

ON THE ROAD OF IDEAS: PLOTINUS, AL-FÂRÂBÎ AND MAIMONIDES

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Greek Neo-Platonism

We start by examining Neo-Platonism, which was a major influence on Islamic philosophy. It can be argued that Islamic philosophy cannot be adequately understood without taking into account its roots in the thought of the late antiquity. (Adamson, 2005, p. 26)

Certain aspects of Platonic and Aristotelian views established the background against which Neo-Platonism was structured. According to Plato, the ordinary world that we know with our senses cannot be entirely real. He felt that it is, as Heraclitus and Parmenides in their different ways have shown, unstable, imperfect and characterized with change and decay. This world reflects dimly the eternal, perfect and changeless forms, the only true objects of knowledge and the ultimately real features of the universe.

The Demiurge (creator or God) connects both worlds; the world of ideas and the changeable material world. Hence, He introduces the system of ideas in perceptible reality, whereby the idea remains the perfect prototype of things. Our knowledge of the material world through sensible-perception, experience and reason remains imperfect (O'Connor, 1964, p. 20).

For Aristotle, the ultimately real features of the universe were the individual things that make up the world. The divine Reason is absolute thinking and form of all forms, generating everything, including forms and ideas. God is no longer a Demiurge, i.e. not a craftsman or cosmic builder. God contained in Himself the whole system of ideal essences as the project of the Cosmos and all things existing in it. This is the activity of an **intellect**. God is an unmoved mover, He is all actuality and completely immaterial (O'Connor, 1964, p. 55).

The differences between Plato's and Aristotle's views show the extent to which classical ontology moved toward theological contemplation.

Plotinus (ca. 205 – 270) was a major Graeco-Egyptian philosopher of the ancient world. From his own writings, we know nothing about his life. However, his disciple and editor Porphyry wrote a biography of him as an introduction to Plotinus's the *Enneads* (Armstrong, 1953, p. 11). Plotinus was concerned with the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle through teaching and critical comparison. According to Armstrong, the teachings of the Platonic school were the immediate philosophical background of Plotinus's thought (Armstrong, 1953, p. 16).

Plotinus is one of the founders and great representatives of Neo-Platonism. His thought represented a turning point in the history of philosophical thought; playing a critical role in the formation of Islamic philosophy. His Neo-Platonism also influenced European philosophy in the middle ages in both Latin and Arabic. For Plotinus, reality is a continuum with a centre from which circles expand outward (O'Connor, 1964, p. 76). Nature is the province of practice, as opposed to contemplation; the latter is the responsibility of **intellect**, and nature is a weak copy of contemplation.

He offers an account of an ordered structure of living reality, which proceeds eternally from its transcendent First Principle, the One or Good, and descends in an unbroken succession of stages from the Divine Intellect and the Forms therein through Soul with its various levels of experience and activity to the last and lowest realities, the forms of bodies (Armstrong, 1953, p. 27).

The **One**, though sometimes spoken of as God, is not a person or a thing, nor is it the sum of particular realities. The **One** is unknowable. The Intellect knows that there is a One, but not what it is like. For Plotinus, the **One** does not think, because thought always implies a certain duality, a distinction of thought and object of thought.¹ He attributes to the One a 'super-intellection' (Armstrong, 1953, VI. 8. 16, p. 63); a simple self-intuition, an immediate self-consciousness higher than the thought of *Nous*, to which Plotinus refers as the second level of reality. Hence, "[t]he One does not think like *Nous* but has, nevertheless, a thought and consciousness of its own" (Armstrong, 1953, V. 4. 2, C, The One or Good, p. 63). According to Plotinus, the One is Infinite. He is the Principle of form, of number, measure, order, and limit. To an extreme degree, Plotinus stresses the transcendence of the One. For him, the "body is in soul and soul in *Nous* and *Nous* in the One" (Armstrong, 1953, p. 32).

There is a hierarchical order of levels of being, according to which, *Nous* proceeds necessarily from the One, the Soul proceeds from *Nous* and the material

1. "The Good exists before any thought of Him, and so does not need to think of Himself. He only has a simple intuition of Himself, and this is identical with Himself and does not imply any duality of subject and object, thinker and thought." Armstrong, 1953, VI. 7. (38-39) C, The One or Good, p. 63.

universe is formed and ordered by Soul. Plotinus's understanding of Soul does not differ much from Plato's. Soul is the intermediary between the worlds of intellect and sense: "It proceeds from *Nous* and returns upon it and is formed by it in contemplation as *Nous* proceeds from and returns upon the One" (Armstrong, 1953, p. 37). He states in the *Enneads* that all things were an **emanation** from the One. Plotinus talks about the continuous emanation and outflowing from the One; explaining the creation of the world through a chain of emanations from the One.

The world of the Intellect is such that the sensible world is a complete copy of it, but it is stripped of all imperfection, time and extension. The world of the Intellect is the world of eternity. We, *qua* Intellect, share in it and express the whole each after our manner. Plotinus emphasizes the point that each individual mind can be aware of the whole. Otherwise, the upward ascent to the One would not be possible. In all this, Plotinus uses certain aspects of Plato's philosophy and Aristotelian notions. He maps the geography of the world of the Intellect. In the end, he wishes to assert that the so-called Platonic "categories" of the Sophist –being, sameness, difference, motion, and the rest- are the highest categories of the intellect and that the other forms can be deduced from them. But to achieve this he had to show that the Aristotelian and stoic categories are inappropriate. As a positive view, on the other hand, he attempts to show that the Aristotelian notion of matter, form, the composite, and the categories of accidents are applicable to the sensible world only, whereas the Platonic "categories" are applicable to the world of the Intellect. Thus, for example, he maintains that to "being" in the world of the Intellect corresponds "matter" in the sensible world. The procedure adopted is ingenious. It is a way of dealing with the more philosophical parts of the Aristotelian logic within a quasi-Platonic system (O'Connor, 1964, pp.76- 77).

In Plotinus's interpretation of Greek philosophy, Being, Intellect, and the Forms are one and the same thing; in his eyes, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle were in substantial agreement on this point, even though it was Plato who provided the most accurate account of it (Adamson & Taylor, 2005, p. 12). Plotinus's interpretation of the Platonic intelligible world would be of great importance for the development of Islamic philosophy, as we shall see later. According to Plotinus, the Forms are the intelligible principles of all that exists, identical in nature with the divine Intellect. The Intellect is both the Platonic Demiurge and the *nous* that Aristotle located at the peak of that well-ordered totality which is the cosmos.

Plotinus also argued that the **One** is an absolute and good source of everything existing in the universe. This concept increasingly approached the idea of the one creating God of the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Neo-Platonism was the philosophical system, which has enabled Al-Fârâbî and other philosophers to combine the edges of their Muslim religious faith with the philosophical and scientific rationality of classical cognition.

Al-Fârâbî, Abu Nasr (C.870 - 950): The Father Of Islamic Neo-Platonism

Through Neo-Platonism, Islamic philosophers became acquainted with classical outlooks and systems of thought. The religious and philosophical meaning of Neo-Platonism, together with its theological interpretation of the ontology of Plato and Aristotle were deeply perceived and comprehended by Al-Fârâbî.

Influenced by Aristotle, who appealed to the notion of unmoved mover or a passive force that moves everything in the world, Al-Fârâbî held that the First Movement emanates from a primary source, God. If all existence emanates from God, Al-Fârâbî argued, then all human intelligence proceeds directly from God in the form of inspiration, illumination, or prophecy.

Into his cosmology, Al-Fârâbî also integrated Platonic thought; asserting that the highest goal of humankind should be the attainment of the knowledge of God. If all worldly material emanates from God, he reasoned, then, enlightened humans should aspire to a return to God through the study of religious texts and moral acts.

In the context of Al-Fârâbî's metaphysics, we explore the influence of Neo-Platonism on his thought. This is perhaps most evident in the doctrine of **emanation** as apparent in Al-Fârâbî's hierarchy of being. In this aspect, let us recall that Plotinus regarded Being, Intellect, and the Forms as one and the same thing.

A quick look at Al-Fârâbî's hierarchy of being, we find that the Divine being is positioned at the top of this hierarchy, which he characterizes as 'the First'. From the First Being there emanate ten intellects. The second being, which emanates from 'the First', is the First Intellect. This First Intellect, like God, is an immaterial substance. The comprehension of God by the First Intellect produces the Third Being, i.e., the Second Intellect. Also the First Intellect comprehends its own essence, thus producing the body and soul of the First Heaven. Of special importance in this hierarchy is the Tenth Intellect, which forms a bridge between the worlds of Heaven and Earth. The actualization of the potentiality for thought in man's intellect is done by the Tenth Intellect, the **active** Intellect. Also, it emanates form to man and the sublunary world. Hence, the cosmic overflow is comprised of a chain of ten emanating separate intellects, where the "active intellect" is the lowest of these separate intellects which constitutes the source of all human knowledge.

Al-Fârâbî wrote *Risala'fi'l-'aql (Epistle on the Intellect)*, which deals with his intricate theories of intellection. In this work, Al-Fârâbî offers his sixfold division

of reason or intellect, enumerating the various senses of the term. The First type of intellect or reason might be termed as ‘prudence’, ‘thoughtfulness’ or ‘discernment’, by virtue of which ordinary people characterize a human being as rational or intelligent (Netton, 1999, p. 48).

The second kind of intellect is that which has been identified with common sense; this intellect is associated with connotations of ‘obviousness’ and ‘immediate recognition’. The third kind of intellect is natural perception. The fourth of the six intellects may be characterized as ‘conscience’. Al-Fârâbî’s fifth intellect is of four different types: potential intellect, actual intellect, acquired intellect and agent or active intellect. The sixth and last of the major intellects is Divine Reason or God Himself, the source of all intellectual energy and power (Nasr, 1996, p. 186).

Moses Maimonides (Ibn Maimoun) (1135-1204)

The great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides worked within the religious culture of Islam in Al-Andalus. His philosophy of Maimonides is profoundly instilled with Neo-platonic metaphysical concepts such as ‘emanation’ and ‘divine transcendence’. He followed the Islamic Neo-platonic tradition of envisioning God as a pure and undivided unity, the perfected Being of fully actualized intellect. On divine unity, Maimonides writes that “He, may He be exalted, is one in all respects; no multiplicity should be posited in Him” (Pines, 1963, 1.52, p. 378).

Maimonides attempted to synthesize Aristotelianism and Judaism and to intellectualize the moral demands of Judaism (Baron, 1952, p. 117). He described God as the **Perfect intellect**, a term that has its roots in Aristotelianism. In his view, intellect is the distinct faculty which links man to God, and man is rewarded and punished in accordance with his development of this faculty (Pines, 1963, III.51, p. 621; III.52, p. 629).

In his, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides states that the intellectual comprehension of God is the highest worship (Birnbbaum, 2001, p. 76). In this, he assuredly assigns a greater status to the intellect. In Maimonides’s Aristotelian system, man’s intellect is insufficient to comprehend the superlunary world. For, the status of heavenly bodies is superior to man, in terms of the intelligences assigned to both. Maimonides argued for the primacy of the intellect or reason; regarding reason as lacking in sufficiency so that it may grasp the essence of God (Pines, 1963, 111.20, 482ff).

It has been argued that Maimonides was influenced by earlier Islamic writings on overflow and active intellect. He describes the **active intellect** as an overflow

from God onto humans, giving them knowledge and leading them towards perfection. He writes: “through the overflow of the intellect that he overflowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect” (Pines, 1963, 2.12, p. 280).

We may justifiably put Maimonides in dialogue with Al-Fârâbî regarding the notions of the intellect and the Neo-Platonic notion of emanation. The emanative overflow of the active intellect is foundational to the activity of human knowing. This is a basic idea for Al-Fârâbî and Maimonides. Al-Fârâbî tells us in his opus on the perfect city that God is “the first cause, the first intellect, and the first living” (Walzer, 1985, p. 81). For Maimonides, God is always an intellect *in actu*; He has pure activity of Intellection; in Him, there is no potentiality. Maimonides’s position is akin to Al-Fârâbî’s Aristotelian account of the Intellect. For Maimonides, the Creator of the universe endows it with permanence through the emanationist notion of divine “overflow” (Pines, 1963, 1.69, p. 168).

He describes the notion of overflow as an activity through which the cosmos is created. Through this process of overflow, a series of 10 cosmic related intellects is produced (Pines, 1963, 2.11, pp. 275-276). The lowest of these intellects which generate one another is the active intellect. From our discussion of Al-Fârâbî’s views on cosmic overflow, we find similarities with Maimonides’s discussion of this notion.

Maimonides’s openness to the work of Islamic philosophers and thinkers such as Al-Fârâbî, Avicenna, and Ibn Bâjjah and his other Andalusian predecessors made possible the philosophical synthesis he formulated (Goodman, 1999, p. 92).

Concluding Remark

These philosophical encounters were major contributions to the advancement of thought in their time and beyond. They offer an enlightened example of contact between ancient civilizations and peoples. Much can be learnt from this dialogue of ideas, cultures and religions. One cannot underestimate its significance for us today, as it becomes paramount to celebrate the values of reason, tolerance, diversity and co-existence, and to rely on universal ethical principles. The appeal to reason is the foundation of any fruitful dialogue of ideas that may lead to the just and peaceful coexistence of cultures.

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