, for the various degrees of reality existed before the individual beings that share in it. If the physical world were not essentially, and in its very

nature, included in the world of the soul, there would be no perception, and the impressions that we receive of the external world would merely be so many random coincidences. And if the physical, as well as the psychical, world were not encompassed by the Intellect, there would be no universally valid knowledge that surpasses the individual. One can thus speak, not only of a physical universe, but also of a psychical and an intellectual universe, and of one encompassing the other according to the spatial symbolism which we apply metaphorically.

In this context it is appropriate to mention the Jewish philosopher, Solomon ben Gabirol, who lived in the first half of the 11th century, and appears in Spain as one of the first followers of Avicenna. In his book, *The Fountain of Life*, he makes a pupil ask his teacher why the sages often represent spiritual substances as circles or spheres, as such figures are peculiar to physical objects alone. The teacher replies that this is a symbol of the relationship between cause and effect, or of knowing and being known. He then gives the pupil the following examples—and in order to understand them it is necessary to know that the medieval philosophers considered nature as the motive power between the body and soul—:

Observe the power of nature, and you will find that it encompasses the body, because it affects it, and because the body is subject to nature, so that it is, as it were, enveloped by nature. Consider, too, the vegetative soul, and you will find that it has an effect upon nature and dominates it, and that nature is enveloped by this soul and is subject to its action. Then consider also the rational soul and the Intellect. Both the one and the other embrace all the substances subordinate to them, by knowing, penetrating and dominating them. This applies especially to the Intellect, which is finer and more perfect than all else.

Proceeding from these qualities peculiar to the individual human being, you will understand that the universal properties likewise exist within one another, in the sense that the soul contains the body, and the Intellect, the soul—for the lower quality is encompassed by the loftier one, which supports and knows it. The universal soul embraces the entire physical world; that is to say, it supports its existence within its own existence. It forms a visual image of everything within it, and sees it in much the same way that our own particular souls, each with its own corresponding body, imagine their body to be, and see all that is in them. Even more all-embracing is the universal Intellect, because of its perfection, its capacity to display itself (in everything), and because of the nobility of its nature. Hence you will also comprehend how the

first, sublime, and holy Creator (of the world) knows all things, and how they are contained in His omniscience. . . .

In these same metaphorical terms, the infinite space surrounding the outer circle on our diagram, corresponds to divine knowledge. The outermost circle is itself the universal Intellect, and the circles inscribed within it represent the universal soul and the entire physical world. In accordance with the teaching of Plotinus, universal nature is frequently inserted between the universal soul, which comprises the individual souls as the sea contains the waves, and the totality of the physical or corporeal world. It is to the purely physical condition, as is the power of movement to inert matter.

The totality of corporeal existence is represented by the all-encompassing vault of Heaven. But within this, the hierarchy of the different levels of existence is again repeated in the form of the planetary spheres, just as they can be seen from the earth. It is in this sense that Ibn Gabirol says:

Just as corporeal existence, in its essence and form, reflects spiritual existence, so the enveloping capacity of spiritual qualities corresponds to physical envelopment, since the lower is always an imitation of the higher. . . . Thus we may say that the spiritual substance embraces the corporeal, because the latter, by its very nature, exists within it, just as all bodies exist within the One Heavenly body.

This calls to mind Dante's description of the heavenly spheres, and with reason, for in both there is the same vision of the cosmos that goes back through Avicenna to Plato, and even further. The orbits of the planets, which from the earth appear to move in ever-widening circles, offer a natural illustration of the levels of existence. The astronomic heavens do not themselves constitute these levels, but correspond to them, because physical existence, as Ibn Gabirol says, reflects spiritual existence; and Dante means the same thing, when he says:

The physical orbits are wider or narrower, according to the measure of virtue distributed in all their parts. . . . Therefore the greatest orbit, that includes the whole great universe, corresponds to the (spiritual) cycle that loves most and knows most. (*Paradiso*, XXVIII. 64–72).

The validity of this symbol does not depend on whether or not the geocentric view of the world—the one shared by Dante and the Arab philosophers—is scientifically accurate. It is sufficient that it

corresponds to general human experience. Obviously, the assumption that the earth stands still and the stars revolve around it in greater or smaller orbits is based upon an optical illusion. However, this fallacy is, to some extent, inherent in the nature of man; it merely proves that our sensory perceptions are limited, and no “exact” science, however advanced, can overcome this; something of an optical illusion will always cling. Yet the more profound meaning of the geocentric view of the world lies in its very symbolism. If the Divine Spirit envelops this world, not spatially, but by virtue of its Being, then it is no fallacy to compare it with the all-embracing, starless heaven, where even space comes to an end. And if this image is valid, then it is also true to regard the hierarchical order of the stars that appear to revolve in ever-widening orbits, as an illustration of the supra-terrestrial states of existence or consciousness. It is no coincidence that the stars are not only a source of light, but also a measure of time.

There is a profound reason why this symbol of the universe, represented by the diagram of concentric circles, can be “read” in two opposing, but complementary ways. In one sense the outer circle, or rather everything outside it, stands for Ultimate Reality; in another sense, the center of all the circles represents the Divine Origin. Both “readings” or interpretations are equally valid for, in effect, pure Being is both that which contains all, as well as being the unfathomable center of all things, even if, when expressed in spatial terms, this sounds contradictory.

*

* *

In the symbolism of the spider’s web (with center, radii, and concentric circles), we can find a simple illustration of the difference between the Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies. Aristotelian philosophy looks on the different circles, or what they represent, as separate entities, and, significantly, this means that the center too is separate from the circles. Platonic philosophy, on the other hand, considers the analogies that link all levels of reality. This is symbolized by the radii that radiate out from the center and intersect all the circles. All points on the same radius, no matter which circle they intersect, are thus linked to the center. They are like traces of the same essence on different levels of existence.

The Essential Titus Burckhardt

From this, it can be seen that Aristotelian thought applies chiefly to the logical homogeneity of a given level of existence, whereas Platonic thought takes account of the symbolic character of a thing, which connects it “vertically” to the higher levels of reality. The two views can be reconciled, provided their differences are remembered.

There can be any number of concentric circles, but it is simplest to envisage three circles, which represent the inner structure of man, namely—from the center outwards—*Spiritus*, *anima*, and *corpus*: Spirit or Intellect, soul, and body.

Likewise, there can be any number of rays, issuing forth from the center and intersecting the circles. Understood as rays from a single light, this light is no less than the Universal Intellect (*intellectus primus* or *al-'aql al-awwal*), which, emanating from its divine source, illumines all levels of existence, and is reflected (more or less refracted) at every level.

St. Albert the Great wrote: “One cannot become an accomplished philosopher unless one knows the philosophies of both Aristotle and of Plato.” Similarly, St. Bonaventura said: “Among the philosophers, Plato received the word of Wisdom, and Aristotle that of Science. The first considered principally the higher reasons, the second, the lower reasons.” The Arab philosophers Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ) and Avempace (Ibn Bâjja) were of the same opinion.

(from *Moorish Culture in Spain*)