

PARADISE AND HELL IN MUSLIM PHILOSOPHY

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To discuss concepts of paradise and hell, or, on a more general plane, of reward and punishment in Muslim philosophy, especially in that of Ibn Sinā, one will have to examine the question of whether it was possible to integrate the religious idea of reward and punishment into the system of philosophy, and if so, how reward and punishment were understood and explained from the point of view of philosophy.

1. In Greek philosophy psychology was part of physics; consequently, their views on the soul were set forth within their general theory on nature. In this context I will refer only to three of them here.

A. Epicurus writes in his letter to Herodotus that “the next thing to see – referring it to the sensations and feelings, since that will provide the strongest confirmation – is that soul is a fine structured body diffused through the whole aggregate, most strongly resembling wind with a certain blending of heat, and resembling wind in some respects but heat in others”¹.

Epicurus propounds the theory that the soul is corporeal, and consists of fine atoms. It is the corporeal nature of the soul that results in “its ability to interact with body and to be affected jointly with it”². At death the atoms of both body and soul will be dispersed. This means that the soul does not outlive the body; consequently, in the Epicurean school there is no speaking of the eternal happiness or suffering of the soul in the world to come.

B. Plato describes the soul as the “oldest of all created things” and “older than all created things” (Plato, *Laws* 969 A and 967 D). In another passage he says that the soul was created before the body (Plato, *Laws* 896 B). All these passages suggest that the soul is an independent entity different from the body. This independent entity is prior to the body, eternal and self-moving (Plato, *Phaedrus* 245 C-E; Guthrie 1979: 366-367; Maróth 2002:332-333). The body is only an instrument of the soul (Plato, *Alcibiades* I, 130 C).

These words suggest that the soul is responsible for all deeds committed by a living being. To put it briefly: if it is always the soul that bears responsibility for the

¹ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* in: Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* X, 63; Long & Sedley 1989-90: I, 64, II, 65.

² Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, in: Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* X, 71; Lucretius, *De rerum natura* III. 136-176.

actions of the body, then it must be the subject of reward and punishment. In Plato's dualistic philosophy, if the soul is eternal, it must get both reward and punishment in the next world. This idea explains why Plato (*Menon* 81 C-D) came to the idea of the transmigration of souls: the human soul affected by sins in this earthly life should be purified after its separation from the body. The purification process lasts for a long period of time, during which the sinful soul transmigrates into the bodies of beings of lower and lower ranks. The sufferings endured in these changing forms contribute to the purification of the soul from the sins committed in human life.

C. Aristotle says that all beings in the sublunar world consist of two basic elements: matter and form. The form of living beings is their soul. This hylomorphic theory of psychology presupposes that, in human beings, both form and matter, soul and body come to be together at the same time, and in the same way the disintegration of a human being means the corruption of his soul and body at the same time. In Aristotle's theory, form and matter cannot exist independently from each other. The only exception is the human intellect (*nous*), which remains eternal (Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 736 b 16-29).

Aristotle's vague remarks on the immortality of *nous* do not permit us to draw any conclusion about its fate in the other world. Perhaps it is not a mistaken interpretation of Aristotle's psychology to come to the view that he denied all kinds of reward and punishment in the world to come. Good moral conduct resulted in a happy life in this earthly life.

This short survey of three different views is enough to suggest that on the basis of either an atomistic and materialistic or a hylomorphic theory one will not be led to any speculation about the ultimate happiness of human beings. Its necessary presupposition is the Platonic notion of the eternity of soul.

2. After these preliminary remarks, let us turn to Ibn Sīnā. In the light of what has been said so far, one will have to examine the definition of soul given by Ibn Sīnā.

Writing on the soul, Ibn Sīnā says that "it is not a body, but it is a part of an animal and a plant, it is a form or like a form, it is like perfection"³. In the following passages Ibn Sīnā explains the meaning of these concepts and the nature of their connections in terms of Aristotelian philosophy. As a result of this terminological investigation he comes to the conclusion that "soul is a substance, because it is a form"⁴. Pointing out that according to Aristotelian philosophy this statement is a tautology, he calls attention to the way the soul exists in the body. In his comment-

³ Ibn Sīnā, *Nafs* 6.12-13:

ذات النفس ليس بجسم، بل هي جزء للحيوان والنبات، هي صورة أو كالصورة أو كالكمال

⁴ Ibn Sīnā, *Nafs* 8.11: فيكون معنى قوله: إن النفس جوهر لأنها صورة

ary on the Categories, he tries to distinguish between various meanings of *sifa*. The third meaning is the following: the characterized thing is taken as something the essence of which was established, but its characteristic feature is not attached to it like an external accident, but belongs to its normal condition. The example of this kind of *sifa* is form as connected with matter (Ibn Sīnā, *Maqūlat* 18-19). Form does not belong to the concept or essence of matter, but matter never exists without form.

Returning to psychology and its functionalistic explanation, one can see how Ibn Sīnā applies this logical doctrine to the examination of the essence of the soul. If soul as form can never exist without body, it is only a property (*sifa*) of matter. To put it in other words: the soul has an existence independent from matter. Soul as form does not exist in matter as in substratum. This means that form and soul have separate existences; and consequently they should be considered as separate (*mufāriq*) substances⁵. In this sense, soul and body are two separate substances in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy, as was taught by Plato as well.

In addition to these considerations, there are some souls existing as separate souls in the intelligible world, not as forms in bodies. This fact is a further evidence for the conclusion that has just been drawn above⁶.

Some elements of this reasoning are not alien to Aristotelian philosophy, although the classification of attributes (*sifat*) as propounded by Ibn Sīnā is not known to me from Aristotle's books. However, the result of Ibn Sīnā's analysis of the status of soul as form in body is a Platonic dualism tantamount to the view that a living being is the connection of two substances (a material and a formal one) existing separately from each other.

In a living body, the functionalist explanation of Aristotelian psychology ascribes growth, nutrition, procreation and other capacities to the soul, although the soul cannot produce these and similar actions without the body. These functions of the soul are carried out by the body. In this respect the body is an instrument of the soul, as Ibn Sīnā puts it⁷. Body as an instrument of soul is a well-known Platonic view, as mentioned in the introduction (Taylor 1949:Ch. 3; Plato, *Alcibiades* I, 130 C). This view implies that the soul has to take responsibility for all the actions of human beings.

To put it in other words: soul as an immaterial, simple substance must have eternal existence; consequently, it can be the subject of reward and punishment in the other world, provided every individual human being has an individual soul.

⁵ Ibn Sīnā, *Nafs* 9.13-18: فإن كان كل نفس موجودة لا في موضوع، فكل نفس جوهر

⁶ Ibn Sīnā, *Nafs* 9.13-18:

وإن كانت نفس ما قائمة بذاتها والبواقي كل واحد منها في هيولى وليست في موضوع فكل نفس جوهر

⁷ Ibn Sīnā, *Nafs* 10.16-19: فالنفس ... كمال أول الجسم طبيعي ألي له أن يفعل أفعال الحياة:

This philosophical teaching is in harmony with the requirements of the Muslim faith so far. The next problem is that of tracing the source of Ibn Sīnā's psychological doctrine. The system of psychology set forth by Ibn Sīnā is similar to that of Plotinus in many respects. Plotinus, too, accepted Aristotle's functionalist view of soul, but at the same time he restored the Platonic dualism, as one can see in the case of Ibn Sīnā as well. Plotinus said that our human soul comes from the world-soul and after our death returns to it⁸. In this monopsychic theory, followed later by Averroës too, one cannot speak of reward and punishment.

The possible problem emerging from the doctrine of the world-soul was addressed by Ibn Sīnā by reliance on the theory of *principium individuationis* developed by Aristotle and set forth later by Plotinus.

Ibn Sīnā says in his *al-Mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* that the human intellect comes to be together with the human body at the same time. Soul is an immaterial substance; consequently, it is one species, i. e. all souls are identical in their specific nature. In the *Metaphysics* he says that the intelligible natures existing without matter cannot be many in number⁹, as opposed to the human souls. The latter cannot exist without matter, and this explains why they differ in number. Their multitude is either a consequence of different accidents existing on the same essence, or of different material they are embodied in. The first option is impossible; and consequently the difference of human souls is due to bodies. If souls different in number come to be together with different bodies, then each one of the souls will have a separate essence. The different material forms they assume result in the various individual characters of the human souls¹⁰. In the *Metaphysics* Ibn Sīnā repeats the same view: the natures not standing in need of matter for their subsistence cannot be many in number. They form a unity in species as well as in number. A nature of this kind can become many neither due to its differences appearing on its essence, nor due to its material or to the accidents pertaining to the material. If dissimilarity is due to accidents inherent in the essence, then the multitude will not be different in respect of the species. If

⁸ Plotinus, *Enneades* IV, 9, 2; cf. Blumenthal 1976, Armstrong 1971 and 1976.

⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt* I, 207:

هذه الطبائع ما كان منها غير محتاج إلى مادة في أن يبقى، ولا في أن يبدئ لها وجود فيكون من السميع أن يتكثر، بل لأنها يكون النوع منه قائما واحدا بالعدد.

¹⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 107-108:

فإن كانت كثرتها واختلافها بالعدد لاختلاف ذواتها فالفرق بين الأنفس الإنسانية بالفصول، وبظاهر أن هذا محال. بل الأنفس الإنسانية نوع واحد. فينبغي أن يكون اختلافها بسبب الأبدان التي لها، ولأنها تكثرت، ثم إذا تكثرت في الحدوث معها صار لكل واحد منها ذات على حدة. وأيضا اكتسبت هيات مادية بها تتغير.

dissimilarity is due to accidents not inherent in essence, then it occurs because the essence is embodied in matter¹¹.

The souls of Zaid and 'Amr are different in number in consequence of the difference of their bodies. In this way monopsychism was refuted.

Taking these teachings as a starting point, Ibn Sīnā easily refutes the Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls. If one takes into consideration what has just been said above about the simultaneous genesis of body and soul, one can immediately realise the impossibility of the transmigration of souls: it would mean that a body has two souls, one of which came to be with the body, while the other came from another body through the process of transmigration.

Two souls in one body is an evidently false assumption; consequently, the doctrine of transmigration should be rejected (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 108-109).

The denial of this Platonic doctrine implies the establishment of the new doctrine of a unique, eternal and responsible soul.

The responsibility of the one soul is underlined by the adaptation of another Platonic doctrine. According to Plato, soul and body are in continuous conflict. For Ibn Sīnā this view is the starting-point of further speculations. In some conflicts – as he says in *Al-mabda' wa-l-ma'ād* – the soul can overcome the resistance of the body, in some other ones the soul has to surrender. If the soul is victorious in the majority of cases, it assumes a victorious character, if not, it assumes a submissive, obedient one. A victorious soul can always overcome the material temptations, whereas a submissive soul is defenceless in the face of bodily temptations.

Happiness of soul – as far as the soul is considered in itself – consists in becoming part of the intelligible world, but as far as it is united with the body, its happiness consists in being submissive (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 110).

In the following passages, Ibn Sīnā explains that pleasure does not consist in having a perfection (*kamāl*), but in the action of that perfection. Every sensation of the sensitive soul is a perfection, but only the attainment of the proper object of sensation is pleasure.

Intellect (*an-nafs an-nātiqa*) is the perfection of the human soul, and analogically, its pleasure consists in the intellection of the Absolute Good (the first and supreme being) and the beings emanating from him (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 111).

This is essentially a doctrine set forth by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There one can read the following lines:

“And life is defined, in the case of animals, by the capacity for sensation; in the case of man, by the capacity for sensation and thought. But a capacity is

¹¹ Ibn Sīnā, *Ilāhiyyāt* 208:

الأغراض إما أن تكون لازمة للطبيعة فلا تختلف فيها الكثرة بسبب النوع وإما أن تكون عارضة غير لازمة للطبيعة فيكون عروضها بسبب يتعلق بالمادة.

referred to its activity, and in this its full reality consists. It appears therefore that life in the full sense is sensation or thought. But life is a thing good and pleasant in itself, for it is definite, and definiteness is a part of the essence of goodness, and what is essentially good is good for the good man, and hence appears to be pleasant to all men. ... and to be conscious that we are perceiving and thinking is to be conscious that we exist .. ; and if to be conscious one is alive is a pleasant thing in itself (for life is a thing essentially good, and to be conscious that one possesses a good thing is pleasant),- and if life is desirable, and especially so for good men, because existence is good for them, and so pleasant (because they are pleased by the perception of what is intrinsically good) ... etc.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* 1170 a 20-1170 b 5).

What Ibn Sīnā said about happiness was derived from this view. Aristotle, as well as Ibn Sīnā, identifies sensation and thought with life. Life is a value in itself, and every living being enjoys its own life. The continuous contemplation of the highest being – contemplation being a thought – means eternal life for our intellect. Life being a pleasure, the intellect enjoys the pleasure of eternal life. Perception and cognition being a pleasure, the perception and cognition of the supreme being is the supreme pleasure.

The continuation of the theory was inspired by Galen. Ibn Sīnā added that as long as the sensation of the proper object of sensation is happiness, the pleasure one feels at the sensation of the not proper object of sensation is a sign of sickness. The same is valid in the case of a desire for an improper object of sensation (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 111). A soul not longing for the knowledge of the supreme being is sick. A sick soul is deprived from all these real pleasures, and that is punishment.

Aristotelian psychology maintains that getting acquainted with any object of knowledge means that the human intellect is receptive of any form. As Aristotle puts it: “Soul is all existing things”¹². The reception of form means the identification of the intellect with the form received.

This Aristotelian doctrine of intellection is the basis of Ibn Sīnā's words when he states that the intellectual perception of the intelligible forms means that they become the essence of the intellect. To put it in other words: the surviving part of our soul, i.e. our intellect – if it has a victorious character, becoming free from the obstacles of our material part, getting acquainted with the purest and highest being, i.e. with the Absolute Good – becomes a divine being itself, and the Absolute Good becomes the essence of our surviving intellect. The divine beauty will belong to our intellect. The Absolute Good is pleasing to the intellect, and in the procedure of intellection the human intellect is taking pleasure at the Absolute Good. The reception of the supreme being into our intellect means that our intellect will feel the same divine

¹² Aristotle, *De anima* 431^b 20 sqq: ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὄντα πῶς ἐστὶ πάντα.

pleasure that is felt by the supreme being in the procedure of the intellection of his own essence¹³. This divine happiness, which we experience in the other world, is the reward we get for our good conduct in our earthly life (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 112-113).

If the *forma mentis* was submissive, the soul would not be able to attain this level of intellection of the Absolute Good; consequently, it would be excluded from the divine happiness described above, and this would mean pains for him. This is the punishment in the other world that we receive for the bad deeds we committed in our earthly lives (Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 112-113).

3. This is the meaning of the happiness of paradise and the suffering of hell in Ibn Sīnā's philosophy. What Ibn Sīnā writes is similar to Thomas Aquinas' opinion. In his *Summa theologica*, the latter writes as follows: *ultima et perfecta beatitudo non potest esse nisi in visione divinae essentiae*. This is precisely what Ibn Sīnā said. The explanation of this thesis also coincides with that of Ibn Sīnā: *uniuscuiusque potentiae perfectio attenditur secundum rationem sui objecti. Objectum autem intellectus est quod quid est, id est essentia rei ad perfectam igitur beatitudinem requiritur, quod intellectus pertingat ad ipsam essentiam primae causae. Et sic perfectionem suam habebit per unionem ad Deum, sicut ad obiectum, in quo solo beatitudo hominis consistit*¹⁴.

What Ibn Sīnā has to say about paradise and hell is different from the colourful description one can find in the Qur'an, thus it is beyond the limits of the orthodox religion. It is an abstract philosophical concept of reward and punishment. The Bible does not contain any description of Paradise or Hell. Thomas Aquinas adopted Ibn Sīnā's teaching, and for lack of a Biblical description, this philosophical speculation about the other world – the abstract concept of happiness, pleasures and pains – became the official teaching of Christendom regarding Paradise and Hell.

¹³ Ibn Sīnā, *Mabda'* 112:

الصورة المعقولة التي يعقلها العقل تصير ذاته، فهربى ذلك الجمال لذاته والمدرک أيضا ذاته. فالمدرک والمدرک راجع كل واحد منهما على الآخر، فوصول سبب اللذات إلى المستلذ أشد وأوغل في ذاته، وهذه اللذة شبيهة باللذة للمبدأ الأول بذاته ويأدرک ذاته، وللروحانيين.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, secunda pars, quaestio III. articulus VIII.

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