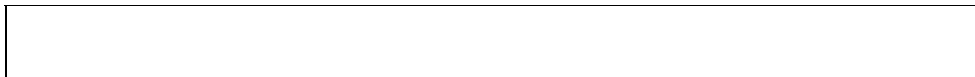


Chapter IV

The Rise and Fall of Reason

Philosophy was never an intellectual luxury within Islamic society. It was in fact, ever since its birth, a militant ideological discourse. Al Kindi,¹ the first Muslim philosopher, was directly involved in the ideological conflict that existed during his lifetime between the Mu'tazilites, then representing the state's ideology, on the one hand and the gnostics and the "Sunnites" on the other. Al-Kindi fought on two fronts: (1) against the gnostics, by publishing summaries of the lectures he gave, within the area of rational sciences, in the form of concise installments (epistles) and a simplified reading, designed to spread among the wider public and among the elite of the Arab readership certain rationalist concepts of man and the universe, while respecting the constants of Islamic² religious thinking; and (2) against the rigorist legal scholars, whom he described as "those who went astray from the truth," those who declared their hostility to philosophy "out of fear of losing the positions they have undeservedly usurped, out of a taste for power, and who commodify religion and (thus) have no religion—for he who trades in something, soon sells it and does not own it any longer. Therefore, he who commodifies religion no longer has a religion, and he who refuses to acquire knowledge of the truth about things and denounces it as impiety (*kufir*) deserves to lose his title of 'religious'..." Al-Kindi stated that there existed a parallelism between religion and philosophy and believed that the two were in agreement and in harmony and that both aimed at one thing: knowledge of the "true," of God's truth, of nature and of man: "The sayings of Muhammad, the truthful—may the prayers of God be upon him—as well as the word that was dictated to him by God—may His power and His might be witnessed, all of which can be grasped through reasoning that is only refuted by those men



who are deprived of rationality, those who are hand in glove together with ignorance.”

Al-Kindi was therefore the initiator of the research on “Arabization” and on the acclimatization of philosophy to the Arab cultural space. Thanks to his work, the cognitive material borrowed from “the sciences of the ancient ones” was re-invested within the ideological conflict that opposed the enlightened thinkers of the Arab-Islamic society of his era to reactionary and conservative forces. These forces had, in turn, called for a new appropriation of both gnosticism (Sufism) and literalism (juridical but not theological) despite the difficulty of conciliating two such incompatible trends.

Al-Farabi³ came a few decades later. In the meantime, there occurred the famous Sunnite “coup d’etat” against the Mu‘tazilites. This was the height of the period of strikes by the Shi‘ite dynasties, e.g., the Buyids⁴ and the Hamdanids,⁵ against a caliphate that had turned into a merely nominal institution. Thus began the break up of the Arab Empire into competing and adversary small states. The ideological debate became divided with the multiplication of doctrines and sects, something that threatened both the unity of the regime and the permanence of the state, and consequently the unity of thought and the permanence of society. Therefore, in all of al-Farabi’s works there was a call on this thought and this society to restore their unity. To restore the unity of thought meant to go beyond the rationalist, segmentarist-atomist, discourse of the Mu‘tazilites, which had failed to conciliate between reason and transmission, by adopting the discourse of the “universal reason” according to which religion and philosophy differ from one another only in their medium of expression. The former resorts to dialectical and rhetorical processes, the latter to the demonstrative method. This is why their opposition is reducible if we consider that “what religion says is the allegory of what philosophy says.” To restore the unity of society meant to establish social relationships on the model of harmony and of the pyramidal hierarchy that prevail in the universe.



When reading al-Farabi's political and religious philosophy within this perspective, one discovers a thinker quite different from the image usually reflected of him in history textbooks. Al-Farabi was not an isolated man who was cut off from the world, as he sat meditating under the shade of trees in some garden in the outskirts of Damascus, but a man who was concerned about the problems of the society in which he lived. He assumed the preoccupations of his contemporaries and was not at all desperate, afflicted or tired of living. He was an optimist who believed in progress and in solving problems through reason, and it was this faith that motivated his dream of the "virtuous city," a city of reason, of harmony, of fraternity and of justice in which he invested all the sciences of his era, especially the rational sciences.

Al-Farabi's thought was an ideological project that placed philosophy and the philosophical sciences at the service of a given cause. It was perhaps the project of an idealist and even of a dreamer. But it was also a militant rationalist discourse, to the point where it would not be too farfetched to wonder if al-Farabi was not, in the Middle Ages, the Rousseau of the Arabs.

It would not have been normal, or even conceivable that Avicenna, al-Farabi's successor, would want to resuscitate the dream of a worldly virtuous city built essentially on reason, he who had lived in an era when the dismemberment of the Arab Empire had reached its worst. He who had resided in Iran-based princedoms that were zealous patrons of the Persian culture, in an intellectual climate characterized by rivalries between the "Easterners," his Khurasanian compatriots, and the "Westerners," the Iraqis, the Syrians and other even more Western hereditary enemies; and he who, as vizier to the Buyid sovereign, had personally experienced a real city, plagued by so much confusion and by so many political, social, economic and cultural disturbances.

If Avicenna indeed adopted al-Farabi's emanationist⁶ scheme, it was not to apply it to society or to history, even in the form of a



dream, but was somewhat like a ladder that would allow him access to the heavens, so he could reserve from this world a place for his soul in the afterlife.

This other side to the “great master”⁷ appears in his “Eastern philosophy,”⁸ which he considers as “the truth that is not blemished by any impurity.” We must show Avicenna’s gnostic side which promotes gloom-thinking in order to get used to reading our past in light of objective data and no longer under the pressure of our present *desiderata*. We must not be afraid of facing this dark side of Avicenna’s thought which contradicts the other side, the one that reflects his great work *Al-Shifa’*. Our tradition does not enjoy the exclusivity of such contradictions; even today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, they are legal tender in the Arab world and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, one could say that Avicenna, even with his Eastern philosophy—the philosophy of the “other life” (in this world and in the next world)—was a man who was engaged in the conflicts of his time, a militant for one cause. This philosophy, which he qualified as being “Eastern” albeit an irrationalist discourse, was also an ideological discourse which, given its subsequent developments, proved to be a project of national (Persian) philosophy. What is of importance to us is not the discourse in itself, nor its motivations, but rather its consequences. With his Eastern philosophy, Avicenna consecrated a spiritualist and gnostic trend whose impact was instrumental in the regression of Arab thinking from an open rationalism, spearheaded by the Mu‘tazilites, then by al-Kindi, and culminating with al-Farabi, to a pernicious irrationalism which augured the “gloom-thinking” that scholars like Ghazali, Suhrawardi of Aleppo,⁹ and others simply spread and popularized in various circles. Such is my judgment against Avicenna, the illustrious philosopher and physician that the Eastern school of philosophy had produced. It is without hesitation and regardless of current ideas that I am formulating it, because I believe that it is history itself that judges him as such, history as it actually happened, not textbook “history.”



As a thinker, Avicenna had two sides to him: the side reflected in his *Kitab al-Shifa'* or his *Kitab al-Najat*, and the side that appears in his *Kitab al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* and in the "Eastern" Epistles. Thus through an irony of fate, critics have always used Avicenna to censure Avicenna. Ghazali accepted responsibility for the contents of Avicenna's Eastern philosophy which he presented as the "Deliverance from Bewilderment"¹⁰ and as the "Revivification of Religious Sciences."¹¹ It is in the name of this Eastern philosophy and in the name of religion that he examined the case against Avicenna. The echoes of the sentence that he rendered were to resound for a long time in the decrees of the rigorist legal scholars. Ghazali and those who imitated him made of Avicenna the official representative of philosophy in Islam, by referring to two of his works, the *Shifa'* and the *Najat*, but concealing the *Kitab al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* and "the Eastern wisdom." They brought action against philosophy in his person and accused him of hostility to a cause to which he had in fact adhered but which he could not easily defend during his time because he had borrowed the theologians' methods. Following his death, these very opponents took his place in defending his cause, that of the "Eastern" philosophy, exposing "the intentions of philosophers," denouncing "the incoherence of philosophers" and engaging in the "struggle against philosophers."¹² That was the best of their talents.

If indeed—as it has constantly been reiterated—philosophy never was able to recover from the blows dealt to it by Ghazali, this was only true in the case of the Arab Middle East. In Iran, by contrast, the Avicennian tradition lasted and its prolongation remained alive until today, expressing, in Persian, a kind of national identity, as this thought was taken out of the sphere of the Arab-Islamic philosophy and placed in that of the Iranian illuminist philosophy.

But let us leave Iran aside and turn our attention towards the Muslim West to discover an Arab-Islamic philosophy (mostly based in the Maghreb and in Al-Andalus), which developed its own



problematics after breaking with the problematics of the Easterners. It is inside the Muslim West that philosophy continued its struggle for reason and rationality, this time addressing the problem through a new methodology and within new perspectives.

¹ Abu Yusuf Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (185-269/796-873) was descended from the great South Arabian tribe of Kinda, a fact that earned him the honorific title of "Philosopher of the Arabs." He was born in Kufa when his father was governor of that city. He studied in Basra, then a great intellectual center, and later settled down in Baghdad. There, he enjoyed the sponsorship of caliphs: al-Ma'mun, al-Mu'tasim (218-227/833-842) and al-Wathiq (227-232/842-847), but was subsequently persecuted under the reign of al-Mutuwakkil. Through his logic, metaphysics, arithmetic, medicine, theology, etc., he contributed greatly to the acclimatization of Greek sciences to Islamic thought. Several of his philosophical treatises were translated into Latin and became famous in the West during the Middle Ages. His thought is heavily influenced by Aristotle as we can judge from his *Treaty of the Original Philosophy*, among others.

² One of the major points of dichotomy between Greek thought and [Islamic] religious thought was the problem of the *ex nihilo* creation or the eternity of the world. Al-Kindi was convinced of the fundamental agreement between research in rational philosophy and the prophetic revelation, but thought that each one represented a distinct path towards the truth. While remaining close to theology, he defended the thesis of the *ex nihilo* creation.

³ See note 7, Chapter 2.

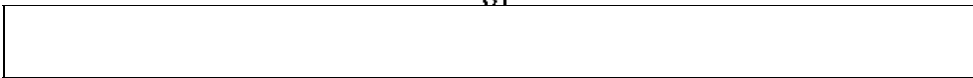
⁴ A dynasty of Iranian Shi'ite princes originally from Daylam (Northern Iran), founded in 300/913. Taking advantage of the political unrest and the potential collapse that threatened the caliphate in Baghdad, it succeeded in imposing a sort of protectorate on the latter in 334/945. This regime was to last until 447/1055. Despite their Shi'ite persuasion, the Buyids never questioned the nominal sovereignty of the Abbasid caliphs.

⁵ A dynasty of Arab princes originally from the Thaghlib tribe, two branches of which succeeded in acquiring sovereignty over the northwest part of the Abbassid Empire—one in Jazira, with Mawsul as a capital, and the other in northern Syria, with Aleppo as a capital. This second principedom knew its glory mostly between 336/947 and 350/961 under the reign of Sayf al-Dawla who fought successfully against the Byzantines and who welcomed into his court numerous thinkers and men-of-letters, like al-Mutanabbi, the poet, and al-Farabi, the philosopher.

⁶ Emanationism is the theory advanced by the neo-platonists according to which spirits and bodies come onto the [human] being through a necessary outflow (*fayd*) of divine power, in the same way light emanates from the sun. This theory was invested within the Arab-Islamic philosophy by al-Farabi. In his "Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City," he views the whole of creation as resulting from the overabundance in perfection of the one (God), which overflows into a primary intelligence that generates, in turn, a secondary intelligence, through the act of understanding its author, and the extreme celestial sphere, through the act of self-understanding. This process continues through successive stages until the tenth cosmic intelligence is generated. The various intelligences determine the movement of the celestial spheres that govern the sub-lunary world. The contribution of such a theory is to have satisfactorily answered the questions of Muslims who were faced with the problem of reconciling the rational requirement—as posited by the Aristotelian philosophy—of a necessity that is inherent to the existence of the Universe implying the eternity of the world, with the requirement of conceiving of the world as being contingent, as postulated by the dogma of the *ex-nihilo* creation. Moreover, the theory of the procession of intelligences helped resolve the problem of the creation of the multiple from the one. Similarly, emanation was the object of exploration by the Shi'ite thinkers as well, in particular by Ja'far al-Sadiq who is said to have identified the primary intellect with the Prophet (the Muhammadan light) and the secondary intellect with Imam 'Ali. The articulation of "Imamology"—or hagiology—after noesis became particularly systematized within the Isma'ilian thought and among the Sufis.

⁷ *Shaikh ra'is*, the honorific title attributed to Avicenna by the Islamic philosophy tradition.

⁸ In his *Kitab al-Shifa'*, Avicenna expressly refers to another work in which he is said to have presented an "Eastern philosophy" or "Eastern wisdom," that must have revealed his true doctrine. In it were gathered "the principles of true science that are discovered—through exhaustive research and prolonged reflection—by he who is not without a fine intellectual intuition." The *Shifa'* and the *Najat*, devoted to peripatetic [rationalist] philosophy, were works he therefore reserved for the commoners, whereas his spiritualist, gnostic, "Eastern philosophy" was



reserved for the elite. M. A. al-Jabri proposed an analysis of this particular question in a text entitled *Ibn Sina wa falsafatuhu al-mashriqiyya* (Avicenna and his "Eastern Philosophy") which he included in his work *Nahnu wa al-turath* and where he suggests that Avicenna's Eastern philosophy represents a moment of "resignation of reason" within the Arab-Islamic philosophy, and the beginning of a "thought of gloom."

⁹ Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (549-587/1155-1191) was originally from the city of Suhraward (northeastern Iran), the same birthplace of the other Suhrawardi: Abu Haf's Shihab al-Din 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (539-632/1145-1234), the Baghdad-based "Great Shaykh" of Sufism and author of a classical Sufi treatise called *Kitab 'Awarif al-Ma'arif* ("The Benefits of Spiritual Knowledge"). Shihab al-Din Yahya, nicknamed Shaykh al-Ishraq, tried to resuscitate the unfinished project of Avicenna's "Eastern philosophy." He consummated the break with nationalism in favor of a mystic approach founded on "direct experience" of the truth, which he called "illumination" (*Ishraq*). "Eastern" Theosophy (*Hikmat al-Ishraq*), the title of Suhrawardi's *magnum opus*, was placed under the aegis of uninterrupted chains of "enlightened" interpreters, Plato, Hermes, Pythagoras in the West, the "Ancient Sages of Persia" and Zoroaster in the East, who would rejoin together in the person of the author. Suhrawardi was thus able to integrate, through "mystical epics," themes of Iranian mythology to the religious meta-history of Islamic spirituality. He was welcomed in Aleppo by the Ayyubid sovereign, son of Salah al-Din (Saladin), but was later killed following an action brought against him by the religious scholars. The image of Suhrawardi was restored in the modern era by (the orientalist) Henry Corbin's works (see Volume II of his book *In Iranian Islam*, entitled *Suhrawardi and Persia's Platonists*).

¹⁰ *Al-Munqid min al-Dalal*: the title of one of Ghazali's works.

¹¹ *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*: the title of Ghazali's great theological-mystical work.

¹² The phrases in between quotations are titles of works that were devoted to the refutation of philosophy. The first two, *Maqasid al-falasifa* and *Tahafut al-falasifa* are Ghazali's. The third one, *Musara'at al-falasifa*, is a work by Shahrastani.

