

Mehdi Aminrazavi

University of Mary Washington, 1310 College Avenue, Fredericksburg, Virginia 22401, USA
maminraz@umw.edu

A Discourse on the Soul in Later Islamic Philosophy

Abstract

Despite the significance of later Islamic philosophical tradition, it has remained a neglected area of study. In this article, the evolution of the concept of the soul from its Avicennian context to post-Avicennian philosophical tradition is discussed. While the author knows of no Islamic philosopher who rejected the Peripatetic notion of the soul, post-Avicennian philosophers have added much to the discourse on the soul. Beginning with Al-Ghazzālī, we see a gradual gnosticization of the concept of the soul that reaches its zenith in the writings of Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī. Having traced Suhrawardī's illuminationist (ishrāqī) doctrine of the soul, we proceeded to discuss the views of some of the ishrāqī figures on the subject matter and then explored how the concept of the soul changed in Mullā Sadrā's School of Transcendent Philosophy (al-Ḥikmat al-Muti'alliyah). The article ends with a general overview of the modern commentators of later philosophical tradition in Islam and those that have been influential in shaping the evolution of the concept of the soul in modern Islamic philosophical discourse.

Keywords

the concept of the soul and self (*ruh/nafs*), the Peripatetic notion of the soul, post-Avicennian philosophers, Suhrawardī's illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) doctrine of the soul, Mullā Sadrā's School of Transcendent Philosophy (*al-Ḥikmat al-Muti'alliyah*), post-Ṣadrian philosophy

When discussing the concept of the soul in later Islamic philosophy, from the outset we encounter two problems. The first and foremost difficulty is that the concept of the soul as understood in its modern philosophical context does not exist in later Islamic philosophical tradition; in fact, there is not even a word in Arabic or other Islamic languages that is precisely equivalent to soul. The second problem unique to later Islamic philosophy is that body in the traditional sense as a corporeal entity that stands in a Cartesian dualism to the soul does not exist either. The question I shall attempt to answer is how a well-established philosophical tradition that does not embrace a traditional concept of the soul and body as understood in its Cartesian sense, made these two very notions the centerpiece of its philosophical discourse?

The two words that come closest to the concept of the soul in Islam are *ruh*, which properly speaking means 'spirit', and *nafs*, which should be translated as 'self', even though in many contexts it is used to mean 'soul'. Since understanding the nature of the soul for Muslim theologians and philosophers was imperative to the understanding of both the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad), let us briefly reflect on the Qur'ānic roots of the concept of the soul before we embark upon our investigation. In the Qur'ān we read:

“So when I have made him complete and breathed into him of My spirit (*ruh*), bow down and be humble to him.” (15:29)

“O soul (*nafs*) that art at rest, return to thy Lord, in a pleasing manner, So enter among My servants, and enter My garden!” (89:27–30)

“And they ask you, [O Muhammad], about the soul (*ruh*), say, ‘The soul comes by way of Divine command from my Lord. And humans have been given very little knowledge [of it].’” (17:85)

In all the above verses, the word *ruh* or spirit is used in a way that could be considered as the equivalent to our use of the word *soul*. Prophet Muhammad, in his references to *ruh*, states:

1. “A well-dressed soul (*ruh*) may be naked hereafter for not praying in time.”¹
2. “Two angels take the soul (*ruh*) of a dead person into the sky to Allah; if the soul is a believer’s then it has a beautiful fragrance; if the soul is of a non-believer then it has a foul smell...”²

The notion of the soul in Islamic philosophy has gone through a long evolutionary process and can generally be divided into four distinct periods:

1. early theological (*Kalām*) discussions,
2. the Peripatetic (*Mashshā’ī*) period identified with Avicenna (*Sīnāwī*),
3. the School of Illumination (*Ishrāqī*) identified with Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī,
4. the later gnostic period (*ʿIrfān*).

In what follows, I shall briefly allude to the early theological and Peripatetic concepts of the soul in order to provide a context for a more extensive treatment of the soul in later Islamic philosophical tradition.

While there is no exact equivalent in the Western intellectual tradition for ‘*Kalām*’, it can roughly be labeled ‘rational theology’, ‘scholastic theology’, or simply ‘fragmented discourses pertaining to God’. While the intellectual foundations of *kalām* are deeply rooted in the Qur’ān and *Ḥadīth*, Islamic theology flourished at a time when Muslim intellectuals were facing a variety of complex political, religious, and moral questions. Such theological groups as Qādarites, Jabarites, Mu’tazilites, and Ash’arites, just to mention a few, realized that understanding the soul and its faculties was imperative to understanding the Qur’ān. Also, understanding such anthropomorphic verses of the Qur’ān such as having a beatific vision of God, the question of spiritual or corporeal resurrection and punishment, to a large extent were contingent upon the nature of the soul.

On the opposite end of the intellectual spectrum were the orthodox jurists (*fuqahā’*), who held the view that discursive method leads to doubt and chaos in matters of faith and hence issued edicts against theological inquiries. For instance, Abū Ḥanīfah, a major jurist, prohibited his students from engaging in theology. Likewise, Mālik ibn Anās saw theology as a form of religious corruption, while the famous Imām Muḥammad al-Shāfi’ī found the whole field of theology useless. Despite such opposition, debate concerning the nature of the soul reached its zenith in the 9th century when the rationalist Mu’tazilites and their faith based opponents, the Ash’arites, developed theories such as Divine occasionalism and atomism to explain the nature and function of the soul.

The discovery of Greek philosophy, and of Plato’s and Aristotle’s work in particular, led to the emergence of Muslim Peripatetics (*Mashshā’īs*) in the 9th and 10th centuries. Islamic philosophy (*falsafah*) effectively put an end to the field of *Kalām* when *Mashshā’īs* applied Aristotelian philosophy to treat a variety of subjects including the concept of the soul. Whereas some

of the Muslim philosophers, such as Al-Kindī, identified with the Athenian interpretation of Aristotle, others, such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, were closer to the Alexandrian tradition, which placed special importance on the works of Themistius, Alexander Aphrodisias, and Simplicius. Other philosophical trends such as Stoicism, Hermeticism, and Neoplatonism also entered into the early *Mashshā'ī* thought through the School of Alexandria. None of the foreign influences, however, had a more profound impact on the understanding of the concept of the soul in later Islamic philosophy than Plotinus' *Enneads*. This work, which appeared in Arabic not under its author Plotinus, but was thought to have been the lost work of Aristotle on theology, came to be known as *Ūthūlūjīyā* or the *Theology* of Aristotle.

It is with the later works of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) that the concept of the soul begins its mystical transformation. While Avicenna's view of the soul remains essentially Aristotelian, it is his Neoplatonic outlook that paves the way for the rise of a more gnostic view of the soul. Furthermore, Avicenna's notion of the soul is intractably connected to his cosmological doctrine, namely the idea of the soul as the animating force within the three kingdoms and the four elements. Avicenna, through the concept of the soul explained such problems as how multiplicity came from Divine unity, the movements of celestial bodies, and the relationship between cosmology and different types of souls.

With the descending order of the universe which comes as emanations from the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) through the Intellects to the four elements, a hierarchy of souls came to be both in longitudinal and latitudinal orders. Having divided the soul into practical and theoretical, Avicenna tells us that the former is the source of all the bodily movements, whereas the latter performs the more abstract functions. In the Aristotelian-Fārābīan tradition which continued with Avicenna, the theoretical soul contains the following four levels:

1. *intellectus materialis* (material intellect),
2. *intellectus habitus* (habitual intellect),
3. *intellectus in actu* (active intellect),
4. *intellectus acquisitus* (acquired intellect).

Though disputed by many scholars, traditional scholarship on Avicenna argues that the early and more analytically oriented Avicenna, in his later works similar to so many other Eastern and Western philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, became increasingly more esoteric. Some of Avicenna's later works, such as his treatise *The Stations of the Gnostics* (*Maqāmāt al-'ārīfīn*), *Salāmān and Absāl* (*Salāmān wa Absāl*), and *The Flight of Birds* (*Risālat al-ṭā'ir*),³ essentially paved the way for the rise of a later and more gnostically oriented concept of the soul. Later, Avicenna and his esoteric understanding of the soul can best be seen in his poem known as "Ode on the Soul," which ends with these lines:

"Now why from its perch on high was it cast like this
To the lowest Nadir's gloomy and drear abyss
Was it God who cast it fourth for some purpose wise?
Concealed from the keenest seeker's inquiring eyes?"

1
Saḥīḥ Bukhārī 13:115.

2
Saḥīḥ Bukhārī 40:6867.

3
In recent years, scholars have cast doubt on the authenticity of this treatise.

Then is its descent a discipline wise but stern,
That the things it has not heard it thus may learn
So 'tis she whom Fate doth plunder, until her star
Setteth at length in a place from its rising far,
Like a gleam of lighting which over the meadows shone,
And, as though it ne'er had been, in a moment is gone."⁴

We can now turn our attention to the gradual transformation of the concept of the soul from the Greek dualistic version of soul versus body to the more mystical and gnostic orientation in later Islamic philosophy. While the thriving of the early *Mu'tazilī* and *Mashshā'ī* schools was substantially curtailed as the result of attacks by such theologians (*mutikallimūn*) as Ghazzālī and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, such criticisms also led to the development of a new understanding of the soul. Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, in his work *The Soul, Spirit and Elaboration of their Faculties* (*al-Nafs wa'l-ruh wa sharḥ quwāhumā*), alludes to the inherent desire of the soul for perfection. Rāzī asserts:

“As for the fact that the soul receives the pure manifestations and Divine Knowledge, this does not depend upon the connection of the soul with the body; rather this connection is as it were, an obstruction in achieving perfection. When this connection is broken, the Divine manifestation becomes illuminated.”⁵

Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī, using the symbolism of light in his brief but significant book, *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*), fully embraces the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation to explain the spiritual and ontological ascendance of the soul. It is with Ghazzālī and his embracing of Sufism that a mystical and gnostic understanding of the soul gained its much needed recognition.

Ghazzālī tells us the following:

“Gnostics climb up from the lowlands of unreal (*majāz*) to the highlands of reality, and perfect their ascent [via the soul]. Then they see by direct eye-witnessing (*kashf*) that there is none in existence save God and that ‘Everything perishes except His (God’s) face’.⁶ [...] So each existent has two aspects – one towards itself, and the other towards its Lord. Considered in terms of the face of itself, it is nonexistent, but considered in terms of the aspect of God, it exists.”⁷

What is particularly important is how from Ghazzālī onward, while the traditional Peripatetic faculties of the soul as rational, animal and vegetative remain valid, a new classification becomes even more important. The soul, according to many later Islamic philosophers, consists of three additional faculties: the lowest is *nafs al-ammārah*, which is the source of evil often identified with carnal desires and ego, *nafs al-lawwāmah* or the self-reflective soul, the soul that is cognizant of its own shortcomings, and finally *nafs al-muṭma'innah*, or the soul that is at peace with God.

Ghazzālī’s mystical view of the soul was further developed by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (12th century CE), the founder of the School of Illumination (*ishrāq*). Also known as *Shaykh al-Ishrāq* (*the Master of Illumination*), Suhrawardī brought about a rapprochement between discursive thought, intellectual intuition (*dhawq*), and mysticism into a single coherent philosophical school of thought. Suhrawardī, who should be regarded as the father of philosophical mysticism, tells us he was puzzled and frustrated by his failure to find the answer as to how the soul/self (*nafs*) knows itself. In his dream-vision, Suhrawardī is told by Aristotle⁸ to seek the answer from such Sufī masters as Ḥallāj and Bāyazīd, rather than the Peripatetic philosophers. Suhrawardī takes this to mean that practical wisdom and asceticism are not only essential in knowing the soul but are superior to discursive reasoning.

Suhrawardī, in his *magnum opus*, *The Philosophy of Illumination* (*Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*), fully develops his doctrine of illumination and discusses the soul as an entity capable of *being more or less*, ontologically speaking, which became the salient feature of later Islamic philosophical understanding of the soul. Similar to light, the soul can become more or less luminous depending on the spiritual status of the person in question. While association of practical wisdom, asceticism and piety with the status of the soul begins with Ghazzālī as stipulated in *The Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*), it was Suhrawardī who, using the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation, provides us with a philosophical paradigm designed to demonstrate the inherent ontological capability of the soul to ascend or descend. Instead of a single soul that stands in a dualistic relationship with the body, Suhrawardī identifies the soul as a light that may appear with different intensities and in different manifestations such as dominating lights (*anwār qāhīrah*), managing lights (*anwār mudabbirah*), and intermediary lights.⁹ Similarly, corporeality, which Suhrawardī identifies with darkness, can be *more or less* corporeal. Corporeality, therefore, ranges from the lowest level, which consists of inanimate objects, to the angelic form that is a type of spiritual matter. Suhrawardī continues to move the paradigm shift from the soul versus body dichotomy to a hierarchy from the highest, which he calls the *Light of Lights* (*nūr al-anwār*), to nearly absolute darkness or corporeality. In the illuminationist model of Suhrawardī, there is no longer a single soul or body but only gradations of them.

Having identified the soul as an ontological level of reality, Suhrawardī offers his epistemological theory, known as “Knowledge by Presence” (*al-ʿilm al-ḥūḍūrī*), in which the soul as an ontological level of reality is a type of existence or presence (*ḥūḍūr*) which can be *more or less*. Since the soul is the essence of man, it follows that humans also *can be more or less*, and that some humans “*are*” *more than others*, ontologically speaking. Suhrawardī advances three complex arguments as to how the soul knows itself. While all three are slightly different, they are renditions of the following argument. In his work *The Philosophy of Illumination* Suhrawardī states:

“A thing that exists in itself (*al-qā'im bi'dhāt*) and is conscious of itself does not know itself through a representation (*al-mithāl*) of itself appearing in itself. This is because if, in knowing one's self, one were to make a representation of oneself, since this representation of his 'I-ness' (*anā'īyyah*) could never be the reality of that 'I-ness', it would be then such that representation is 'it' in relation to the 'I-ness', and not 'I'. Therefore, the thing apprehended is the representa-

4

“Avicenna's Poem on the Soul”, trans. by Edward G. Browne, in: Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, Richmond: Curzon, 1999, p. 111.

5

Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, “al-Nafs wa'l-ruh wa sharḥ quwāhumā”, ed. and trans. by Muhammad Saghīr Ma'sūmī, in: *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, Vol. 3, ed. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Mehdi Aminrazavi, London: I. B. Tauris, 2010, p. 247.

6

Qur'ān, 28:88.

7

Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights* [*Mishkāt al-anwār*], ed. and trans. by David Buchman,

Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1998, pp. 17–18. The translation above has been modified by the author of this paper.

8

See Shihabaddin Yahya Sohrawardi, *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol. 1, ed. by Henry Corbin, Tehran: Institut d'études et des recherches culturelles, 2001, pp. 70–71.

9

See Suhrawardī's *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* in: Sh. Y. Sohrawardi, *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol. 2, p. 149.

tion. It thus follows that the representation apprehension of ‘I-ness’ would be exactly what is the apprehension of ‘it-ness’ (*huwa*), and that the apprehension of the reality of ‘I-ness’ would be exactly the apprehension of what is not ‘I-ness’. This is an absurdity.”¹⁰

The theory of “Knowledge by Presence” that became the *modus operandi* in later Islamic philosophy rests on the notion that not only the soul is an ontological level of reality, but that its very presence is its epistemic means of cognition. In other words, the soul comes to know itself first by virtue of its presence and then of other intelligible things. Being cognizant of the fact that practical wisdom is a component of utilizing the function of the soul, Suhrawardī reminds us:

“Know that the ‘rational soul’ (*nafs nāṭiqah*) is of a Divine substance which the powers and engagements of the body withdrew it from its abode. Whenever, the soul is strengthened through spiritual virtues and the body is weakened through fasting and not sleeping, the soul is released and unites with the spiritual world.”¹¹

The post Suhrawardian era of Persia in the 13th century witnessed the revival of Peripatetic philosophy at the hands of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Quṭb al-Dīn Shirāzī, and a number of other philosopher-scientists. Despite the Peripatetic orientation of this period, the influence of the illuminationist doctrine of Suhrawardī is abundantly reflected in the works of the masters of this period, generally known as the School of Āzarbāyjān. In fact, during this period, we see how the soul is treated by philosopher-mystics who themselves wrote treatises of both analytical and mystical nature on the soul. For instance, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, in his early Peripatetic phase, wrote the *Catharsis of Beliefs* (*Tajrīd al-iṭiqād*), in which he supports a more Avicennian view of the soul. Later, in his Sufī phase of life, Ṭūsī supports a more gnostic view of the soul as reflected in his spiritual biography entitled *Contemplation and Action* (*Sayr wa sulūk*). On the soul Ṭūsī states:

“[...] souls, despite their various ranks, emanate from one origin and share in the same essence (*māhiyyah*), but they are perpetuated [individually] by virtue of the forms they acquire, which is the cause of their coming into this world [...]; and when the veil is removed, he [soul] will reach his teacher and be united with His Oneness, and then he [the discipline/soul] will have reached [his place of] return.”¹²

The other member of this school, Quṭb al-Dīn Shirāzī, was the Persian philosopher, scientist, and mystic (1236 CE) who wrote a major commentary on Suhrawardī’s *Philosophy of Illumination*. In his other major work, *The Pearl of the Crown* (*Durrat al-tāj*), he offers a gnostic commentary on the relationship between practical virtue and the ascending and descending of the soul. Practical virtue which looms large in later Islamic philosophy was seen increasingly as an integral part of any discourse on the nature of the soul.

From the 14th to 16th centuries, the center of philosophical life in Persia shifted from Āzarbāyjān to Shīrāz. Despite this move, the concept of soul remained one of the primary subjects of inquiry, especially in the field of philosophical ethics. Such figures as Taftāzānī, Ījī, Jurjānī, Dawānī, and Dashtakī, among others, wrote commentaries on the soul which saw ascetic practices as the necessary condition for the spiritual development of the soul. Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī (1502 CE), an ethicist and a prominent member of the School of Shīrāz, in his *Jalālian Ethics* (*Akhlāq-i jalālī*)¹³ examines the relationship between virtues of the character and the illumination of the soul and offers an esoteric version of Aristotle’s theory of virtue ethics. Ghiyāth al-Dīn Manṣūr Dashtakī (1542 CE), another ethicist belonging to the same school, in his *Manṣūrian Ethics* (*Akhlāq-i manṣūrī*),¹⁴ identifies the soul as the vehicle of spiritual ascendancy

toward the eventual unity with God. Dashtakī, referring to the flight of the soul towards unity with its original abode, asserts poetically:

“The tall cypress is beautiful in its stature
Yet the nightingale only desires the beauty of the rose.
What can I do if no other face pleases me?
As these shameless eyes are only fixed on thy beauty.”

Many philosophers belonging to later Islamic philosophy see and interpret the early period through gnostic lenses, and Dashtakī is not an exception. Having discussed the opinions of his predecessors such as Avicenna, he adopts a poetic mode of expression to allude to the unique nature of the soul. Dashtakī, interpreting Avicenna’s notion of the soul from a mystical perspective, poetically summarizes it as follows:

“God has sent the soul with wisdom,
Hidden even from the understanding of the wise.
Its descent was necessary to inform;
Those who do not hear, to see it and hear it.
The soul becomes aware of Truth in the world
But its tear cannot be repaired
If it does not strive to improve itself after its fall;
Then the soul would dwell in the realm of arrogance
Block its own path from achieving its desire:
Time has blocked its path
Until it has disappeared with no hope of return.
Time has blocked the path of the soul until
It has set without any hope of another rising.
It is like a lightning that has lit up the skies,
Then it disappears as though it has never been.
Rejoice with the answer that I have discovered
The light of knowledge keeps shining.”¹⁵

As time went by, the process of seeing the soul as an instrument of spiritual perfection and an ontological level of reality inevitably became associated with the concept of mystical love in the School of Shīrāz. Dashtakī, in the typical school of Persian Sufism, speaks of the pain of separation from God that the soul endures. He states:

“The lamentation of the mystic is due to the pain of his separation,
The shouting of the wine seller is the sign of the same sorrow,
The roaring of the drunken [Sufi] is due to separation from You,
The bleeding hearts of the lovers testify to their longings for You.”¹⁶

¹⁰
Ibid., p. 111.

¹¹
Sh. Y. Sohrawardi, *Œuvres philosophiques et mystiques*, Vol. 3, p. 107.

¹²
Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Contemplation and Action* [*Sayr wa sulūk*], ed. and trans. by S. J. Badakhchani, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 45.

¹³
See Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī, “Lawāmi’ al-ishrāq fī makārim al-akhlāq: Akhlāq-i jalālī” [Sparks of Illumination in the Virtues of Ethics], trans.

by Carl W. Ernst, in: *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, Vol. 4, pp. 119–133.

¹⁴
See Ghiyāth al-Dīn Maṣṣūr Dashtakī Shīrāzī, “Akhlāq-i Maṣṣūrī: Risālah-yi ūlā az wajh-i thālīth jām jahān-namā”, *Ma’ārif* 2 (1375): 13, No. 38, pp. 132–160.

¹⁵
Ibid.

¹⁶
Ibid.

Dashtakī's other major work, *Stations of the Gnostics (Maqāmāt al-'arifīn)*, is almost entirely devoted to a discussion concerning the ascendance of the soul to the Divine throne through different states and stations of the spiritual journey. Stations of the knowledge of God are essentially identified with different ontological levels of the soul; the more purified the soul, the closer it is to God with the eventual goal being *fanā' fi 'llāh* (annihilation of the self in God) and *baqa' billāh* (subsistence in God).

While the concept of the soul in later Islamic philosophy remained central to the philosophical discourse in the Persian speaking world, it was the convergence of several major trends that produced a new philosophical paradigm known as *al-ḥikmat al-muta'aliyah* (the transcendent philosophy), taking the discussion of the soul to a new height. First, there was the monumental gnostic system of Ibn 'Arabī, developed in Andalusia, which came to Persia through his illustrious commentator Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī. To this we need to add the discursive philosophy of Peripatetics revived by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, the philosophy of illumination of Suhrawardī propagated by various masters of the School of Shīrāz, and finally the practical aspects of Sufism. The philosophers of this period who shied away from calling themselves philosophers (*failasūf*) and instead preferred to be called *ḥakīm*, more properly translated as a 'Divine sage', relatively escaped the wrath of the orthodox jurists by including the legal injunctions of Islam to be part and parcel of being engaged in philosophy. The central pillars of *al-ḥikmat al-muta'aliyah* remained the reality of existence or being (*wujūd*) and its relation with the journey of the soul, both of which for the philosophers of this school were fundamentally intertwined. It is noteworthy that the flourishing of transcendent philosophy would not have been possible without the advent of the Shī'ite Safavid dynasty in Persia in the 16th century. It was the patronage of Safavid kings of the intellectual sciences that led to the emergence of another golden era of Islamic philosophy known as the School of Iṣfahān.

While even a brief treatment of the views of Ibn 'Arabī, also known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the Great Master), of philosophical Gnosticism of this era, on the soul is beyond the scope of our work, however, his influence on later Islamic philosophy, especially in the Persianate world, merits a brief reminder. Ibn 'Arabī, whose school of thought is generally identified with the "Doctrine of the Unity of Being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), postulates that in light of the Absolute Reality of God there is nothing in existence but God. Ibn 'Arabī writes:

"The soul sees that it sees God through God, not through itself, and that it loves God only through him, but through itself. So God is He who loves Himself – it is not the soul that loves God. The soul gazes upon God in every existent by means of every eye. Hence it knows that none loves God but God. God is the lover, the beloved, the seeker and the sought."¹⁷

Mīr Dāmād, the founder of the School of Iṣfahān in 1631 CE, continues to build upon the notion of the soul as postulated by Ibn 'Arabī not as a fixed incorporeal entity which simply *is*, but as a *becoming*. In a number of his works Mīr Dāmād deals with the concept of the soul and its spiritual journey among which are *Sparks of Light (Jadhawāt)*, *The Clear Horizon (Ufuq al-mubīn)*, *Orients of Light (Mashāriq al-anwār)*, *Heavenly Mystical States (Khalsat al-malakūt)*, and, of course, his mystical poetry, which he wrote under the pen name *Isḥrāq* (Illumination). Even though Mīr Dāmād is generally known as the philosopher of time for his major contribution to the subject, it is the notion of the soul as the vehicle of illumination that remains the heart of his philosophical outlook. Referring to the soul as that which can unveil, witness

and see the manifestation of God, Mīr Dāmād, who was also an accomplished poet, said:

“In the path of those who unveil and witness [the truth]
The world is not but reflections upon existence
Though many forms have appeared from Him
Once you ponder, they are not but One Being.”

Despite the fact that Mīr Dāmād left an indelible mark upon the history of Islamic philosophy, the most illustrious member of the School of Iṣfahān, without question, is Mīr Dāmād’s student, Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī, generally known as Mullā Ṣadrā, or by his honorific title, *Ṣadr al-muta’alīhīn* (foremost among the Divine sages). It is with Mullā Ṣadrā that the philosophico-gnostic discourse on the concepts of existence and soul reaches a new high in Islamic philosophy.

With his intimate and profound knowledge of earlier schools of Islamic thought together with his metaphysical acumen, Mullā Ṣadrā brought together a grand synthesis of nearly a millennium of Islamic intellectual thought into a single philosophical paradigm. This school of philosophy known as *al-ḥikmat al-muta’aliyah* (the transcendent philosophy), is a rapprochement of Islamic Peripatetic philosophy (*mashshā’ī*), the School of Illumination (*ishrāq*), gnosis (*irfān*) of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī, schools of *kalām*, both Sunni and Shī‘ite, based on the Qur’ān and *Ḥadīths* of the Prophet and traditions of the Shī‘ite Imāms.

As to the specific contributions of Mullā Ṣadrā on soul, his *magnum opus* in four volumes, entitled *The Four Intellectual Journeys (Al-Asfār al-‘aqliyyah al-arba’ah)*, perhaps the most advanced work on Islamic metaphysics, is an analysis of the journey of the soul to and from God. For Mullā Ṣadrā, the soul has both an ontological and an epistemological function to play. He states:

“You should know that the seekers, among the Gnostics and the saints, are embarked upon four journeys: the first of these is from Creation to the Truth; the second is through the Truth in the Truth; the third is the reverse of the first, or from the Truth to Creation through the Truth; and the fourth is the reverse of the second in a sense, since it is through the Truth in the Creation.”¹⁸

For Mullā Ṣadrā and many other masters of the School of Iṣfahān, in an act of cognition the soul as the knower, the intelligibles as objects of knowledge and the epistemic relationship between the knower and the known become one and the same. In his work entitled *The Unification of the Intellector and the Intellected (Ittiḥād al-‘āqil wa’l-ma’qūl)* Mullā Ṣadrā investigates the question of unity between the intellector and the intellected. This theory, often known as the “Unity of the Knower and the Known”, maintains that when the soul as the knower reflects upon God as the object of knowledge, they become one and the same.

Mullā Ṣadrā, in his famous phrase “*jismāniyyāt al-ḥudūth wa ruḥāniyyāt al-baqā*” (“corporeals are created and incorporeals are everlasting”), tells us that the survival and perfection of the soul is a process that begins from the birth of the soul as an attachment to the body and continues with its gradual

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Ibn ‘Arabī, “The Divine Roots of Human Love” [*Futūḥāt*], trans. by William C. Chittick, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*, XVII, 1995, 331.17. The author of this paper has changed the word ‘Him’ which Chittick has used as an equivalent to ‘God’.

18

Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-Asfār al-‘aqliyyah al-arba’ah* [*The Four Intellectual Journeys*], Part I, Vol. 1, Tehran: Dār-al-ma‘ārif al-islāmiyyah Press, 1958, p. 13.

spiritual-ontological evolution. This evolution, according to Mullā Ṣadrā, is explained by his theory of the “*al-ḥarakah al-jawhariyyah*” (transubstantiality of motion), which claims that motion occurs in substance and not only in accidents. For instance, when an apple goes from being unripe to being ripe, not only has change occurred in the accidental qualities of the apple, but there has also been a qualitative change or motion in the very essence¹⁹ of the apple. The apple has gone from being less perfect to being more perfect. Both in his *The Four Intellectual Journeys* and the *Wisdom of the Throne*,²⁰ Mullā Ṣadrā tells us that the soul goes through various stages of development. *The Four Intellectual Journeys* depicts the journey of the soul from God to the created order and back to God. In this journey, the soul is first born as an incorporeal attachment to the body, but as it climbs the ontological ladder of existence it evolves substantially. As its mode of existence and ontological modality changes by virtue of its ascendance towards its Source, it becomes more abstract (*mutajarrid*), pure, self-subsistent, and Godlike.

The traditional Peripatetic function of the soul, as discussed by al-Fārābī and Avicenna, is understood by Mullā Ṣadrā in the context of Islamic Gnosticism in which there is nothing other than God. The soul of sages acquires knowledge by virtue of the transcendent mode of cognition that Mullā Ṣadrā considers to be the fruit of philosophical wisdom.

Based on his direct and unmediated experience of truth, Mullā Ṣadrā claims certain philosophical principles which he calls ‘Oriental Principles’ (*al-qā’idah al-mashrafiyyah*) and which are of an axiomatic nature to have been intuitively discovered by him. These principles, which the soul has directly acquired from the Active Intellect, are sound according to Mullā Ṣadrā, since they can be verified both discursively and experientially.

The tradition of philosophical Gnosticism, which began with Ghazzālī and continued with philosophers of other schools of thought, reached its zenith in the School of Iṣfahān. Post-Ṣadrian philosophy until the present time has been heavily influenced by Mullā Ṣadrā’s “transcendent philosophy”. Among notable figures in the later Islamic philosophical tradition, who in one way or another have commented on the soul along the Ṣadrian line, we can mention ‘Abd al-Razzāq Lāhījī and his works *The Pearl of Desire (Gowhar-i murād)* and *Lights of Inspiration (Shawāriq al-ilhām)*, both of which essentially offer a gnostic commentary upon the flight of the soul from its corporeal cage, i.e. the body. The other two major figures who were students of Mullā Ṣadrā are Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī and Qāḍī Sa’īd Qummī, both of whom provided rich commentaries on the function and place of the soul both in prose and poetry. An example of the genre that philosophers of this period produced can be found in Mullā Rajab ‘Alī Tabrizī, the philosopher, theologian, mystic and Shi’ite jurist of the 17th century who, in his work *The Fundamental Principle (Al-Aṣl al-aṣīl)*, treats the subject of the soul. For instance, in a chapter on how the soul knows itself, Tabrizī says:

“Know that the soul is the greatest name of God; and He ‘taught Adam the names, all of them’ (Qur’ān, 2:31). To be truly Adam is to know the soul and all the names, and the modality of the knowledge of existents.”²¹

Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Alawī, the other philosopher of this period, in his work written in Persian and entitled *Reflection of the Archetype of Purity in Refutation of the Mirror of Truth (Muṣqal-i ṣafā dar radd bar ā’ina-yi ḥaqq-namā)*, comments on this very issue. After restating the traditional Avicennian view, ‘Alawī asserts that:

“The soul, likewise, also has one faculty because of its simplicity and through which all things are known, be they sensible or intelligible.”²²

Emphasizing the traditional classification of the soul as a separate entity from the very being of a person for ‘Alawī, breaks down. He writes:

“All of these are perceived by the soul through one faculty: the faculty for hearing is no other than the one for sight, nor [is the faculty for] sight other than the one for touch and taste. These faculties are none other than the holy, intellectual and rational faculties through which the soul comprehends the realities and universal natures of things. Indeed, they *are* [the soul].”²³

A complete survey of the views of post-Ṣadrian philosophers on soul is beyond the scope of our work,²⁴ but suffice it to say that throughout the School of Iṣfahān, followed by the Schools of Qājār and Tehran in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the soul, its nature, and function remained the pivotal point of philosophical discourse.²⁵

* * *

In our previous discussion, the relationship between the notions of existence and the soul in later Islamic philosophical tradition has been discussed. Whereas in the early Peripatetic phase, existence and soul were seen as two separate entities, in the later period they became intertwined. Avicenna’s Neoplatonic scheme of emanation provided the framework to see the soul as a level of existence which contains Divine presence. The degree to which divinity is present in the soul depends on its ontological distance from God. Later Muslim philosophers’ analyses of the soul provide us with a dual perspective: the soul *is*, but this ‘is-ness’, while Divine, is nevertheless separate from God. What distinguishes the soul as an ontological reality from God (*mābih al-ikhtilāf*) is itself, and what is in common between the soul and God (*mābih al-ishtirāk*) is also itself. It is for this reason that the soul has the potentiality

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The word used by Mullā Ṣadrā is ‘jawhar’, which although is often translated as ‘substance’, but it is not the same as Aristotle’s use of the word ‘substance’. ‘Jawhar’, as used by Mullā Ṣadrā is much the same as ‘essence’, whereas Aristotle offers four different interpretations of it; most of them have something to do with the functionality of a thing.

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Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Wisdom of the Throne [Al-Ḥikmat al-‘arshīyah]*, trans. by James W. Morris, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 131–132.

21

Mullā Rajab ‘Alī Tabrizī, “Al-Aṣl al-aṣīl”, in: S. J. Ashtiyānī, *Muntakhabāt-i az āthār-i ḥukamāy-i Iran*, Tehran: Department d’iranologie de l’Institute Franco-Iranien de recherche, 1975, p. 278.

22

Sayyid Aḥmad ‘Alawī, *Muṣṣal-i ṣafā dar radd bar ā‘ina-yi ḥaqq-namā*.

23

Ibid.

24

There were also many other philosophers of note who have written extensively on the soul but even a cursory survey of their views requires a separate work. Among such figures we can mention Āqā Ḥusayn Khunsārī, Quṭb al-Dīn Ashkiwārī, Shaykh Ḥusayn Tunakābunī, Qawām al-Dīn Rāzī, Mullā Muḥammad Bāqir Sabziwārī, and Mīrzā Ḥasan Lāhījānd Mullā Na‘īm Ṭāliqānī.

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Among major figures and their works in which the concept of the soul is treated from an existential perspective we can name Mulla Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī’s *Kalamāt-i makhnunah [Hidden Words]* and *al-Ma‘ārif al-ilāhiyyah [Divine Sciences]*, Qāḍī Sa‘id Qummi’s *Asrār al-‘ibādāt [Mysteries of Worship]* and *Ta‘liqāt bar uthūlūjiyā [Commentary on the “Enneads”]*, and the greatest master of this period, Ḥajjī Mullā Hādī Sabziwārī, with his *Sharḥ al-manẓumah [Commentary on a Philosophical Poem]*, as well as Mullā ‘Abd Allah Zunuzīn’s *al-Lama‘āt al-ilāhiyyah [Divine Flashes of Light]*.

to become united with its Source, a theme often discussed under the so-called Doctrine of the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). This view of the soul in later Islamic philosophy is similar to what Boethius, the Christian philosopher of the 5th century argues in his work *How Substances Can Be Good in Virtue of Their Existence without Being Absolute Goods*. He tells us:

“Everything that is participates in absolute Being through the fact that it exists.”²⁶

In his other work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius takes his argument to its logical conclusion and states:

“And as men are made just by the obtaining of justice, and wise by the obtaining of wisdom so they who obtain divinity must in like manner become gods.”²⁷

Mehdī Ḥā’irī Yazdī, an eminent modern philosopher, in his work *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, referring to the dual character of the soul, concludes:

“To the same degree that God has presence by illumination in the reality of the soul/self, the soul also, to the same degree, enjoys its presence in God in the sense of absorption.”²⁸

Perhaps, Rūmī, the Persian Sufi poet and mystic, may have summarized the views of the later Muslim philosophers on the soul best when he wrote the following poem describing the evolution of the soul.

“I died from corporeality and became a Name,
I died from being a Name and entered the animal domain.
I died from animality and entered the human sphere.
Why then fear death, I shall never cease to be.
A moment later, I shall die from being a human –
So I may fly in the angelic domain,
From the angels too, my journey shall continue,
For all things shall perish except His Face.”²⁹

Mehdi Aminrazavi

Rasprava o duši u kasnijoj islamskoj filozofiji

Sažetak

Usprkos značaju kasnije islamske filozofske tradicije, ona je ostala zanemarenim područjem proučavanja. U ovome članku raspravlja se o razvoju koncepta duše iz njezina avicennijanskog konteksta prema post-avicennijanskoj filozofskoj tradiciji. I dok autor ne zna niti jednog islamskog filozofa koji je odbacivao peripatetički pojam duše, post-avicennijanski filozofi dodali su puno toga raspravi o duši. Započinjući s al-Ghazzālījem, uvidamo postupnu gnosticizaciju koncepta duše, koja doseže svoj vrhunac u djelima Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardīja. Idući tragom Suhrawardījeva iluminacionističkog (ishrāqī) učenja o duši, nastavljamo s raspravom o stajalištima nekih ishrāqī figura o ovoj problematici i potom istražujemo kako se koncept duše promijenio u Mullā Sadrāovoj školi transcendentne filozofije (al-Ḥikmat al-Muti‘alliyah). Članak završava općenitim pregledom modernih komentatora kasnije filozofske tradicije u islamu i onih koji su bili utjecajni u oblikovanju razvoja koncepta duše u modernom svijetu.

Ključne riječi

koncept duše i sebstva (*ruh/nafs*), peripatetički pojam duše, post-avicennijanski filozofi, Suhrawardījevo iluminacionističko (*ishrāqī*) učenje o duši, Mullā Sadrāova škola transcendentne filozofije (*al-Ḥikmat al-Muti‘alliyah*), post-sadrījanska filozofija

Mehdi Aminrazavi

Diskurs über die Seele in der späteren islamischen Philosophie

Zusammenfassung

Trotz der Signifikanz der späteren islamischen philosophischen Tradition blieb sie ein vernachlässigter Studienbereich. In diesem Beitrag wird die Evolution des Seelenkonzepts von seinem avicennischen Kontext bis hin zur postavicennischen philosophischen Tradition erörtert. Während der Autor keinen islamischen Philosophen kennt, der die peripatetische Vorstellung von der Seele verwarf, haben die postavicennischen Philosophen dem Diskurs über die Seele vieles hinzugefügt. Beginnend mit Al-Ghazālī sehen wir eine allmähliche Gnostisierung des Konzepts der Seele ein, die ihren Zenit in den Schriften von Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī erreicht. Nachdem wir Suhrawardīs illuminationistische (ishrāqī) Lehre von der Seele verfolgt haben, beginnen wir, die Standpunkte einiger der ishrāqī-Figuren zu diesem Gegenstand zu diskutieren und anschließend zu erforschen, wie sich das Konzept der Seele in Mullā Sadrās Schule der Transzendentalphilosophie (al-Ḥikmat al-Mutiʿalliyah) geändert hat. Der Beitrag endet mit einem allgemeinen Überblick über die modernen Kommentatoren der späteren philosophischen Tradition im Islam und über diejenigen, die einflussreich in der Gestaltung der Evolution des Konzepts der Seele in der modernen Welt waren.

Schlüsselwörter

Konzept der Seele und des Selbst (*ruh/nafs*), peripatetischer Begriff der Seele, postavicennische Philosophen, Suhrawardīs illuminationistische (*ishrāqī*) Lehre von der Seele, Mullā Sadrās Schule der Transzendentalphilosophie (*al-Ḥikmat al-Mutiʿalliyah*), postsadraiische Philosophie

Mehdi Aminrazavi

Le discours sur l'âme dans la philosophie islamique tardive

Résumé

Malgré son importance, la philosophie islamique tardive est restée un domaine d'étude négligé. Dans cet article, le développement du concept d'âme a été discuté à partir du contexte philosophique d'Avicenne et s'étend jusqu'à la tradition philosophique post-avicennienne. Tandis qu'aucun philosophe islamique n'a rejeté le concept péripatéticien de l'âme – à la connaissance de l'auteur –, les philosophes post-avicenniens ont amené leur contribution au débat sur l'âme. En commençant par al-Ghazālī, nous remarquons une gnosticisation graduelle du concept d'âme qui atteint son paroxysme dans les œuvres de Shahab al-Din Suhrawardī. En suivant la trace de l'enseignement illuminationniste (ishrāqī) sur l'âme de Suhrawardī, nous poursuivons la discussion en abordant les points de vue de certaines figures ishrāqī sur la problématique, pour ensuite nous pencher sur l'évolution du concept d'âme dans l'école de la philosophie transcendante (al-Ḥikmat al-Mutiʿalliyah) de Mollā Sadrā Shīrāzī. L'article se termine par une étude générale des commentateurs modernes de la tradition philosophique tardive en islam et s'intéresse aussi à ceux qui ont été influents dans la formation du développement du concept d'âme dans le monde moderne.

Mots-clés

concept d'âme et de soi (*ruh/nafs*), concept péripatéticien de l'âme, philosophes post-avicenniens, enseignement illuminationniste (*ishrāqī*) sur l'âme de Suhrawardī, école de Mollā Sadrā Shīrāzī, école de la philosophie transcendante (*al-Ḥikmat al-Mutiʿalliyah*), philosophie post-sadraiienne

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Philosophy in the Middle Ages, ed. by Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 1973, p. 128.

27

Ibid., p. 121.

28

Mehdi Ḥāʾirī Yazdī, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence*, New York: SUNY Press, 1992, p. 146.

29

Rūmī, translated by the author of this paper.