

**ASPECTS OF IBN SINA'S METAPHYSICS,  
PSYCHOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

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*Ibn Sina was a man of astonishing versatility, excelling not only in several branches of philosophy and religion but also in the art of medicine, politics and administration. This article is an attempt to give a glimpse of his many sided genius by adumbrating some of his interesting ideas in the field of metaphysics, psychology and epistemology. For Ibn Sina, God is the eternal, unmoved first mover, who exists necessarily by His own nature and who eternally generates the first created being, a pure intelligence, by a creative act of thinking. Souls are vegetable, animal, and human; the human soul is characterized by the faculties of growth, reproduction, nutrition, motion, perception, and reason. There are five external senses and five internal senses. The writer concludes by opining that Ibn Sina's thought has had a powerful impact not only on the subsequent history of Muslim philosophy but also on Christian and Jewish thinkers.*

Abu Ali Al-Husain Ibn Abdullah Ibn Sina (370-428) (980-1037) known familiarly as Ibn Sina or Avicenna was born in 370/980 in Afshana in the province of Bukhara which was at that time under the sovereignty of the Samanid Amir Nuh the Second. Many interesting details of his life may be known from his Autobiography which was recorded by his pupil Ubaidullah al-Juzjani. There can hardly be any doubt that Ibn Sina was a child prodigy whose intellectual potential was ably exploited by his discerning father who educated the young Abu Ali with infinite care. Learned teachers began by giving him religious instruction. After his study of the Quran and Hadith, Ibn Sina went on to study law and the various branches of the philosophical sciences. He acquired knowledge of medicine simply by reading books and was a well-known physician at the age of seventeen. He

served the Shi'ah rulers of Persia as physician and minister. From the year 389/999 when Bukhara was invaded by Mahmud of Ghazni until 428/1037 when Ibn Sina died of colic in Hamadan, he vacillated between Khurasan, Isfahan and Hamadan in the service of rival Buwayhid princes.

Ibn Sina was a man of astonishing versatility. George Sarton has described him as the most famous scientist and philosopher of Islam and one of the greatest of all races, places and times (Studies in Muslim Philosophy by M.S. Sheikh, Lahore, 1962 p. 87). Besides being one of Islam's most celebrated philosophers, he was a renowned author of texts on religion and medicine, a court scholar, a physician, a politician and an administrator. Ibn Sina wrote more than two hundred books (Islamic Studies, S.H. Nasr, Beirut, 1969 p. 44). Of these the best known are: *al-Qanun*, *Kitab al-Shifa*, *Kitab al-Najat*, *al-Asharat wa'l-tanbihat* and his last series of treatises *The Visionary Narratives* or *Recitals*. Most of Ibn Sina's works are divided into four parts pertaining to logic, physics, mathematics and metaphysics respectively.

Much has been written about Aristotle's influence on Ibn Sina and while it would be manifestly unjust to regard Ibn Sina merely as a follower of Aristotle, it is undoubtedly true, as Dr. Hosein Nasr has pointed out, that Ibn Sina learnt a lot from Aristotle (Islamic Studies p. 47). Ibn Sina always regarded himself as an Aristotelian but his Aristotelianism is tinted by Neoplatonism and Stoicism and modified by his religious beliefs.

Important divergences from Aristotle may be seen in Ibn Sina's notion of God, his doctrine of creation and his cosmology. For Aristotle the distinction between essence and existence had been only a logical one, whereas for Ibn Sina it was an ontological one. For Ibn Sina God is not only the eternal, unchanging, immaterial Unmoved Mover but also a being whose existence is necessary because his essence is identical with his being. In all beings other than God the essence is separated from existence. From the fact that all beings in whom essence and existence are separated must come into existence through the agency of one in whom this separation does not exist, an inference may be drawn, namely, that there are two categories of being — the possible and the necessary. In several writings (including *al-Risalat al-Arshiyah*). Ibn Sina seeks to prove not only the existence — but adhering to Islamic monotheism — also the unity of a Necessary Being. Professor Arberry observes: "Since it is thus established that the Necessary Being cannot be two, but is all truth, then by virtue of His Essential Reality, in respect of which

He is a Truth. He is United and One, and no other shares with Him in that Unity; however the all-Truth attains existence, it is through Himself" (Avicenna on Theology, p. 26).

The presence of multiplicity in the face of unity is a problem which has vexed philosophers through the ages and Ibn Sina seeks to solve it by formulating an emanationistic theory of creation. God who stands at the apex of the hierarchical scale of being, brings into existence the pure spirit which is called the primary cause by a creative act of thought. Since in a pure intelligence there is no bifurcation between intellect and will, God can create simply by thinking the first created being or the first. Intelligence, too, can create by thinking, but being finite it creates in a different way. When it contemplates God, it creates the second intelligence. When it contemplates itself and becomes aware of its contingent nature which is characterised by potentiality, it creates the first celestial sphere and its soul. The celestial sphere being attached to a body does not possess pure intelligence and therefore does not create but it seeks to perfect itself by circular motion. The Second Intelligence, by contemplating the first Intelligence and itself, produces the third Intelligence and the body and soul of the Second celestial sphere which contains the stars. In a similar way the spheres of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon are produced. The Tenth Intelligence produces not a sphere, but sublunar things which come about as the four Aristotelian elements combine and recombine under the influence of the celestial spheres. It may be pointed out here that Ibn Sina's theory of emanation, particularly his description of the soul's journey through the Cosmos as given in his last work, *The Visionary Recitals* is more reminiscent of Plato than of Aristotle being more symbolic than concrete (Islamic Studies, p. 47).

Disagreeing with theologians, Ibn Sina holds, as Aristotle did, that the process of creation is not a temporal process and that it is not creation out of nothing (creation ex-nihilo). Creation is not a temporal event because time is the measure of change and presupposes the existence of matter. It is not a temporal process because a cause must be contemporaneous with its effect. It is not creation out of nothing because form can only be given to matter which already exists. Therefore God, matter, the cosmos, and creation itself, are eternal. All things emanate from the thinking of God who is a Necessary Being and who contemplates himself necessarily. The theory of emanation suggests not only a non-temporal sequence of active, efficient causes

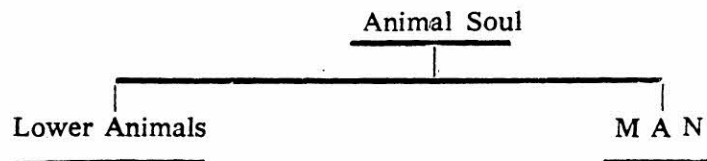
which are rooted in the supreme, efficient cause, but also a hierarchy of essences following from one another in sequence. Unlike Aristotle's God, Ibn Sina's Divine Mover knows the cosmos in detail since it is the result of his contemplation of his own essence. Ibn Sina's theory of emanation was intended to supplement, with the assistance of the Neo-platonic theory of emanation, "the meagre and untenable view of God formulated by Aristotle according to whom there was no passage from God, the One, to the world, the many" (F. Rahman "Ibn Sina" A History of Muslim Philosophy, Vol. 1 Wiesbaden. 1963 pp. 482-83).

Ibn Sina's ideas had profound influence on many subsequent philosophers. "Many, if not all, of the later Christian philosophers appreciated the proof of God's existence from the evidence of contingent things, the notion of God as an agent, the step in the direction of a suitable creation theory, the doctrine of intelligences as a foundation for a study of angels, God's knowledge of the world, and the identity of essence and existence in God but their sharp separation in other things. They objected to the eternity of the world, the denial of creation ex-nihilo, the piecemeal emanation of the created world, the determinism, and the doctrine of the Agent Intellect". (Magill and McGreal: Masterpieces of World Philosophy. London 1963. p. 280).

Ibn Sina's psychology bears the obvious imprint of Aristotle's work, particularly the *De anima*. Like Aristotle, Ibn Sina classifies the souls as vegetable, animal and human. The vegetable should possess the faculties of growth, reproduction and nutrition. The animal soul had these faculties plus those of perception and notion. The faculty of motion is in fact a double one. There is a psychic faculty which has the characteristic of anger and desire propelling either away from or towards an object. There is also a physical faculty which controls the muscles and actually moves the body. The human being, in addition to all the other faculties, has the faculty of reason.

Ibn Sina differentiates between five external senses and five internal senses. The five external senses operate when the sensed object makes an impression on the physical sense organ. For example, when an object receives a ray of light, an image is transmitted through the transparent medium. This image is received by the vitreous humour of the eye where it is apprehended by the psychic faculty of sight. Iqbal has pointed out that Ibn Sina's view of the various powers of the soul can be thus represented:

1. Manifestation as unconscious activity:
  - a) Working in different directions (vegetable soul)
    - i) Assimilation
    - ii) Growth
    - iii) Reproduction.
  - b) Working in one direction and securing uniformity of action — Growth of temperament.
2. Manifestation as conscious activity —
  - a) As directed to more than one object —



- Lower Animals
- A. Perceptive Powers
  - B. Motive powers (desire of pleasure and avoidance of pain)

- M A N
- A. Perceptive Powers
    - a) Five external senses
    - b) Five internal senses.
      - i) Sensorium
      - ii) Retention of images.
      - iii) Conception.
      - iv) Imagination.
      - v) Memory.

These constitute the five internal senses of the soul which, in man, manifests itself as progressive reason, developing from human to angelic and prophetic reason.

B. Motive Powers — will.

- b) As directed to one object — the soul of the spheres which continue in one uniform motion.

(The Development of Metaphysics in Persia Lahore, 1964, pp. 34-35).

Ibn Sina's analysis of the internal senses goes considerably beyond that of Aristotle who did not distinguish explicitly between the internal and external senses. As Dr. Rahman observes with reference to Ibn Sina: "His doctrine of the internal senses has no precedent in the history of philosophy." (A History of Muslim Philosophy. Vol. I, p 495). The internal senses are fantasy or common sense, representation, imagination, the estimative sense, and the recollective or retentive sense. Each faculty is unique and connected with a different part of the brain. The common sense (*sensus communis*) is the seat of all the senses. It receives sense-data and integrates them into precepts. Representation or sense memory preserves the data received by the common sense. The imaginative faculty separates and combines the images preserved by representation. The estimative faculty or 'wahm' is the most important internal faculty and detects the effects of inanimate things and the intentions of animate things and the intentions of animate things determining their harmfulness or usefulness. It is, in fact, the basis of our character whether influenced or uninfluenced by reason. The "doctrine of 'wahm' is the most original element in Ibn Sina's psychological teaching and comes very close to what some modern psychologists have described as the nervous response of the subject to a given object" (A History of Muslim Philosophy—Vol. I p. 494). For Aristotle the function of the estimative faculty is performed by imagination or perception itself, but Ibn Sina points out that imagination or perception can inform only about perceptual qualities (e.g. size, shape, colour etc.) and not about the intentions or the inner meaning of a thing. In its early recurrences, the estimative faculty may be seen at work in instinctive reactions such as sheep's awareness that the wolf is an enemy from which it should flee. Later it also seems to work by association. The recollective faculty preserves the judgement of the estimative faculty just as the representative faculty preserves the data received by the common sense.

Ibn Sina divides reason into the practical and theoretic faculties. Practical reason or active intelligence is that on which morality depends. Theoretical reason or speculative intelligence is that by means of which we also abstract thinking (Studies in Muslim Philosophy p. 93) with the assistance of the latter, the former develops fundamental moral principles (e.g. "Stealing is wrong") It is responsible for the consideration of purposes. It initiates behaviour and causes responses such as shame and

laughter. The theoretic faculty is to be found in varying degrees. The faculty may be dormant, or partially developed to the point of grasping primary principles of thinking, or developed to the point of grasping secondary principles as well. When the Political Intellect exercises its capacities and thinks, it is called the Active or Acquired Intellect. The Potential Intellect cannot become the Active Intellect unless it is activated by the Tenth Intelligence and is able to complete the process of abstracting forms from matter. Theoretic reason is able to contemplate pure forms by means of the external and internal senses. Highly-bested individuals such as prophets and seers can by-pass the process of abstraction because the Agent Intellect directly illuminates their minds.

Ibn Sina, unlike Aristotle, does not hold that form is restricted to its occurrence in matter. However, he does not quite attain the position of a Platonic realist "for he does not admit that a form can exist or subsist by itself. He introduces the famous doctrine of *ante rem*, *in rebus*, and *post rem*, a doctrine accepted later by Aquinas and others as the solution to the problem of universals. The essence are *ante rem* insofar as they are the exemplars in the Giver of Forms, *in rebus* insofar as they are manifested in sensible objects, and *post rem* insofar as they are grasped free of material considerations by the human intellect" (Masterpieces of World Philosophy, p. 282).

Knowledge for Ibn Sina consists of discovering the necessary relations between universals. The relations grasped indirectly by syllogistic reasoning and directly by intuitive apprehension. While seeming to think that ideally speaking—knowledge is derived by reason from universals and self-evident truths, Ibn Sina does admit that much of our knowledge, though certain, is partly based on experience. In experience one notes the constant conjunction or disjunction between things (e.g. between 'man' and 'rationality' between 'day' and 'night') and thereby acquires knowledge of necessary truths. But though assisted by external and internal senses as providers of data, reason does not operate through physical organs since it knows itself, is not distracted by violent stimuli as the eye is chased by a brilliant ray, and is essentially immaterial.

As Iqbal has pointed out, in his fragment on "Nafs" (Soul) Ibn Sina seeks to prove that a material accompaniment is not ne-



cessary to the soul (The Development of Metaphysics in Persia p. 35). To substantiate the view that the soul is an immaterial substance, Ibn Sina advances his celebrated "man in the void" argument which had much deep influence on later philosophers particularly Descartes, the father of modern philosophy. Ibn Sina asks us to imagine a man created in a void, whose physical parts are separated from him in such a way that he has no sensation of them. He could then have no experience of his body or the external world. Nonetheless he would still be conscious of himself. Consequently, the self he is conscious of, must be an immaterial thing. Also, since he can think of himself without thinking that he has a body, having a body is inessential to being a self and therefore does not form a part of the self's definition. The association between the body and soul is accidental. Just as the pilot is not the form of the ship so the soul is not the form of the body. It is an entelechy because it governs and guides the body. The soul does not exist prior to the existence of the body but is created when there is a body suitable to it. The soul is influenced by the nature of the body which it inhabits and the body is affected by the circumstances which confront it. Since the soul is a simple substance it does not die with the body but passes on into the hereafter.

"Love" is an important concept in Ibn Sina's philosophy and he defines it as the appreciation of Beauty from the standpoint of this definition. Ibn Sina explains that there are three categories of being:-

1. Things which are at the highest point of perfection.
2. Things which are at the lowest point of perfection.
3. Things which are in between the two points. This third category does not really exist since all things have either reached the acme of perfection or are striving towards it. (The Development of Metaphysics in Persia pp. 32-33).

Ibn Sina envisages all change as the result of the desire of all beings to reach the perfection which belongs to the necessary Being (Islamic Studies p. 46). The entire universe is moved by the power of love towards the One Supreme Beauty. M.A Hashem is quite right in observing that Ibn Sina anticipated the modern theory of Emergent Evolution (Essentials of Muslim Philosophy, Kushtia, 1963 p. 202) which regards the emergence of the higher from the lower as being due to a driving force welling



up from below and drawing upwards through activity. Ibn Sina's theory of love finds a Beautiful expression in the following lines by Iqbal:

کہنے لگا چاند ! ہم نشینوں !  
اے مرزے شب کے خوشہ چینو !  
جنبش سے ہے زندگی جہاں کی  
یہ رسم قدیم ہے یہاں کی  
ہے دوڑتا اشہب زمانہ  
کہا کہا کے طلب کا تازیانہ  
انجام ہے اس خرام کا حسن  
آغاز ہے عشق ' انتہا حسن

(Oh my companions', said the moon,  
'You who nights' harvest-acres' glean,  
On motion all the world's life hangs:  
Such is the ancient doom of things  
Swift runs the shadowy steed of time  
Lashed by desires' whip into foam,  
And what is the goal of all this waste?  
Its cradle love, beauty its quest).

(Translation by V. Kiernan in Poems  
from Iqbal. London 1955 p. 11).

In the short space of this essay, it is not possible to do justice to any part of Ibn Sina's philosophy. All that has been attempted is to throw light on some important and interesting aspects of Ibn Sina's metaphysics, psychology and epistemology. As a conclusion it would be quite correct to observe that Ibn Sina has been one of the most influential philosophers in the world. His thought has had a powerful impact not only on the subsequent history of Muslim philosophy but also on Christian and Jewish thinkers. He learnt much from the Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Stoic traditions and place it in the perspective of the Islamic world-view in such a way that he was able to

make a mark on both Eastern and Western thought. As Dr. Rahman observes, "The influence of Ibn Sina's thought has been enormous. In the East, indeed, his system has dominated the Muslim philosophical tradition right down to the modern era . . . . The influence of his thought in the West has been profound and far-reaching" (A History of Muslim Philosophy, Vol. I, pp. 504-505).

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