A Problem in Avicenna's View on the Origination of the Soul and a Reply to It *

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Abstract

Traditionally, it has been thought that according to Avicenna's view of the soul, the origination of the soul is, in some sense, (with or) after the origination of human body. In this paper I will argue against this interpretation of Avicenna. In the first section, a short review of the Peripatetic philosophy of the soul will be given. In the following section, I will explain a significant problem for the Peripatetic view of the soul. In the ending section, I will try to provide an alternative reading of Avicenna's view on the origination of the soul.

Key Terms: The soul**,** Avicenna, The Peripatetic philosophy**.**

Introduction

Some of the ancient philosophers have considered the soul as the quality resulting from the composition of the four elements, i.e., temperament. Many of the contemporary scientists consider the real nature of the human soul to be the quality resulting from the chemical reactions in the body or the mode in which various human cells are related and interact.

Avicenna's teachings in *The Healing* and *The Remarks and Admonitions*, however, are different. The soul is identical neither to the temperament nor to the quality resulting from the chemical reactions in the human body (or the mode in which cells are related and interact); rather, this is the soul that is the cause and the preserver

* I would like to thank Seyed N. Mousavian (from the Iranian Institute of Philosophy) for his help at various stages of preparing this paper.

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of the temperament or such reactions. This view is relevant to Avicenna's position on the abstractness of the soul. Roughly speaking, there are three reasons, taken from Avicenna's teachings, for the abstractness of the human soul. First of all, in some cases there is a clash or contrariety between the volition of the soul and the natural exigencies of the body. Second, the soul is always attentive to itself, even though in some circumstances, such as the states of sleeping or drunkenness, it is unaware of the body and its organs. Finally, one of our existential aspects is that we cogitate ourselves even when we are ignorant of our body. Since cogitating (or conceiving) is nothing except the presence of the conceived object, our soul is present to itself when it cogitates its essence. Hence, our soul is identical with cogitability (or intelligibility). Therefore, it is abstract and immaterial.[1]

As the author of *The Faiths and the Sects* has pointed out, the first person who disagreed with the view ascribed to Plato regarding the pre-eternity of the soul was Aristotle. Aristotle not only considers the pre-eternity of the soul as impossible, but he also takes the origination of the soul before the body as contradictory.[2] In other words, he believes that the precedence of the soul over the body is impossible. After Aristotle, his followers, including Avicenna, Sohravardi, and Mulla Sadra, have strongly argued against the precedence or pre-eternity of the soul. Mulla Sadra has tried to give an *explanation* for Plato's *words* and has discussed two interpretations of it at the end of the third volume of *The Four Spiritual Journeys* and the first part of the *Fourth Journey*, which includes some of his discussions on the soul.

A central question concerning the origination of the soul goes like this: Is the origination of the soul with the origination of the body (or even with the origination of temperament)? Namely, is it the case that, with the preparation of the embryo's body or even with the origination of the temperament capable of receiving the soul, the soul, which is essentially abstract, is bestowed on the body? (As it has been ascribed to Avicenna and his followers). According to this view, the soul is spiritual-in-origination and spiritual-in-persistence. Or, does the embryo's soul come into existence after the origination and evolution of its body and *from* the body itself? Namely, the origination of embryo's soul is *due to* the origination of its body. According to this view, the soul is corporeal-in-origination and spiritual-in-persistence.

This is Mulla Sadra's view and a result of his theses of *substantial motion* and *existential intensification*. He does not take the soul at the beginning of its origination as completely abstract; rather, the soul goes through different levels (of abstractness) from its origination. He is explicit that "the soul has various statuses and different levels: the level of sense, the level of imagination, and the level of reason" (*The Four Spiritual Journeys,* Vol. 3, p.510).

All of these remarks were intended to set the scene for a reconsideration of the question of the origination of the soul in Avicenna's view. Traditionally, it has been thought that according to Avicenna's view of the soul, the origination of the soul is, in some sense, (with or) after the origination of human body. In this paper I will argue against this interpretation of Avicenna. In the first section, a short review of the Peripatetic philosophy of the soul will be given. In the following section, I will explain a significant problem for the Peripatetic view of the soul. The ending section will provide an alternative reading of Avicenna's view on the origination of the soul which seems to be promising in solving the long standing problem concerning the Peripatetic view of the soul discussed in the second section.

1. A Summary of the Peripatetic View

How human souls come into existence according to Avicenna's view, as far as I can tell from my own reading of his works, is different from what is commonly attributed to him. In this paper I will endeavor to explain Avicenna's view regarding the origination of the soul and how the soul relates to the temperament and the body. Of course, it is evident that discussing the problem of the origination of the soul is posterior to refuting the precedence and pre-eternity of the soul to the body, i.e., the view ascribed to Plato, which deserves a separate study.

According to the followers of Aristotle, in particular Avicenna, human soul is neither eternal nor originated before the origination of the temperament of the body. Rather, its origination is *simultaneous* with the origination of the temperament of the body. Among those who believe in the thesis of the origination of the soul, there are two views. The first view, which is Avicenna's, is that the soul is spiritual-in-origination and spiritual-in-persistence. The second view is that the soul, after bodily changes caused by substantial motion and existential intensification, gets elevated from the level of nature, from mineral,

vegetative, and animal statuses, to the level of imaginary abstractness, and then, by means of the very substantial change, to the level of rational abstractness (it is worth noting that according to Mulla Sadra, the final transition, i.e. from imaginary abstractness to rational abstractness, may not occur in all humans). This second view suggests that the origination of the soul is *caused* by the origination of the temperament and the body, as the origination of the fruit from the tree. Hence, the soul is corporeal-in-origination and spiritual-in-persistence. This view belongs to Mulla Sadra and his followers (discussing this view goes well beyond the purview of this article). Both views take the soul to be incorruptible, and it must be recalled that all those who believe in the abstractness of the soul also believe that the soul is not corrupted with the corruption of the body.

Most of Aristotle's Muslim interpreters say that the human soul is bestowed on the body only after the matter, through various bodily changes, reaches its highest level of being. Moreover, the Peripatetic philosophers believed in *becoming and corruption* in a particular sense, i.e., a corporeal-kind form is bestowed on the matter in virtue of its initial preparedness (or capacity), after which matter becomes *begotten*. This begetting is referred to by 'becoming,' and this new form carries a potential and preparedness for the more perfect form following it. When this preparedness reaches its perfection and actuality, the previous form corrupts and another form, which in addition to the perfection of the previous form possesses some higher perfection, is conferred. They call the annihilation of the preceding form 'corruption' and the coming (or occurrence) of the subsequent form 'becoming' (as before). The first compositional form that comes into existence is only the preserver of the elements and composite ingredients from dispersion. This form is called the 'mineral form.' After this, the solid form occurs, which in addition to preserving elements from dispersion, has some other effects and properties. After the solid form, the vegetative form occurs, which besides the effects of solid form, causes growth in various aspects. This latter form is also labeled the 'vegetative soul.' After the corruption of this form, the animal form follows; this form, besides growth, has conceiving, perceiving, and movement as its powers. This form is called the 'animal soul.' If a material being is becoming a human, then it will be elevated from the animal soul to the level of the human soul after the former's corruption.

2. A problem

What follows is a well-known problem: What does integrate and preserve the elements from dispersion? Historically speaking, three different replies have been provided.

(1) If it were said that this is the embryo's soul, the problem would be that such a soul has not yet been given. Moreover, how could the soul, which should be bestowed *after* the amalgamation of the elements and the generation of the temperament, be the integrator and preserver of the elements? This would demand the precedence of the soul to itself in two stages. That is, the generation of the soul is after the generation of the temperament and the generation of the temperament is after the amalgamation and composition of the elements. This puts philosophers in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they have claimed that the soul and every kind form is given by supreme principles after the generation of the temperament, and on the other hand, they have said that the soul is the integrator of the elements and the cause generating the temperament.

(2) If we say that the integrator of the elements and the form-giver to the embryo and its organs is the form-giving faculty of the soul, then the problem would be the following: How could such a faculty, whose reality and existence is posterior to the existence of the soul and is only one of its means, be realized before the generation of the soul (when it is known that a soul's faculty cannot possibly perform its function except by being in proper relation to the soul)?

(3) Finally, it might be said that the elements are preserved and composed, and the corporeal form conferred to the embryo, all by the mother's soul in her womb, and after that when the embryo's soul is bestowed, these tasks, i.e., preserving the elements from dispersion, maintaining the temperament, and managing and preserving the embryo's form, are put on the embryo's soul with no natural or existential link. This view, according to the principles of Islamic philosophy, is not acceptable too. This is because whatever is the cause of the generation of something is also the cause of its continuance and the basis of its persistence. It is so, in turn, because in natural systems the task of no *natural* means can be put on another natural means, though such conferment can be accepted in *conventional* tasks.

Nasir al-Din al-Tousi, in his explanatory notes on *Remarks and Admonitions*, after raising the problem of the unity of the integrator and the preserver of the temperament, writes:

«قد يرد على هذا الموضع سوال مشهور و هو ان يقال انكم قلتم ان المركبات انما يستعد لقبول صورها عن مبدئها بسبب امزجتها المختلفه و يجب من ذلک تقدم الامزجه على تلک الصورة و الان تقولون ان نفس التى هى صورة للحيوان جامعة للاستقسّات و الجامعة للاستقسّات يجب ان يكون مقدما على المزاج و هذا تناقض».

Following this, Tousi recounts Imam Raazi's reply and then rejects it providing a rejoinder according to Avicenna's teachings. A translation of this part, roughly speaking, goes like this:

"What the philosophical rules taught by Avicenna and others imply is that the embryo's soul gathers nutritive ingredients because of an *attracting power* and then turns them into quadruplet mixtures. And then, by means of *procreative power*, it extracts a matter from them and prepares it for receiving a potentiality that renders it human. Initially that potentiality turns into a matter as semen and that matter becomes prepared and capable of a form preserving the temperament; this form is the mineral form. Then in virtue of the perfection it obtained from the mineral form, it will become prepared to accept a soul that is more perfect and executes vegetative tasks of growth in addition to preserving the temperament. Then it gathers food and adds to the matter in such a way that matter grows and gets more perfected to do vegetative tasks. And in this way it moves toward perfection to become prepared for a more complete soul that does animal tasks in addition to all the previous ones. And animal acts, from sensation to various movements, are carried out by this soul until the body develops into a complete body and becomes capable of accepting the rational soul, which besides the previous tasks brings about speech and reason. This soul will remain as the administrator of the body to the end of life. Philosophers have analogized this power, from its origination to its perfection as an abstract soul, to the warmth of charcoal due to its juxtaposition to the fire. This is because the charcoal initially gets warm, for its proximity to the fire, and then this warmth turns into hotness and then into fire and finally into fire flames. The charcoal's warmth is like the mineral form, which only preserves the elements from dispersion. The charcoal's hotness is like the vegetative soul, which is the source of vegetative functions. Its becoming fire before flaming is like the animal soul and its flaming and burning is like the rational soul. It is obvious that each subsequent form carries out what the previous one carries and something more. Hence, all these powers are one thing headed to a boundary of perfection from a boundary of deficiency. The last three powers, with all the differences, are one thing and given a single name, i.e., the 'soul': this is the infant's soul". (Nasir al-Din al-Tousi, 1378: 305)

Though Tousi's view may be able to solve most of the problems, there is still a difficulty regarding the manner according to which these four forms are transformed (how do these material transformations occur?). Is it the case that such transformation happens through substantial motion and existential intensification, namely the mineral form that preserves the temperament and guarantees the non-dispersion of the elements is the soul's lower stage and then that very form is transformed into the abstract soul via existential intensification and substantial motion? Tousi (ibid) writes:

«فجميع هذه القوى كشئ واحد متوجه من حدّ ما من النقصان الى حدّ ما من الكمال».

If it were meant that there be substantial motion and existential intensification, we should have found, at least at some other places, pieces of evidence indicating such a belief. However, we could not find such things. Quite to the contrary, since he follows Avicenna in most of his philosophical views, and he is explicit at the beginning of his reply to the problem in question that

«و ما تقتضيه القواعد الحكميه التى افادها الشيخ ره وغيره».

, it is more plausible to think that he disagrees with substantial motion, as Avicenna strongly did. Therefore the above-mentioned analogy cannot be interpreted as indicating that Tousi believed in substantial motion. It should be recalled that Tousi has also attributed this analogy to others who do not believe in substantial motion and existential intensification. On top of that, note that we can find similar analogies in *The Healing* as well.

Therefore, such transformations cannot occur, according to Tousi's view or Avicenna's, by means of motion in substance and intensification of existence. Do these transformations occur as becoming and corruption in the way that Peripatetic philosophers believed? If so, then the contradictory situation Tousi has described will remain.

3. A Reply

In my opinion, the view that is closer to philosophical rules, and accords with Avicenna's analysis more straightforwardly, is the following: the soul comes into existence when the temperament originates. What is meant by 'temperament,' as used by Avicenna, is a quality resulting from the continuous actions and reactions of the

elements, and such a quality is similar to the qualities of the composite elements. The union of these elements and qualities is called 'amalgamate.' But if the combination of some objects or qualities does not bring about a new quality, like the combination of wheat and barley in which no actions or reactions occur, such a combination is not called 'amalgamate' and it does not result in temperament (*The Healing*, p.126-7). He adds, in *The Healing* (vol. 2, 136-7), that because of the amalgamation of the elements and the formation of temperament, composites possess new properties that are not found in the components. For example, the color and taste that may be found in composites are not present in their components. Or, some acts may be found in composites that are not present in the components in the very same form or as distributed. For example, a magnet attracting iron, or scammony absorbing yellow bile in the human body (and many other acts observed in plants and animals) only appear after the formation of the temperament. What the contemporary scientists maintain, i.e. that vegetative natural life is due to the composition and chemical reactions of matter and elements, is not acceptable for Avicenna or other Islamic philosophers, however. They do not consider life or living, which is concomitant (a quality, in a sense) to temperament, as temperament phenomenon; rather, they take the very temperament that is capable of life to be the effect of vegetative soul. If one likes to get the existential order right, according to Muslim philosophers, it should be said that first the vegetative soul comes into existence and then in virtue of that the temperament originates and then other qualities subsequently appear. We may say the same thing regarding the animal soul. It should be noted that this analysis is contrary to the natural scientists' approach. They believe that initially matter and elements come together, then the temperament is formed, and then the vegetative soul as well as animal and human soul come into being as its effects. An important question at this stage is the following: do vegetative and animal cells initially originate from nonliving elements to bring about life? Or is life initially there to let the elements combine? If the cell is not living, it would not be able to gather its food, grow and so on and so forth. Hence, it seems that the cell should be initially alive to gather food and grow. By putting hydrogen, carbon, and other elements together, the living cell does not emerge, since in genuine composites the composite will not form except by actions and reactions between the elements, or so Avicenna thought.

Hence, there needs to be another thing to gather the elements together and instigate the necessary actions and reactions. This natural factor should be the vegetative (, and then animal,) soul which is alive and forms the body of the cell.

If it is asked where this vegetative (or animal) soul resides, Avicenna's reply, as well as his followers', is the following: Father, mother, or plants which themselves possess a vegetative (or animal) soul develop living cells (e.g., in their ovaries), and matter and elements of the male body are mixed with the matter and elements of the female body, in such a way that the egg cell emerges under proper conditions. The development of the egg, its gathering food, and its forming the suitable temperament for its particular life, indicates that a separate soul has been bestowed upon it. For Avicenna and his followers, it is evident that the composition of elements and temperament cannot precede the vegetative (or animal) soul.

In the Natural Philosophy of *The Healing* (p. 286), in the third chapter of the first essay, he says:

«بمزاج خاص و هيئة خاصة و انما تبقى لكن المادة القريبة لوجود هذه الانفس فيها انما هى ما هى بذالک المزاج الخاص بالفعل موجوداً ما دام فيها النفس. و النفس هى تحفظها بذالک المزاج. فان النفس هى لا محاله علة لتكوّن النبات و الحيوان على المزاج الذى لهما اذ كانت النفس هى مبدأ التوحيد و التدبير».

Translation:

> And the immediate matter for the realization of these souls in the thing is the matter with the particular temperament and mode, and the matter remains with that temperament that is actually existent as long as the soul exists therein. And the soul is the one that preserves it by that temperament. And with no doubt, the soul is the cause of the being of that vegetable or animal with their own temperaments, since the soul is the origin of unity and order.

Here Avicenna is explicit that the soul, vegetative or animal, is a reality that causes the temperament and takes care of it. On the next page (ibid), he adds:

«فالنفس التى لكل حيوان هى جامعة لهذا البدن على النظام الذى يليق».

This seems to imply that the soul of each animal is the integrator of the elements of the animal's body and their synthesizer in such a way that the body suits the soul. In Natural Philosophy of *The Healing* (p. 361) one also finds:

«و ليس يجب اذا كانت النفس واحدة الذات ان لا يفيض عنها فى اعضاء مختلفة قوى مختلف بل من الجائز ان يكون اول ما يفيض عنها فى البذر و المنى قوة الانشاء فتنشى اعضاء على حسب موافقة افعال تلک القوى و تستعد كل عضو لقبول قوة خاصة ليفيض عنه ولولا ذالک لكان خلق البدن معطلاً لها».

Translation:

> It is not necessary that if the soul is a unified essence it does not confer different powers to different organs. Rather, it is permissible that the first thing conferred by it in the seed or semen is the power of engendering. So it engenders the organs appropriate to their corresponding powers and makes each organ capable of receiving a specific power to be conferred by it. And were it not like that, the creation of the body would remain suspended for it.

The explanation of what Avicenna is trying to say, I suspect, is the following. If the soul is not created from the time of the origination of the prepared temperament and it does not contribute into the composition of the bodily constituents and the arrangement of the necessary powers (and it is only conferred after the complete creation of the body) then it necessitates suspension during the time in which the soul still does not belong to the body. However, suspension in this sense is impossible. Hence Avicenna says that (the act of) form-giving to the organs is done by the first power that emerges from the soul. And after the preparation of each organ for receiving the power suitable for its job(s), bodily powers are conferred. And if we do not accept this view, it would follow that the body should remain suspended for a while. So it should be evident that the first power that emerges from the soul is its form-giving power. Therefore, the soul should exist in advance for this power to work. In the above-mentioned passage, as we interpreted, Avicenna is explicit that the origination of the soul after the completeness of the body is mistaken. Hence, we can conclude that with the origination of the embryo's

temperament, the soul originates as well so as to create the body and its necessary powers.

Finally, it should be noted that, though in some of Avicenna's works, e.g., *The Book of Salvation* and *The Beginning and the End*, we find quotes that are apparently explicit in stating that the origination of the soul is after the origination of the body, we may take these as formulations of Peripatetic philosophers' view in general, not Avicenna's own view. His view on the soul in *The Healing* and *The Book of Annotations* is his personal view and, like his view on many other issues, deviates from the dominant Peripatetic view.

Notes

1. These arguments have been introduced in a very sketchy fashion. Obviously they contain numerous gaps. They are only intended to provide an overview of Avicenna's reasoning regarding the abstractness of the soul.
2. Here I rely on a common interpretation of Aristotle.

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