

Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The Al-Ṭūsī, Al-Qūnawī Correspondence

Author(s): William C. Chittick

Source: *Religious Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 87-104

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20005713>

Accessed: 24/03/2011 09:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Religious Studies*.

WILLIAM C. CHITTICK

MYSTICISM VERSUS PHILOSOPHY IN EARLIER
ISLAMIC HISTORY: THE AL-ṬŪSĪ, AL-QŪNAWĪ
CORRESPONDENCE

MYSTICISM, PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

To say 'mysticism versus philosophy' in the context of Islamic civilization means something far different from what it has come to signify in the West, where many philosophers have looked upon mysticism as the abandonment of any attempt to reconcile religious data with intelligent thought. Certainly the Muslim mystics and philosophers sometimes display a certain mutual opposition and antagonism, but never does their relationship even approach incompatibility.

The debates and discussions between the two schools are concerned mainly with the limitations and shortcomings of their respective methods of acquiring knowledge. Thus Peripatetic philosophers¹ such as Avicenna accept the possibility and even the reality of a direct, mystical apprehension of transcendent and supra-rational truths. What they question is more on the order of how one person can convey this experience to another, or how the latter can be certain of the validity of the former's vision. For their part, the Sufis or Muslim mystics do not deny the validity of many of the philosophers' findings. They merely hold that the philosophers cannot go beyond a certain point, and that therefore none of the philosophical discussions concerned with such subjects as metaphysics can carry any authority.

At the same time, many Sufis were familiar with philosophy, and many philosophers were also mystics, especially in the later periods of Islamic history. Avicenna, the greatest of the Peripatetics, wrote 'visionary recitals' and spoke of the special modes of knowledge open to mystics after long spiritual travail, but not accessible to the unilluminated intellect.² The famous mathematician, philosopher and poet, 'Umar Khayyām, divided the seekers after knowledge into four categories and placed the Sufis at the highest stage.³ And such Sufis as 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī and Ibn al-'Arabī were thoroughly familiar with Peripatetic philosophy and made use of its terminology to explain mystical ideas.

But the Sufis did not accept everything the philosophers said, nor vice

¹ The Peripatetics or followers of Aristotle are the 'philosophers' (*al-falāsifah*) *par excellence* in Islamic civilization; throughout this article we will be referring to their particular school and for the most part will leave aside other figures who can also be called 'philosophers' in the traditional Islamic sense. See S. H. Nasr, 'The Meaning and Role of "Philosophy" in Islam', *Studia Islamica*, xxxvii (1973), 57-80.

² See H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Princeton, 1960).

³ S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 33-4.

versa. The very fact that we may speak of two independent schools of thought shows that the two groups offered different explanations of the nature of things. A good deal of critical interchange between the two schools took place, all of which, however, served to bring Sufism and philosophy closer together rather than to drive them farther apart. In general, the later we move in Islamic history – especially in Iran, where philosophy remained vigorously alive – the more interchange and harmony we find between the two perspectives.

The creative tension between philosophy and Sufism was augmented by their interplay with a third basic perspective in Islamic thought, that of scholastic theology or *Kalām*. The theologians trusted neither the philosophers nor the Sufis and felt that their claims to have discovered the truth of things were invalid. In the minds of the theologians, knowledge of the truth could only come through a third method to which the other two groups paid insufficient attention. Again, the basic difference in perspective between the theologians and the other two groups comes down to the question of the method for acquiring knowledge and attaining truth.

To understand the interrelationships among these three basic perspectives in earlier Islamic thought, it may be useful to examine their differing views on this problem of the source of knowledge and truth. Each of the schools gives its own particular answer to the question, ‘What is the most reliable method for gaining knowledge concerning the nature of things and God?’

Before considering this problem, however, it should be emphasized that this relatively clear distinction among the three perspectives of philosophy, Sufism and theology becomes increasingly clouded with the passage of time. From the sixth century A.H. (twelfth century A.D.) onward, more and more figures appear who speak from the points of view of two or even all three schools, and who gradually begin to combine the perspectives. In later Islamic history, especially from the Safavid period onward in Iran, it is often impossible to classify a particular thinker as only a philosopher, or a theologian, or a Sufi. The perspective of a Mullā Ṣadrā or a Sabziwārī can best be referred to by other terms, such as ‘theosophy’ – in the etymological sense – (*al-ḥikmat al-ilāhiyyah*). For in fact, what such figures represent is an intellectual synthesis within which rational, philosophical speculation is combined with the mystical intuitions of the Sufis, the Koranic exegesis of the theologians, and a thorough familiarity with the Shi’ite *ḥadīth* literature, which discusses the Divine Unity in technical terms peculiar to itself.¹

* * *

¹ See S. H. Nasr, ‘Renaissance in Iran – Ḥāji Mulla Hādi Sabziwārī’, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. by M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden, 1963–6), II, 1316–32; also his ‘Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzi (Mullā Ṣadrā)’ in the same work, II, 952–61; also his *Sadr al-Din Shirazi and His Transcendent Theosophy* (Tehran–London, 1978).

In general, the Peripatetic philosophers, such as Avicenna, al-Kindī, and al-Fārābī, supported the premise that the 'intellect' (*al-'aql*), unaided by revelation or mystical 'unveiling' (*kashf*) was a sufficient guide for man to understand the realities of things and to attain ultimate truth. They did maintain that the very act of acquiring knowledge entails a kind of illumination by the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*), but their emphasis was upon the rational knowledge that any human being could attain through the healthy functioning of his mind without any special divine aid or grace.

The Sufis, such as Bāyazīd, Rūmī and Ibn al-'Arabī, held that the limited, human intellect alone was insufficient and misleading, and that man could not attain ultimate truth without a personal, intimate and direct knowledge resulting from the removal of some or all of the veils separating man from God. In their view, this knowledge is given by God himself to certain of his elect servants, and it must be based on the outward support of his revelation to man, i.e. the Koran. They called this knowledge by such names as 'unveiling' (*kashf*), 'direct vision' (*shuhūd*), 'contemplation' (*mushāhadah*) and 'direct tasting' (*dhawq*).

Finally the theologians, such as al-Ash'arī, maintained that truth could only be found through the Koranic revelation, and that both intellect and unveiling tended to be misleading.

This scheme is vastly oversimplified, but can be a useful means to separate the main perspectives in earlier Islamic thought. Complications arise because the division is based upon the *emphasis* a particular school places upon a given mode of knowledge. To gain an accurate view of the situation, one must also take into account the importance each school gives to the other perspectives and the individual variations found from figure to figure. In practice, many members of each school made use of the other perspectives to differing degrees. It was pointed out above that the perspectives and tools of Sufism and Peripatetic philosophy became intermingled to different degrees in various figures. The same holds true for theology in its relationship with the other two perspectives. A theologian like al-Ghazzālī was also a Sufi (although he became known in the West as a Peripatetic philosopher because of the Latin translation of his synopsis of the philosophers' views, which he wrote in order to refute them). And one like Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, however much he criticized the philosophers, made thorough use of their rational techniques.

Then again, from a certain point of view the position of the Sufis concerning revelation was almost identical to that of the theologians. For the Sufis also maintained that all knowledge must be judged according to the standard provided by the Koran and *Ḥadīth*. They constantly took pains to declare that their views were only clarifications of what is contained in the revelation and in no way conflicted with it. They held that any data received

through unveiling must be disregarded if it contradicts the text of the Koran.¹ But at the same time, they felt that a true understanding of the Koran and *Hadīth* could only come through unveiling. Without it, the views of the theologians remained pure opinion, or rational explanations of a sacred text of supra-human, and thus supra-rational, origin. So although the theologians and Sufis agreed in principle upon the primary importance of revelation, in practice many of their views diverged sharply.

The perspectives of Sufism and theology were similar in another important respect, i.e., in the fact that both laid claim to a knowledge concerned primarily with religion. And because of religion's very nature, the two schools could not limit themselves to explaining Islam's principles and teachings; they also had to stress the absolute importance of *practising* what they preached. The theologians held that man must believe in the Koran, then follow its directives. The Sufis said that before one can attain personal and direct understanding of Divine Truth through unveiling, he must 'polish the mirror of the heart', which meant both practising the Sharī'ah or exoteric Law and following the Ṭarīqah or spiritual Way. As for the philosophers, they did not find it necessary to speak of practice in their purely philosophical expositions, although they often did in other works. Almost all of them believed in and practised Islam, but by and large this is not a necessary part of their perspective. One can read long philosophical and metaphysical tracts and remain unconcerned with the practical teachings of religion. Peripatetic philosophy did not *demand* that one follow the Law or the Way. Nevertheless, as developed by the Muslims – as well as by the Jewish and Christian philosophers – it did provide a view of reality perfectly harmonious with faith in God and the practice of religion.

'INTELLECT' IN THE THREE PERSPECTIVES

We can form some idea of the complexity of the interrelationships among these three perspectives through considering the different meanings contained in the one Arabic word 'intellect', '*aql*', and analyzing how each school may be said to derive its knowledge from a single source, which we might refer to as the 'Intellect' with a capital 'I'.

The root meaning of '*aql*' is 'to tie', 'to bind'. Hence 'intellect' implies limitation and constriction. Knowledge acquired through it limits and defines the ineffable Truth, which ultimately, in its very Essence, remains Nondelimited (*muṭlaq*) and Unknown (*maǧhūl*). In this sense, the word '*aql*' can perhaps best be translated as 'reason', in order to indicate that it refers to a means of acquiring knowledge which is limited to the purely human

¹ Al-Qūnawī is extremely explicit about this point in his work *Taḥṣīrat al-mubtadi' wa tadhkīrat al-muntahī*, which I have translated in a forthcoming book on him.

plane and cannot go beyond it.¹ When the Sufis employ the term, they usually do so to emphasize this limitative and constricting quality of the ordinary human faculty of knowledge.

But the word '*aql*' is also employed in another sense, that is, to refer to the first creation of God, in keeping with the saying of the Prophet: 'The first thing created by God was the Intellect'. In this sense the Intellect is identical with the 'Greatest Spirit' (*al-rūḥ al-a'zam*) and the 'Supreme Pen' (*al-qalam al-a'lā*).² It possesses a full and direct knowledge of God and stands beyond any merely human comprehension, although the prophets and great saints are able to achieve some degree of identification with it. This identification is one of the causes of what the Sufis refer to as 'unveiling'.

One can usually understand from the context to which of the two basic senses of the word '*aql*' an author is referring. The Sufis in particular pay close attention to this distinction between the 'reason' – which we will translate as 'intellect' with a lower case 'i' as a reminder that only one word is employed in Arabic – and the 'Intellect'. Sometimes they add the qualifiers 'universal' (*kullī*) and 'particular' (*juz'ī*) to make the distinction completely clear. In the following verse, Rūmī employs one of these qualifiers in explaining why the Sufis avoid the term '*aql*' to refer to a positive human faculty: 'The particular intellect has disgraced the Intellect.'³ Here Rūmī is alluding to the fact that the philosophers, through upholding the authority of the intellect to support even their wrong opinions, have disgraced the Intellect to which the Sufis have access. So Sufis prefer such terms as 'unveiling' to prevent confusion between the two senses of the one term.

In another passage, Rūmī clarifies the relationship between the unaided human intellect and the Intellect from which Sufis receive their illumination. The unveiling of this (mystery) will not come from the meddlesome intellect: do service (to God) in order that it may become clear to you.

The philosopher is bound by things perceived by the intellect; the pure one (the Sufi) is he that rides like a prince upon the Intellect of intellect.

The Intellect of your intellect is the kernel; your intellect is the husk. The belly of animals is ever seeking husks.

He that seeks the kernel has a hundred loathings for the husk: in the eyes of the goodly, (only) the kernel is lawful, lawful.

When the husk, which is the intellect, offers a hundred demonstrations, how should the Universal Intellect ever take a step without certainty?

The intellect makes innumerable books completely black (with writing): the Intellect of intellect fills the horizons with the moon (of unveiling).⁴

¹ Certain of the 'theosophers' have pointed out another dimension of the symbolism of the word, to which I have not seen reference in the writings of the earlier figures: since the '*aql*' 'ties' and 'binds', and since on the human plane it reflects the First Intellect, it can serve to tie and bind man to God. There are innumerable references to this positive function of the '*aql*' throughout Islamic literature. To cite one significant early example, the sixth Shi'ite Imam said, 'The '*aql*' is that through which man worships the All-Merciful and gains paradise'. See W. C. Chittick, *A Shi'ite Anthology* (London, 1980), p. 55.

² See my forthcoming article, 'The Five Divine Presences: from al-Qūnawī to al-Qāṣārī'.

³ *Mathnawī*, ed. and trans. by R. A. Nicholson (London, 1925-40), v, 463 (my translation).

⁴ *Ibid.* iii, 2526-31.

* * *

According to the teachings of Islam and other traditions man is a 'microcosm'. Everything contained in the created world in the mode of 'particularized deployment' (*tafşıl*), in all the amplitude of the world's time and space and in all the different levels of its existence (*marātib wujūdihi*), is contained within the existence of individual man, but in the mode of 'summated unity' (*ijmāl*).¹ In the Islamic scheme man's intellect corresponds microcosmically to the macrocosmic Intellect, God's first creation.

Looking at the implications of the root meaning of the word 'aql, we can see why its two senses are equally appropriate. It is employed in the microcosmic sense because man's intellect delimits and defines man's perception of reality, thus giving it a logical and comprehensible coherence. In the macrocosmic sense, the word 'aql is employed because the theophany (*tajallī*) or outward manifestation (*zuhūr*) of God's Being which is called the 'world' (*al-ālam*: 'everything other than God') is different from God and incomparable to him by the very fact that it is his manifestation, and not he himself. So the Intellect, God's first creation, or Being's first outward manifestation, represents a delimitation and restriction of God's Nondelimited and Nonrestricted Being.

One of the Sufis explains the macrocosmic function of the Intellect in the following terms. It should be noted that he refers to the fact that, according to the Prophet himself, the Intellect is identified with the Supreme Pen, which 'writes' all the details of God's creation upon the 'Guarded Tablet' (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) before the creatures become manifest in the physical world. Literally the word 'aql signifies tying, binding and restricting. So it demands 'delimitation' (*taqyīd*). But... God, who is not delimited by any limitation – not even by that limitation which is the nondelimitation opposed to delimitation¹ – contradicts 'aql, the reality of which is binding and restricting. So this restriction and limitation becomes manifest first in the First Intellect, which 'bound' (*'aqala*) the light of the Nondelimited Theophany through its own special, delimiting preparedness. So God placed the Intellect in its place to make manifest this mystery, i.e. the mystery of limitation. Hence the reality of the Intellect is the delimitation of the Nondelimited Light. God said to it 'Write!' In other words, 'Delimit and collect My knowledge of My creation until the Day of Resurrection!'³

¹ For a Sufi view, see W. C. Chittick, 'The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jāmī', *Studia Islamica*, LXIX (1979), 135–57.

² This is a point to which Sufis such as Ibn al-'Arabī and al-Qūnawī often refer. By 'God' they mean God in the highest sense, the Godhead, or in their own terminology, the 'Essence' (*al-dhāt*) or 'Sheer Being' (*al-wujūd al-mahd*). If we say that God is 'Nondelimited', but do not qualify the statement as the author has done here, this means that he cannot be delimited in the usual sense. In other words, we are saying that Sheer and Nondelimited Being cannot manifest itself as the delimited existence which is called the 'world'; i.e. that there can be no creation. But this is absurd. So to say that God is Nondelimited in the sense the author means here signifies that he is not even delimited by nondelimitation, for he manifests himself in theophany precisely through delimitation. In himself he transcends the duality implied by the two terms. For a discussion of the doctrine of the 'Oneness of Being' upon which this teaching is based, see W. C. Chittick, 'Sadr al-Dīn Qūnawī on the Oneness of Being', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

³ Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (a disciple of al-Qūnawī), *Sharḥ fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, chapter on Shu'ayb; quoted by Jāmī in *Naqd al-nuṣūṣ*, ed. by W. C. Chittick (Tehran, 1977), p. 205.

* * *

Sufis, philosophers and theologians all acknowledged the possibility for man to attain various stations of spiritual perfection. By the nature of their perspective, the Sufis were much more explicit as to exactly what this possibility entailed, for it was their primary concern. But many philosophers, such as Avicenna, also discussed it.¹ They held that man could attain some degree of inward identification with the macrocosmic prototype of man's intellect, a prototype which they often referred to as the 'Active Intellect'.² And theologians like al-Ghazzālī referred to the possibilities of direct spiritual knowledge possessed by man.

But when Sufis discuss unveiling, they are not always referring to man's inward identification with the Intellect. According to them, the prophets and saints are manifestations of the 'Perfect Man', i.e. the Logos, who is the intermediary between God and creation, more highly exalted than even the First Intellect.³ In his inmost reality the Sufi may undergo an unveiling which results from his union with God himself and which thus precedes any form of creation. This is another reason the Sufis avoid the term '*aql*' to refer to unveiling.⁴ Instead, they call the locus of unveiling the 'Heart' (*al-qalb*), which is not restricted in any sense. For according to the words of God related by the Prophet, 'My heaven embraces Me not, nor My earth, but the Heart of My believing, gentle and meek servant does embrace Me.'

In short, the Sufis agree with the philosophers that man's intellect may be the source of sound knowledge, but they hold that this knowledge will be limited and indirect as long as man is not illuminated by the Intellect or by God himself. The philosophers can have no guarantee that they will attain such illumination. If they refuse to enter the Way of the Sufis, they can never attain it. Hence, in the words of Rūmī,

The leg of those who employ rational arguments is of wood: a wooden leg is very infirm.⁵

¹ See for example the ninth section (*namaʿat*) of his *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, on the 'Spiritual Stations of the Gnostics' (*maqāmāt al-ʿarīfīn*).

² See S. H. Nasr, 'Intellect and Intuition: Their Relationship from the Islamic Perspective', forthcoming.

³ See my articles 'The Perfect Man' and 'The Five Divine Presences'; also W. C. Chittick and P. L. Wilson, *Divine Flashes: The Lamāʿat of Fakhrud-dīn ʿIrāqī* (Classics of Western Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press), 1981, introduction.

⁴ Of course in European languages it is still valid to speak of the highest form of unveiling as deriving from the 'intellect', since this conforms to the terminology used by many figures in Christianity. But if one were to use this term to refer to what Sufis such as al-Qūnawī are speaking about, one must remember that it is not the translation of the word '*aql*', but rather of such expressions as 'Specific Face' (*al-wajh al-khāṣṣ*: the Face of God turned specifically towards a given individual without any intermediary, ultimately identifiable with that individual's 'immutable entity', *al-ʿayn al-thābit*, within God's knowledge 'prior' to creation). But since such Christian mystics as Eckhardt speak of something 'uncreated and uncreatable' at the inmost core of man's soul, and identify that something with the intellect, one would be justified in using the term to explain the Sufi concept. Eckhardt also refers to God as 'pure intellect', whereas no Muslim thinker would ever refer to God as '*aql*' in any sense (see for example Eckhardt's, *Defence*, ix, 8; viii, 6).

⁵ *Mathnawī*, i, 2128.

For their part the philosophers were wary of the Sufis' claims to inspired knowledge. Although they accepted the fundamental identity of the intellect and the Intellect, they felt that there should be no shortcuts to expressing the truth. The laws of logic and rational discourse should be observed so that the workings of the Intellect may be clearly explained on the discursive level and others may be able to understand. In no sense were they 'rationalists' in the modern sense, since they ascribed to the traditional cosmology, in which man's intellect is a potential source of knowledge above what can be attained through merely rationalistic argumentation.

* * *

Since the theologians felt that the only sure guide to truth was revelation, they criticized both the philosophers and the Sufis for making unwarranted claims of having fathomed the reality of things. But of course they could only understand the Koran through their minds, so they had no choice but to have recourse to the 'intellect' and to employ logical argumentation in their writings. Some of them also became Sufis, thus making use of unveiling to understand revelation.

In addition, viewed from the point of view of Islamic cosmology, 'revelation' is intimately connected to the Intellect. It represents a specific and providential crystallization of the truths known by the Intellect for the sake of a given people and historical period. The interrelationship between '*aql*' and revelation is succinctly expressed in a saying attributed to one of the Shi'ite Imams: 'The '*aql*' is a messenger (*rasūl*, i.e. prophet) from the inward; and the messenger is an '*aql*' from the outward.'

* * *

By now it should be clear that the three schools of theology, philosophy and Sufism all tended to emphasize a particular mode of attaining knowledge, which we have referred to as revelation, the intellect and unveiling. But numerous figures claimed access to two or even all three of these authorities. What ultimately determined to which school a person belonged was the overall emphasis of his writings. And many figures can be classified under two or even all three labels, depending upon our point of view.

Throughout Islamic history these three perspectives have been much more complementary than exclusive. This is illustrated to the fullest degree in the syntheses carried out by such figures as Mullā Ṣadrā. But long before his time, many thinkers were aware of this complementarity, especially when they themselves studied all three schools.

Nevertheless this could not be a complementarity among equals, since the three sources of knowledge, by definition, do not pertain to the same plane. In the religious universe accepted more or less by all three schools, the

intellect pertained to the microcosm; unveiling was an influx of the macrocosmic Intellect onto the individual, microcosmic plane, or a participation of the microcosm in certain dimensions of the macrocosm; and revelation represented an outward and concrete manifestation of God's uncreated Word delivered to humanity through the intermediary of Gabriel, who is often identified with the Intellect.

The hierarchical nature of revelation, unveiling and intellect is summarized in a particularly simple manner by al-Qūnawī in one of his Persian works. Although the philosophers and theologians might view the situation somewhat differently – in particular with reference to the conclusions al-Qūnawī wants to draw from his exposition – they would have difficulty rejecting his scheme in principle.

Man possesses stages, and in each stage there are specific perceptions, so that the perceptions of the subsequent stage are absent from the preceding stage. For example, the unborn child has specific perceptions, and in relation to its perception, the suckling infant's perceptions are 'unseen' (*ghayb*). So the stage of the suckling infant is beyond that of the unborn child. In the same way, the stage of the child who can differentiate (between right and wrong) in relation to the suckling infant is the same as the stage of the infant in relation to the unborn. Likewise, the stage of the person who controls his intellect is beyond that of the child who can only differentiate, the stage of sanctity (where unveiling takes place) is beyond that of the intellect, the stage of prophecy is beyond that of sanctity, 'And over every man of knowledge is one who knows' (Koran XII, 76).

It is impossible for the unborn child to perceive any of the objects of perception of the child, for it is imprisoned within the constricting limits of the womb and has not yet reached the open space of this world. And so it is in the other cases as well: whoever resides in a determined stage of man is incapable of grasping the objects of perception of the stage beyond his own. . . . The farthest limits of the men of intellect are the beginnings of the saints, and the farthest limits of the saints are the beginnings of the prophets.¹

In his Arabic works addressed to al-Ṭūsī, al-Qūnawī uses much more technical and philosophical language, but his message is essentially the same.

AL-QŪNAWĪ AND AL-ṬŪSĪ

Few scholars have attempted to clarify the interplay between various intellectual perspectives which led to Mullā Ṣadrā's synthesis. But it is clear that the gradual conciliation between the Peripatetic philosophers, claiming the preeminence of the intellect, and the Sufis, holding the superiority of unveiling, plays a central role in this development.

The epitome of Peripatetic thinkers and the archetypal exponent of the intellect in Islam is of course Abū 'Alī ibn Sīnā, or Avicenna (d. 428/1037). Although the attacks of al-Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī eclipsed his

¹ *Maṭāli'i-ī imān*, ed. by W. C. Chittick, *Sophia Perennis*, IV, 1 (1978), 71–2 (Persian section).

importance for some years, in the seventh/thirteenth century the philosophical works of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) revived Avicenna's influence. As a result the study of Avicenna, especially as seen through al-Ṭūsī's eyes in his commentary on Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, became a mainstay of intellectual life wherever philosophy was cultivated in the Islamic world.¹ Avicenna, then, may be viewed as a symbol for the 'Pole of the Intellect' in Islamic civilization, while Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī is his most influential follower.¹

If we want to name a 'Pole of Unveiling' to stand opposite Avicenna, we have a choice of several figures, such as Bāyazīd, Rūmī or Ibn al-'Arabī. In the present context I would like to choose the last of these three, since he was an 'intellectual' who was nevertheless opposed to the preeminence of the intellect. Other Sufis maintained the superiority of unveiling largely by criticizing the intellect's shortcomings. But Ibn al-'Arabī seems to be attempting to overwhelm the intellect by the sheer plethora of rational and supra-rational teachings he received through unveiling. He shows that wherever the intellect makes claims to attain knowledge, unveiling can claim to know much more. Yet he attempts to describe the nature of the cosmos and the reality of the soul in a language less purely symbolic, and much more 'rational', than that of the earlier Sufis. He avoids the aphoristic style of so many of his predecessors and in fact goes to the other extreme by elaborating his ideas in great detail. He presents complicated metaphysical and cosmological schemes making use of Peripatetic, theological, Koranic, astrological, alchemical, numerical and other terminology and data. He seems to be trying to exhaust the possible means of expressing Sufi teachings by making use of every vehicle at his disposal. And always there is an implicit appeal to the intellect, even though he disclaims its authority.

So Ibn al-'Arabī may be considered the 'Pole of Unveiling' in the sense that his incredibly voluminous writings³ assert in kaleidoscopic variety and under the guise of numerous kinds of symbols, images and rational demonstrations that unveiling is superior to the intellect not only for attaining man's spiritual well-being, but also for realizing the full potential of his rational and mental faculties.

Ibn al-'Arabī's most important disciple and follower is Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), a much neglected figure whose writings determine

¹ See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 45-7; also Nasr, 'Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī', *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. by C. H. Gillespie (New York, 1976), xiii, 508-14.

² Others may prefer to call Averroes Avicenna's most influential follower, but that is only true in the West. In the Islamic world itself, Averroes was practically unknown and unread. One can say that this is because Averroes extended Avicenna's teachings even further in the direction of emphasizing the superiority of the intellect and therefore in effect drew him further away from the perspectives of revelation and unveiling. But al-Ṭūsī moved Avicenna *toward* these two dimensions of Islam and therefore helped to make him a 'better Muslim' and more attractive to the great majority of intellectuals, who believed in the validity of the Koranic revelation.

³ See O. Yahia, *Histoire et classification de l'oeuvre Ibn al-'Arabī* (Damas, 1964).

the way in which Ibn al-‘Arabī will be interpreted by succeeding generations.¹ But if Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works are characterized by interminable discussions and profuse outpourings of inspired intuitions which often follow one another with little apparent rhyme or reason, al-Qūnawī’s works are marked by balanced, measured, sobre and epitomized demonstrations almost at the opposite extreme from those of his master. Were it not for the fact that al-Qūnawī defends his master’s theses from first to last, in particular on the question of the superiority of unveiling over the intellect, one would be tempted to call him the model of a rational and reasonable philosopher.

Al-Qūnawī, the spokesman for Ibn al-‘Arabī, and al-Ṭūsī, the reviver of Avicenna, died within a year of each other. While al-Qūnawī busied himself teaching the *ḥadīth* literature and training spiritual disciples in Konya, al-Ṭūsī assisted in directing the affairs of state under the conquering Mongol emperor Hūlāgū and somehow continued to find time to write, teach and carry out experiments at his observatory in Marāghah. Al-Qūnawī was the perfect embodiment of a sobre, intellectual Sufi; while al-Ṭūsī was the model of a rational, systematic philosopher, as well as a theologian, mathematician, astronomer and himself not uninformed about the mysteries of the Sufis.²

In the very personalities of these two figures we already see the beginnings of a rapprochement between Sufism and Peripatetic philosophy. Al-Qūnawī’s eminently reasonable mode of exposition often makes his style resemble that of a philosopher more than that of a Sufi. And al-Ṭūsī’s immersion in Shi‘ite theology and the practice of religion, as well as his thorough familiarity with Sufi teachings, make him incline naturally toward a more spiritual and less purely rational interpretation of the reality of things. Or we can say that he is naturally drawn toward that dimension of Avicenna’s personality represented by his esoteric teachings in such works as *Manṭiq al-mashriqīyyīn* or the last chapters of *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*.³

Thus it does not surprise us to see the correspondence between al-Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī as surpassingly cordial and mutually sympathetic. Both thinkers feel that the distance between the respective positions of the Peripatetics and the Sufis is not as great as it might seem and that a careful discussion of ideas and terminology will show great similarities. However, this is not to say that each does not maintain his distance. Al-Qūnawī addresses al-Ṭūsī as the foremost *philosopher* of the age, and al-Ṭūsī accepts this role in his answers, since he does not go outside of the Peripatetic position. And by the end of the correspondence we can still sense a wide chasm separating the two schools, centering, as al-Qūnawī so often emphasizes, upon the question of the validity of the knowledge acquired by the human intellect.

¹ See W. C. Chittick, ‘The Last Will and Testament of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Foremost Disciple and Some Notes on its Author’, *Sophia Perennis*, IV, 1 (Spring 1978), 43–58.

² This is obvious from his letter to al-Qūnawī (work 4) as well as such works as *Awṣāf al-ashrāf*, a book on Sufi ethics which he wrote to complement his *Nasirean Ethics*.

³ See Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, chapter 1; also H. Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*.

THE CORRESPONDENCE

In order to give the reader an idea of the contents of the correspondence, I will summarize briefly each of seven works involved.¹ The correspondence is divided into three parts. (A) A Persian letter from al-Qūnawī, accompanied by two Arabic treatises, one of which includes a number of questions. (B) An answering Persian letter from al-Ṭūsī, along with an Arabic treatise responding to the questions. (C) A second Persian letter from al-Qūnawī, followed by an Arabic treatise commenting upon al-Ṭūsī's answers. If these works were to be printed, al-Qūnawī's first treatise with questions would occupy about 60 pages, al-Ṭūsī's answers would take up 30 pages, and al-Qūnawī's final remarks 35. The letters would take up 3 to 10 pages each.

*Part A*1. *Al-Qūnawī's first letter*

After the usual formalized titles and salutations, al-Qūnawī notes that al-Ṭūsī's fame has spread throughout the world and that for a long time he has desired to meet him. Since destiny has prevented this, the next best thing is to open a correspondence. But such an exchange should be blessed by the fruits of al-Ṭūsī's knowledge. So al-Qūnawī encloses a treatise which he had written long ago concerning the 'Outcome of the Conclusions of Thought' (*ḥāṣil-i natā'ij-i afkār*), to which is attached a number of questions which are the result of discussions held with friends. He hopes that al-Ṭūsī will study them and send his own views.

2. *The first treatise*

This work, entitled 'The Treatise Exposing the Outcome of Thought, the Reason for the Disparity of the Religions and the Mystery of Guidance to the Noblest, Straightest Path' (*al-Risālat al-muṣṣiḥah 'an muntahā al-afkār wa sabab ikhtilāf al-umam wa-l-mūḍiḥah sirr al-ihtidā' ila-l-ṭarīq al-ashraf al-amam*) discusses primarily the inability of the intellect to gain knowledge of the realities of things as they are in themselves (*ḥaqā'iq al-ashyā' kamā hiya*). Al-Qūnawī divides knowledge into two kinds, that which can be attained independently through the intellect with the help of the perceptual faculties, and that which cannot be so attained, such as knowledge of God's Essence, his names and attributes, his acts and the manner in which he bestows existence upon them, the levels of existence and the manner in which they are arranged, etc. He then explains the necessity for the prophets and the

¹ I have prepared an edition of the main body of the correspondence (excluding work 3) from the following manuscripts, all of which are to be found in Istanbul. Works 2, 5 and 7: Şehid Ali Paşa 1415; Esad Efendi 1413, 3717; Ayasofya 1795, 2358; Hacı Beşir Ağa 355; H. Hüsnü Paşa 1160; Pertev Paşa 617; Carullah 2097; Hamidiye 188. Works 1, 4 and 6: Pertev Paşa 617; Ayasofya 2349, Bağdath Vehbi Efendi 2053, Üniversite A.4122, Hamidiye 188, Esad Efendi 3717. I have only seen one manuscript of work 3 (Amcazade Hüseyin Paşa 447), although Brockelmann mentions two more in his *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (vols. 1, p. 450; SI, p. 808).

saints, i.e. those to whom God has given knowledge of the above things. He clarifies the relationship of this class of men with the other two classes, the believers and unbelievers. He divides the two latter groups into a number of subgroups, and shows how each is delimited and defined by the share it receives from God's effusion (*fayd*) of existence and knowledge. Finally he discusses in great detail the weakness of the intellect and its inability to grasp the truth. Much of this final section is taken from the beginning of al-Qūnawī's *magnum opus*, a commentary on the opening chapter of the Koran.¹

In introducing the questions, al-Qūnawī remarks that they represent problems for which years before he had had trouble finding solutions. After presenting each question, he mentions most of the answers given by the Peripatetic philosophers and poses objections to each of them in turn. Then he usually summarizes his own views, which are fine philosophical statements of Ibn al-'Arabī's teachings. The space occupied by al-Qūnawī's questions is in fact more than that taken up by al-Ṭūsī's answers.

First question: Do you accept that the being (*wujūd*) of the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) is extraneous (*zā'id*) to its reality (*ḥaqīqah*), or do you hold that its being is identical with its quiddity (*māhiyyah*) and that it possesses no reality beyond being?

Second question: Are the possible quiddities (*al-māhiyyāt al-mumkinah*) 'made' (*maj'ūl*) or 'unmade' (*ghayr maj'ūl*)? In either case, if we consider them only in respect of the fact that they are quiddities, are they ontological things (*umūr wujūdiyyah*) – in the sense that they possess some kind of being – or are they things pertaining to nonexistence (*umūr 'adamiyyah*)?

Third question: If we consider 'all-pervading, shared being' (*al-wujūd al-'āmm al-mushtarak*) only in respect of its being, is it one of the possible-existents (*al-mumkināt*) or not? And if it is a possible-existent, does it possess a reality beyond the fact that it is being or not?

Fourth question: 'Nothing issues from the One but One'. From this axiom very important problems arise, such as the problem of the supernal intellects (*al-'uqūl*), the cause of their arrangement, and the cause of the manyness (*al-kathrah*) which issues forth from the First Intellect, which is viewed as a oneness (*waḥdah*). Here also we have the problem of God's Knowledge becoming attached to its objects in terms of universals and the denial of its attachment to particulars.

A comprehensive question which comprises a number of questions: What is the reality of the human soul (*al-nafs al-insāniyyah*)? What proof demonstrates its existence? What is the proof of its disengagement (*tajarrud*, i.e. from the world and the body), the eternity of its subsistence, and the claim that through the perfection which it realizes in this world it has no need for any planes following this one? What can be clarified and explained concerning

¹ *Tafsīr al-fāṭihah*, also called *Fjāz al-bayān fī tafsīr umm al-Qur'ān*, the only one of al-Qūnawī's Arabic works to have a modern edition. See the list of his works in my article, 'The Last Will and Testament'.

the way the soul governs the body? Does any proof exist to demonstrate the impossibility of its being able to govern numerous bodies and outward forms at a single moment, or the impossibility of certain souls attaining such a station through a perfection acquired as a result of knowledge and works in the present plane? Do you maintain that the soul's existence comes after the bodily constitution and that it becomes defined in keeping with the constitution, or that the soul was existent and differentiated before the body? In either case, did it possess knowledge of everything it now knows, but forgot it because of its attachment to the body? Or was it empty of every knowledge and attribute? Or did it know universals but not particulars?

A question comprising a number of questions: What proof can demonstrate that the human species cannot become extinct in the world? Is it not possible for it to become extinct not through the properties of celestial bodies, but through certain divine things known by God? What is the proof of the infinitude of the celestial powers (*al-quwā al-falakiyyah*) and the fact that they do not undergo change and corruption? What proof do you possess that the celestial bodies are empty of the properties and characteristics of nature?

Question: Since the soul cannot break its attachment to the body or to the properties of nature during life, how can it experience spiritual pains and joys? Likewise, what is the nature of the joys attributed to God?

Question: What is the reality of the effusion which issues from God?

Among the individual questions which can neither be proven nor disproven are the following:

The question of the regression of an infinite, existent series of causes and effects to an ultimate limit.

The relations between existents are infinite in man's eyes, but in relation to God's knowledge they must be finite. So how can the infinite derive from the finite?

Substance (*jawhar*) is not nullified by the nullification of one of its qualities, but if heat is nullified from fire, the fire is nullified.

Neither matter (*māddah*) nor form (*ṣūrah*) can be divided according to the view of the intellect. So how is it that when form becomes incarnated within matter and the two produce a body, then they may be divided?

3. 'Expectoration of an Ailing Breast and Gift of One who is Thankful' (*Nafthat al-maṣdūr wa tuḥfat al-shakūr*)

This work does not form an integral part of the correspondence. It consists of a long prayer (about 30 pages) in which al-Qūnawī, as he writes at the beginning of the treatise, 'discourses with the Lord in the form of the state which comprehends the two stations of Majesty and Beauty'. He makes clear in his second letter (work 6) that the work was sent to al-Ṭūsī without his knowledge by one of his disciples, and that it was not meant to accompany his letter and first treatise.

*Part B*4. *Al-Ṭūsī's letter*

Al-Ṭūsī warmly thanks al-Qūnawī for opening the correspondence, for he himself had long desired to meet al-Qūnawī and had even decided to write to him, but here as in other areas, al-Qūnawī has displayed his precedence over others. Al-Ṭūsī praises al-Qūnawī and his spiritual attainments in glowing language, which one might expect from one of al-Qūnawī's spiritual disciples, but which one is surprised to see coming from the greatest philosopher and one of the most powerful political figures of the age. Al-Ṭūsī thanks al-Qūnawī for sending the treatise and questions, and he apologizes if the answers he has enclosed are not satisfactory. Then he records his impression of al-Qūnawī's second treatise (3), illustrating his profound knowledge of Sufism. His remarks are slightly critical, and he finds it necessary to observe that al-Qūnawī has obviously written the work for beginners and intermediate adepts and that it does not represent al-Qūnawī's own spiritual attainments.

5. *Al-Ṭūsī's answers*

Al-Ṭūsī begins by praising the first half of al-Qūnawī's work. He says, 'I have made it a means for my true desires and an instrument for my hopes of certainty.' Then he proceeds to answer each of al-Qūnawī's questions. Since it is beyond the scope of the present paper to detail these answers – especially since the questions have been summarized far more than is necessary for clarity – I can only allude to a few salient points in al-Ṭūsī's work.

In discussing the reality of being, al-Ṭūsī attempts to avoid the pitfalls enumerated by al-Qūnawī by having recourse to the concept of 'gradation' (*tashkīk*), the fact that being, like light, becomes related to different realities in different degrees. In each case we can still speak of 'being', but its strength differs. In the same way light is light whether it appears in the sun, in a lamp or in a glowing ember. The concept of gradation becomes a mainstay of Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy, although the members of Ibn al-'Arabī's school do not discuss it, and, judging from al-Qūnawī's last treatise, they do not consider it a serious argument. Also in his first answer al-Ṭūsī comments upon al-Qūnawī's quotations from Avicenna, claiming that al-Qūnawī has misinterpreted him and that Avicenna does not want to say that man cannot attain knowledge of the realities of things through his intellect.

In replying to the second question, al-Ṭūsī expresses his surprise at the position al-Qūnawī had delineated as his own. He remarks that it resembles the views of the Mu'tazilites. As a result of al-Ṭūsī's objections, al-Qūnawī devotes a significant portion of his final treatise to clarifying his position on the quiddities (which Ibn al-'Arabī and his followers usually refer to as the 'immutable entities', *al-a'yān al-thābitah*) and explaining why it differs from that of the Mu'tazilites.

In answering the fourth question, al-Ṭūsī displays his scientific predilections, since he uses a mathematical style and example to explain the manner in which the many issue from the One without contradicting the axiom, ‘None issues from the One but One’. He also rejects the common notion that the Peripatetics deny God’s knowledge of the particulars, and demonstrates that their position demands that he know *all* things.

Part C

6. *Al-Qūnawī’s second letter*

After thanking al-Ṭūsī for his answers and praising him for the manner in which he has clarified the Peripatetic position, al-Qūnawī reviews his motives for having begun the correspondence. In the first place he had wanted to ‘open the door of friendship’. And in the second, ‘Concerning certain basic problems I had hoped to combine the conclusions derived from logical proofs and the fruits of unveiling and direct vision.’

Then al-Qūnawī apologizes that he had not been well when he prepared the first treatise. And he had sent it in haste because a mutual friend was departing upon a journey during which he would be seeing al-Ṭūsī. Moreover, it seems the copyist had made a number of mistakes, but al-Qūnawī had not been able to see the work again because of the hurry. So certain questions and problems were incompletely explained, a fact which became clear from al-Ṭūsī’s answers. In short, al-Qūnawī states that in order to clarify these points, he has written an introduction to his second treatise which completes his original discussion. Then he has remarked upon a few of al-Ṭūsī’s answers.

Finally al-Qūnawī turns to the treatise which had been sent by mistake and explains how this had come about. But since al-Ṭūsī has read it and commented upon it, al-Qūnawī feels it necessary to clarify his motive in writing it. This explanation occupies the second half of the letter.

7. *Al-Qūnawī’s final treatise*

Al-Qūnawī opens this work, called the ‘Treatise Giving Guidance’ (*al-Risālat al-hādīyah*), with a discussion of technical terms. He points out that the possibilities of expression provided by language are limited in relation to the possibilities of conception open to the mind, not to speak of the realities perceived by unveiling or those known by God. Because of these limitations, one school often employs the same term as another while meaning something quite different. This is why one might imagine that the Sufis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school, referred to by al-Qūnawī as the ‘School of Verification’ or ‘of the Verifiers’ (*madhhab al-tahqīq, mashrab al-muḥaqqiqīn*), share certain ideas with such sects as the Mu‘tazilites, whereas this is far from the truth. So before all else it is necessary to clarify the position of the ‘Verifiers’ and to differentiate it from that of other schools. ‘Hence their beliefs and goal will

become plain, and that area in which they share certain ideas with the People of Theoretical Intellect (i.e. the philosophers) . . . and the area in which they differ from them and from other groups will be clarified.' Later on in the treatise, al-Qūnawī summarizes the relationship between the Verifiers' position and that of both the philosophers and the theologians: 'The Verifiers agree with the philosophers concerning those things which the theoretical intellect is able to grasp independently at its own level. Then they differ from them in other perceptions and knowledge beyond the stage of thought and its delimiting properties. But as for the theologians in their various schools, the Verifiers only agree with them in rare instances and on minor points.'¹

In order to clarify the position of Verification, al-Qūnawī enters into a long discussion upon the nature of God, the relation of his Knowledge to his Essence and to the world, and the nature of the Divine Unity. These passages call to mind al-Qūnawī's most difficult and technical works, such as *al-Nuṣūṣ* and parts of *Miftāḥ al-ghayb* and *al-Nafahāt al-ilāyiyah*,² and offer valuable insights into the ideas discussed there. His attempts here to explain concepts based upon unveiling in a language acceptable to philosophers who maintain the supremacy of the intellect makes this section one of al-Qūnawī's clearest presentations of the quintessence of Sufi metaphysical speculation.

During this discussion al-Qūnawī returns to the problem of man's inability to know the realities of things through his intellect. He reaffirms that Avicenna did indeed believe that man could not know them, and he quotes a long passage from Avicenna's *al-Ta'liqāt* to prove his point.³ He even suggests that al-Ṭūsī's copy of *al-Ta'liqāt* must have been left incomplete by the copyist, or else he never could have interpreted Avicenna as he does.

In continuing his long general discussion, al-Qūnawī elaborates upon many of the key points in the teachings of the Verifiers in technical, philosophical language, including for example a succinct explanation of the role of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in creation and a discussion of the degrees of human perfection and knowledge.

Finally he turns to al-Ṭūsī's answers and makes brief remarks concerning many of them. He usually finds al-Ṭūsī's answers open to discussion and presents various objections which could be made to each of them, both from a philosophical and a mystical point of view. In the question on the soul he refers to al-Ṭūsī's discussion of this problem in his commentary upon Avicenna's *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*.

¹ As was pointed out above, the Sufis feel that the theologians reach their conclusions by abusing the intellect and ignoring unveiling, and thus by misunderstanding the revelation. For a criticism of the theologians in the spirit that al-Qūnawī has in mind, see F. Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (London, 1976), chapter 7.

² See my article, 'The Last Will and Testament'.

³ This important work, only recently published in the original Arabic and long unknown to Western scholarship, contains Avicenna's 'Explanatory Remarks' (*al-ta'liqāt*) concerning certain difficult aspects of his philosophy, and includes expositions of his own views as opposed to the official Peripatetic position. See the edition by 'A. Badawī (Cairo, 1973).

At the end al-Qūnawī apologizes for objecting to several of al-Ṭūsī's answers, but, he says, if he had remained quiet some people might imagine that he was unaware of the objections which could be made to al-Ṭūsī's replies.

* * *

Thus ends the correspondence between a great philosopher and a great 'Verifier'. Such a short summary cannot begin to do justice to the complexity and subtlety of the discussions. But at least it can serve to call the reader's attention to the exchange of ideas which was taking place between two schools of thought as early as the seventh/thirteenth century, an exchange which was to increase steadily until the perspectives of the two schools became integrated into the synthesis brought about by Mullā Ṣadrā more than 300 years later.¹

¹ I do not wish to imply that either Sufi speculation *per se*, or Peripatetic philosophy as such, disappeared. Both, in particular the former, remained as independent schools of thought. But the main stream of intellectual activity in Iran and many of the other eastern areas of Islam came to be dominated by Mullā Ṣadrā's theosophy.