2 Ibn ʿArabi: philosophy and reason

Ibn ʿArabi, Averroës and philosophy as demonstrative science

Two central senses of the term philosophy can be identified in the writings of Ibn ʿArabi: philosophy as *love of wisdom* and philosophy as *reflective thinking*. These two meanings of philosophy are differentiated primarily by the authority on which they rely rather than by any specific difference in the content with which they deal. It is philosophy as "love of wisdom" (as the word itself implies) which constitutes its original and, for Ibn ʿArabi, its ultimate meaning.[1]

For Ibn ʿArabi, Plato was the example *par excellence* of the philosopher devoted to the love of wisdom. Plato, in this respect, is firmly aligned by Ibn ʿArabi with "men of revelation and contemplation".[2] In the context of Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysics wisdom (Greek, s*ophia*; Arabic, *hikma*) is to be understood as a divine gift which is instantiated in certain individuals who are its "settings" or "bezels", such as prophets, saints and those who know. These are the human exemplars of wisdom and the only people to whom the title philosopher can properly be applied in its original meaning. This meaning of philosophy is perfectly reflected in the lexicological appropriateness of the title of Ibn ʿArabi's famous synoptic work, the *Fusus al-Hikam*, or, The Bezels of Wisdom.

By contrast, the concept of philosophy depleted of its original meaning and used simply as a synonym for "reflective thinking" can mean, by implication, either (1) that the philosopher is one who takes human reason as the only reliable avenue to truth, or, (2) that the

philosopher is one who assumes that, whilst truth can be arrived at by processes of rational investigation, this is not the only avenue to such truth.

The eighteenth-century European Enlightenment movement exemplifies this first sense of reflective thinking, a view which is well-encapsulated in Diderot's strident epistemological recommendation:

> All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings … We must ride roughshod over all ancient puerilities, overturn barriers that reason never erected, give back to the arts and the sciences the liberty that is so precious to them.[3]

In contrast to this is Averroës (whose meeting with Ibn ʿArabi we discussed earlier), who adheres to the second sense of reflective thinking which he extensively defends in *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*. These two views on the epistemology of reflective thinking need to be carefully separated for it is only this latter view which can countenance the truths of revelation.

These two fundamentally differing meanings of philosophy – either as love of wisdom or as reflective thought – are distinguished for Ibn ʿArabi by their contrasting epistemic authorities. For him, philosophy as love of wisdom entails that the only certain ground for the "knowledge inherent in God" (*ʿilm laduni*) is God's revelation. The main epistemic access to this knowledge is, as Niffari points out, "in the contemplation of … self-experience"[4] and it is this self-knowledge which is the foundation of the contemplative and spiritual life. The meeting between Ibn ʿArabi and Ibn Rushd (Averroës)[5] illustrates unambiguously the distinction between philosophy as love of wisdom and philosophy as reflective thinking. It equally illustrates the difference between the eighteenth-century *philosophes*' view and the Averroësian view of the scope and legitimacy of reason.

Let us explore this matter a little further bearing in mind Ibn ʿArabi's caveat that "reflection can only roam in its own specific playing field, which is one of many fields. Each faculty in man has a playing field in which it roams and beyond which it should not step."[6]

For Averroës, philosophy (*falsafa*) was conceived as a demonstrative science. It was viewed as a rational activity based on indubitable

premises from which the truth of certain conclusions logically follow. As Hourani[7] points out philosophy "is thought of by Ibn Rushd and his Arabic predecessors not as speculative in the modern sense, but as yielding knowledge of reality which is demonstrative according to the Aristotelian conditions: conclusions drawn from flawless logic from indubitable premises. ... It shares with other sciences the authoritative name of *hikma*." Averroës defines philosophy as "the systematic application of demonstrative reasoning to the world."[8] This broad conception of philosophy as a form of demonstrative reasoning applied to the world would include, for Averroës, what we now call natural science. Averroës' fundamental commitment to philosophy as a form of demonstrative reasoning, in the manner of a sound Aristotelian syllogism,[9] enabled him to conceive of the study (*nazar*) of philosophy as being immune from any "connotations of uncertain methods".[10] It was because of this assumed immunity of philosophy to methodological error that he came to believe in the possibility of philosophical reasoning achieving a knowledge of the "content of the *inner* world"[11] as well as encompassing a knowledge of the *outer* world. The locution, "content of the inner world", refers to the world of spiritual realities as described within the context of Islam. Averroës clearly sought a role for philosophy that was legally permitted by the Islamic religion and in harmony with it. He thought, as a Muslim, that to reflect upon the external natural world and inner human experience was to reflect upon God and that such rational reflection was in perfect accord with Quranic injunction.

The difficulty was that Averroës committed himself, at least philosophically, to a rather narrow form of Aristotelian deductive rationality. From the perspective of Ibn ʿArabi this commitment underestimates the necessary and vital role of direct epistemic access to ultimate spiritual realities. Philosophy, as demonstrative science, is simply incapable of grasping the experiential domain of the mystical. Equally, from the perspective of modern philosophy, scientific knowledge of the empirical world is far from being based on "indubitable demonstrative premises" as Averroës presumed. Averroës' belief in the epistemological adequacy of Aristotelian rationality to deal with the matters to which he was deeply committed was his Achilles heel: it can neither account for the nature of mystical knowledge, nor does

it constitute an adequate account of the logic of science.

For modern philosophers of science such as Popper, Kuhn and Feyeraband,[12] Averroës would be regarded as simply failing to recognize the conjectural, conceptual and contingent grounds of the scientific enterprise. For contemporary theorists science does not rest on the indubitable basis which Averroës seemed to wish for it. Of course, this is not to deny the logic and rationality of science but this does not make science indubitable in the way it was considered it to be by Averroës.

As we have noted, Ibn ʿArabi categorically insists that it is not reasoning (demonstrative or otherwise) which leads to knowledge of the Real but, rather, divine inspiration. Ibn ʿArabi's response to Averroës' question – "What solution have you found as a result of mystical illumination and divine inspiration? Does it coincide with what is arrived at by speculative thought?"[13] – raises the more general question of what Ibn ʿArabi considers speculative thought can come to know about God.

The most positive aspect of reflective thinking derives from the fact, according to Ibn ʿArabi, that it is a divine gift found only in human beings. But it is also a test and a trial. It can at most lead to the acknowledgement that knowledge of God cannot be attained through one's own rational resources. Reflective thinking, in this respect, *positively* attests to the impotence and incapacity of human beings to reach the knowledge of the Real via unaided reason. Reflective reason can recognize not only its own limitations but also the manner in which it limits – it can discover its own unsatisfactoriness when it comes to the knowledge inherent in God and of God. What reflective thinking can establish is the incomparability of God through the method of *via negativa*, that is, the method of attempting to show what God is not; for example, God is not corporeal, He is not temporal, and so on. And yet even this would lead to an overly transcendent view of God, ultimately incompatible with Ibn ʿArabi's *wahdat al-wujud*.

Summarily, reflective thinking is regarded by Ibn ʿArabi as unreliable in a number of inter-related senses: firstly, rather than being the means by which spiritual realities can be achieved, it is, simply, an inappropriate method; secondly, it is unreliable because reason

acts as a "veil"[14] which constricts and binds reality within its own rational schemas and often preoccupies the thinker with other than the Real; thirdly, reason is unreliable because reason for the men of rational faculties becomes the ultimate arbiter of truth and the epistemological gold standard; fourthly, cognitive acts are generally thought to imply the separate ontological identity of the thinker from God and thereby they implicitly deny *wahdat al-wujud* and, fifthly, human reason can only accept what is consistent with its own canons, and its canons deny the existence of what is self-contradictory or logically impossible.[15] This last point is a crucial one which needs further clarification.

When the knowers of God enter the universe of spiritual meanings they are in the presence, Ibn ʿArabi informs us, of a reality in which what is hidden to the rational faculty, and therefore sometimes deemed impossible by it, actually occurs and is witnessed. This world is referred to in Ibn ʿArabi studies as the intermediate objective world of the divine creative imagination.[16] As James Morris carefully points out, Ibn ʿArabi draws a decisive distinction "between each individual's 'self-deluding imagination' and the ongoing Divine 'Imaging' underlying all creation".[17]

Nevertheless, in whatever way we may wish to describe the divine imaginative presence, a central feature of it, according to Ibn ʿArabi, is that it is a spiritual reality teeming with the impossible and the coincidence of opposites. The unaided rational faculty has no direct access to this world and cannot countenance its true reality. It is the world where "the impossible is given form". Ibn ʿArabi tells us: "sense perception is the nearest thing to the imagination, since imagination takes forms from sense-perception, then it discloses meanings through those sensory forms". In this way, continues Ibn ʿArabi, "it sees knowledge in the form of milk, honey, wine, and pearls. … It sees religion in the form of a cord ... the Real in the form of a human being or a light."[18]

Ibn ʿArabi paints this extraordinary picture of an ontological realm in which spiritual meanings are given tangible form and tangible forms become subtle spiritual meanings. This is the reality where the substrata of phenomenal forms are forever newly created with profound spiritual meanings. It is in this presence that the foundations of