Philosophy as a Path to Happiness

Attainment of Happiness in Arabic Peripatetic and Ismaili Philosophy

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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki in auditorium XII, University main building, on the 13th of June, 2011 at 12 o’clock.
Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore the idea of philosophy as a path to happiness in medieval Arabic philosophy. The starting point is in comparison of two distinct currents within Arabic philosophy between the 10th and early 11th centuries, Peripatetic philosophy, represented by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, and Ismaili philosophy represented by al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity. These two distinct groups of sources initially offer two contrasting views about philosophy. The attitude of the Peripatetic philosophers is rationalistic and secular in spirit, whereas for the Ismailis philosophy represents the esoteric truth behind revelation. Still, the two currents of thought converge in their view that the ultimate purpose of philosophy lies in its ability to lead man towards happiness. Moreover, they share a common concept of happiness as a contemplative ideal of human perfection, merged together with the Neoplatonic goal of the soul’s reascent to the spiritual world. Finally, for both happiness refers primarily to an otherworldly state thereby becoming a philosophical interpretation of the Quranic accounts of the afterlife.

For both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers the way to happiness consists of two parts: theory and practice. The practical part of philosophy manifests itself in the idea of the purification of the rational soul from its bodily attachments in order for it to direct its attention fully to the contemplative life. Hence, there appears an ideal of philosophical life with the goal of relative detachment from the worldly life. All Arabic philosophers moreover interpret the regulations of the religious law within this context, perceiving their purpose to lie in their purificatory function within the soul’s ascent to spirituality, and possessing a distinct meaning for philosophers and non-philosophers. However, only for al-Kirmānī is the philosophical praxis limited to the religious regulations. For the rest, religious law emerges as only the first stage of pre-philosophical purification, which is complemented by auxiliary philosophical practices conducive to happiness, such as the general practice of ascesis, methods habituating the soul towards virtue, and the practice of philosophical self-governance.

The soul’s ascent to happiness, however, takes place primarily through the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, for which practical purification prepares the human soul. Within the soul’s theoretical ascent all parts of philosophy play a Gnostic role of providing the knowledge indispensable for salvation. The primary content of this knowledge is understood to consist of the conception of the hierarchy of physical and metaphysical reality. All of philosophy, however, forms a curriculum of knowledge through which the soul gradually ascends from a material to a spiritual state of being. For Ismaili philosophy the ascent takes place from the exoteric religious knowledge associated with the material sphere towards the esoteric knowledge of the spiritual plane. For Peripatetic philosophers the ascent proceeds within the philosophical sciences. Hence, within the soul’s ascent logic performs the function of an instrument enabling the ascent, mathematics is treated either as propaedeutic to philosophy or as a mediator between physical and metaphysical knowledge, whereas physics and metaphysics provide the core of knowledge necessary for the attainment of happiness.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to all the individuals and institutions that have contributed to the completion of this dissertation, even if I might not recall all of their names here. First of all, I would like to thank Kone Foundation for the financial support that made the writing of this work possible. I am also grateful to the teachers at the discipline of Arabic and Islamic studies of the University of Helsinki who initiated me into this field in the first place, and inspired my curiosity towards medieval Islamic world and culture. I would like to thank my colleagues in the Institute for Asian and African Studies, as well as the participants in the seminars – the official and unofficial ones – who read and commented the work in writing. I am particularly grateful to the supervisor of my doctoral thesis, Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, for his generous help and support throughout my doctoral studies, as well as for his guidance during my earlier years of study. I am furthermore thankful for the helpful comments and critique that I received from the professors Carmela Baffioni and Taneli Kukkonen during the process of revision, even if I have thus far only been able to incorporate their ideas into my work in part. I would also like to thank all the friends – especially Tiina, Samuel, and Mikko – who patiently conversed with me about themes related to my thesis – as well as other unrelated things. Finally, I am grateful to my parents for their support throughout the lengthy process of the writing of this dissertation.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Arabic philosophy as a path to happiness

The idea of philosophy in classical and medieval times was in many ways more spiritual than what it was to become during the modern period. In his *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, Pierre Hadot depicts a classical conception of philosophy that appears in contrast to that of modern philosophy. While the modern conception is primarily one of theoretical reflection, in classical philosophy the starting point is a practical way of life. Theoretical doctrines and a certain world view follow secondarily from the existential choice of choosing a philosophical life.

Classical Arabic philosophy largely adopts this idea of philosophy, but connects it further to the new context of prophetic religion. While the purpose for practicing philosophy in the first place is to attain theoretical understanding of the ultimate nature of the world through rational reasoning, philosophy serves in the end a more practical goal of man’s development towards his highest perfection.

This perfection is conceived as the ultimate happiness (*eudaimonia*/*saʿāda*) of man. In the Platonic tradition adopted by medieval Arabic philosophy in this question, attainment of happiness in the philosophical sense means essentially the ascent of the human soul from the material and sensible level of existence to a higher spiritual and intelligible grade of being. Philosophy then emerges as an upwards progression through which man approximates to the divine, crystallized in the definition of philosophy as “becoming like a god as much as is possible for man.” Hence, philosophy, much more than just a theoretical discipline, is a complete spiritual path through which its practitioner aspires to ascend towards the transcendent ideal of human perfection and salvation to eternal life.

It is the aim of this study to investigate medieval Arabic philosophy precisely through such a conception of philosophy as a spiritual path to happiness. The period on which I will focus is the early formative period of the Arabic philosophical tradition in the 10th and early 11th centuries. The sources on which the study is based are formed of two distinct schools of philosophy, the mainstream tradition of Peripatetic philosophy on the one hand and Ismaili philosophy on the other. This approach will highlight the idea of the philosophical path from two perspectives, and through comparison reveal the ultimately similar objectives of the secular Peripatetic

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1 Translated as *What is Ancient Philosophy?* by Michael Chase. See, Hadot 2002.
2 I have chosen to use the word Arabic philosophy throughout this study for the philosophical tradition that arose in the Islamic world since 9th century, and which for the most part was carried out in Arabic. The term is problematic, as a major part of these philosophers were not Arabs, and increasingly employed Persian besides Arabic as a language of philosophy. But even in the eastern parts of the Islamic world Arabic retained its status as the main language of philosophy well into modern times. Moreover, as Gutas (2002, pp. 17-8) notes, even when writing in Persian, the technical philosophical terms used by the philosophers were largely Arabic. The alternative term Islamic philosophy involves at least as many problems, as it would exclude the great number of Christians, pagans, and Jews that worked within the same tradition, and imply that the contents of the philosophy is somehow *a priori* based on Islam. Of the philosophers treated in this study, all but the Brethren of Purity are in fact Persian, but wrote exclusively in Arabic, with the notable exception of Ibn Sinā’s *Dāneshname-ye 'Alā‘ī*. While all four are Muslim, the context of the Baghdad logicians in which al-Fārābī was educated was largely Christian.
3 “al-tashabbuh bi-ilāh bi-qadr mā fī tāqat al-insān.” See, chapter 5.1 below.
and esoterically oriented Ismaili traditions. The period of the sources is the one during which the tradition of falsafa as a separate and original school of thought with its own peculiar doctrines was truly formed. In this study, this so-called Peripatetic school of philosophy will be represented through two of its most towering figures, al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), who were also the ones with the most lasting influence for the development of later Arabic philosophy.

The Fārābian tradition of falsafa was, however, not the only early current of intellectual thought that incorporated Greek philosophical ideas. One of the most important and influential factions during the 10th century was the Shiʿi sect of Ismailis, which rose to both political and intellectual prominence during this period. Early Ismaili philosophical thought achieved its maturity in the figure of al-Kirmānī (d. 1021), while the anonymous group of the Brethren of Purity fused Ismaili and Greek philosophical influences into an eclectic mix at the end of the 10th century. It is these two authors that I will employ in this study as representatives of the more esoteric tradition of Ismaili philosophy.

Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy appear in contrast to each other in many respects. Peripatetic philosophy is secular and rationalistic in its attitude, at least in theory only relying on the philosophical method for reaching true knowledge about the world, without resorting to a priori convictions or uncritical faith in revelation. It carries on the Greek tradition of philosophy in the Islamic world, drawing from Aristotle and the Neoplatonists in particular, which was conveyed into Arabic during the great period of translation activity of the 8th to 10th centuries.

Ismaili philosophy, in contrast, rises from the doctrinal developments of the Ismaili sect of Shiism. It claims to be the divinely inspired truth conveyed by the imam of the time to the cadre of believers. All major Ismaili philosophers, including al-Kirmānī, are high-ranking functionaries within the religious hierarchy of the movement. Philosophy for the Ismailis therefore represents the esoteric truth behind the exoteric surface of prophetic revelation, rather than the independent speculations of a philosopher. In its initial position Ismailism is then clearly more religious in orientation, and Ismaili philosophers are highly critical of the Peripatetic premise of the primacy of reason. Still, Ismaili philosophers also in the end resort to the Greek tradition of philosophy in order to erect their esoteric doctrine.

Despite this divergence in outlook, the two traditions of philosophy ultimately converge in their view of the final purpose of philosophy. Both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers in the end view the benefit of philosophy to lie in its ability to lead man towards his ultimate happiness. Both traditions perceive happiness, or the greatest imaginable human perfection, as the ultimate goal of man during his earthly existence. For both, happiness as human perfection is essentially intellectual because reason constitutes man’s highest part which distinguishes him from other animals. Furthermore, both traditions in the end identify human happiness with the soul’s salvation to an eternal supra-material existence, and resort to the language of Neoplatonism to portray this eschatological part of philosophy.

Hence, it is not only in Ismailism, sometimes dubbed as the Gnosis of Islam, where philosophy plays the role of providing Gnostic saving knowledge. In Peripatetic philosophy philosophical knowledge also has its ultimately Gnostic function. Due to their initial differences of orientation, however, Ismaili philosophy
provides a good point of comparison for Peripatetic philosophy, and highlights the ultimately religious orientation also contained within Peripatetic philosophy.

In his historiographical review on the scholarship of Arabic philosophy, Dimitri Gutas perceives the discipline to have been plagued by various classes of misconceived perceptions about the essential nature of Arabic philosophy, such as the Straussian perception of Arabic philosophy as essentially political or Corbin’s view of philosophy as inherently mystical. It is to such an overall conception of Arabic philosophy that this study is related. According to Leaman, there have been three major scholarly perceptions about the general nature of classical Arabic philosophy: firstly to view Peripatetic philosophy as a rationalistic enterprise discarding the central Islamic religious doctrines; secondly, as an attempt at reconciliation between religion and philosophy, and thirdly as an “esoteric” discipline concealing its genuine opinions under a disguise of apparent conformity with religion.

My own view, represented in this study, coincides with that of Ramón Guerrero of viewing Arabic Peripatetic philosophy as a holistic enterprise aiming towards a complete explanation of reality, which, while recognizing the necessity of prophetic religion, still proceeds on an independent path with respect to religion.

Hence, this study explores the view of medieval Arabic philosophy as a practical discipline, where the entirety of the philosophical system is oriented towards the attainment of the perfection and happiness of the one engaged in philosophy. Thereby practice of philosophy appears as one potential road among many towards perfection and truth in medieval Islam. Consequently, this is also an investigation of the religious dimension of Arabic philosophy, in that the purpose of philosophy is perceived to abide in the soul’s salvation to eternity. The role of philosophical knowledge is not merely to seek knowledge for its own sake, but to provide a means for the soul’s salvation.

The practical function of philosophy is not wholly otherworldly in orientation, however. Besides its religious dimension, philosophy has its practical function in this life. Arabic philosophers, such as al-Fārābī in particular, repeatedly emphasize that in order to be truly meaningful, theoretical knowledge should be actualized in practical life in the sense of morally good actions. This is so despite the fact that the ultimate goal of happiness is perceived as essentially contemplative in nature. Therefore, philosophical knowledge also contributes to man’s morally good and happy life during his worldly existence. In this sense, the conception of Arabic philosophy materializes into a contrast to the contemporary view of philosophy as a purely theoretical enterprise. This view of philosophy is, however, not in variance with the tradition of Greek philosophy, where philosophy ever since Pythagoras was seen to serve the greater aspirations of the pursuit of human perfection.

I do not claim that the philosophical and secular disciplines were not practiced in the medieval Islamic world also with purely theoretical aims in mind. My aim in this study, however, is to view the totality of philosophy as a practical and Gnostic enterprise, where all the parts of philosophy from logic to metaphysics serve man’s quest towards ultimate happiness.

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4 Gutas 2002.
5 Leaman 1985, pp. 182-201.
1.2 Program of study

The purpose of this study is then to investigate the ways in which early philosophers of the Islamic world perceived philosophy as leading towards the attainment of happiness. While the question of happiness has often been investigated by scholars of Arabic philosophy, it has rarely been viewed from a holistic perspective as the end point of all philosophical enterprise. Most medieval Arabic philosophers agree in their perception of philosophy that philosophy consists of two parts: theoretical and practical. Whereas the aim of the theoretical part is to attain true knowledge about the world, the aim of the practical part is to become good. Hence, living a good life is seen to form as much part of philosophy as gaining theoretical wisdom. Both the theoretical and practical parts of philosophy are in the end seen as conducive to man’s final aim of ultimate happiness.

Since both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers see man’s final goal as essentially intellectual, it is the knowledge gained through the theoretical part of philosophy that leads him towards this goal. However, they agree equally that theoretical wisdom alone is not sufficient for the soul’s salvation. In addition, the soul must be purified of its material attachments that hinder it from ascending towards the higher spiritual sphere of being. The practical part of philosophy investigates these means towards the soul’s purification. Ultimately, philosophy forms a dual path of theory and practice, both of which have man’s ultimate happiness as their aim.

While the theme of happiness properly pertains to the sphere of ethics within Arabic philosophy, I believe it should be perceived through a view of the philosophical system as a whole. Philosophy forms a progression in which all parts of theoretical and practical philosophy are seamlessly bound to serve the ultimate goal. Hence, in order to truly understand the function of ethics, it must be located within man’s theoretical ascent towards intellectual perfection. On the other hand, theoretical philosophy must also be understood from a practical-ethical perspective as an aspiration towards human happiness.

As the starting point of my study is in the idea of two distinct philosophical orientations; in the second and third chapters I aim to sketch the general lines of the Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophical schools, and to place them in their proper historical context. I will also discuss in these chapters questions specific to the authors and sources that I use, including such controversial questions as the affiliation of the Brethren of Purity to the Ismaili movement.

There is no clear-cut division of philosophical schools within early Arabic philosophy, in the sense of the classical Greek schools of philosophy. I will, however, employ the term Peripatetic (peripatētikos/mashshā’ī) for the mainstream of Arabic philosophy that self-consciously carries on the Aristotelian tradition within the Islamic world. Peripatetic philosophy is not in reality a homogenous philosophical school, as philosophy was never institutionalized into such schools in the Islamic world. Still, there is a clear line of intellectual succession from al-Fārābī to Ibn Sīnā, and from Ibn Sīnā to the later Peripatetics.

Ismaili philosophy, on the other hand, arises out of the doctrinal developments of the Shī Shī Ismailis which during the 10th century were increasingly transformed into the form of a philosophical system. Such Ismaili philosophers as al-Kirmānī did not consider themselves philosophers (faylasūf), and were in fact highly critical of
philosophy, but still did not hesitate to draw on Greek and Arabic philosophy for inspiration. However, on the question of happiness the two schools are more alike than different. They make use of the common language of Neoplatonism in order to depict the religious side of philosophy, adopting the theory of creation as a process of timeless emanation and man’s purpose as the re-ascent of the rational soul to its spiritual origin.

In order to investigate the philosophical path to happiness, it is of course first necessary to find out what it is precisely that the philosophers mean when they speak about happiness. While the meaning of happiness seems self-evident enough initially, it quickly becomes clear that the word possesses very different contents for the philosophers and for the common people. As a philosophical term, happiness (saʿāda) is a translation of the Greek word eudaimonia which embodies centuries of discussion within the history of Greek philosophy.

For both eudaimonia and saʿāda, happiness may in fact be an inappropriate translation. Namely, unlike the modern common sense understanding of the word, eudaimonia does not primarily refer to a subjective state, but rather to an active and objective one of ‘living a good life,’ even if it may ultimately turn out also to be one that accords the most intense pleasure to man. Hence, translations such as ‘human flourishing’ have been suggested. Moreover, in Arabic philosophy happiness often becomes synonymous with an almost inhuman ideal of absolute perfection which is radically different from most common sense connotations of happiness.

It is also not clear whether happiness is at all attainable during this earthly life, and for the Muslim philosophers happiness becomes almost synonymous with the religious idea of salvation. Still, I will adhere to using the word ‘happiness’ for lack of any generally accepted alternative, since it is this word that the philosophers themselves employ, even though furnishing it with a novel meaning. Salvation is moreover an inaccurate translation, as in Arabic philosophy the word is used equally for happiness in this life and the next. Worldly and other-worldly happiness are not incompatible, but Arabic philosophy promises to provide the answer to both. In the fourth chapter I address these questions about the nature of happiness, and delineate its contents with both its mundane and other-worldly connotations.

The fifth chapter is devoted to a portrayal of the relationship between philosophy and happiness on a general level, as viewed in both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy. For Peripatetic philosophers, when perceived with happiness as its ultimate goal, philosophy appears as a special way of life in which theory and practice are bound together inseparably. Philosophy is not only gathering of knowledge, but also an ethically determined way of life. On the other hand, morality without a basis in knowledge is equally impossible. Both theory and practice have man’s ultimate good, happiness and salvation, as their aim. In the first part of the chapter I try to sketch this general picture of the transcendent idea of medieval Arabic philosophy where theory and practice together lead man towards his ultimate goal. In the other part, I portray the alternative Ismaili way to happiness.

On a general level, Ismailis are in agreement with the Peripatetics. The way to happiness consists of practical and theoretical worship (al-ʿibāda al-
‘amaliyya/‘ilmīyya), both of which are necessary for the soul’s salvation. However, al-Kirmānī in particular is at variance with the idea that the proper way of life leading to happiness should be philosophical. For the Ismailis, as for Muslims in general for that matter, the moral way of life should be based on religious revelation, rather than the independent musings of a philosopher. Hence, for the Ismailis, philosophy alone is not capable of leading man towards salvation, but rather philosophy and revelation together.

The chapters six and seven are the central chapters of this study, devoted to the two constituent parts of the quest for happiness: practice and theory. Both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers view attainment of happiness in Neoplatonic terms as the soul’s ascent towards an intellectual-spiritual state of perfection. While the ascent takes place through a mainly intellectual process, practical purification of the soul is indispensable for reaching that goal. In order to turn its gaze up towards the world of pure Intellects, the repository of philosophical knowledge, the rational soul must first be liberated from its material attachments that draw it down towards sensible reality. In chapter six I portray this practical part of the ascent, and its place within the soul’s general progression towards happiness. It is this philosophical praxis that forms the core of the philosophical life, and enables the life of contemplation.

In Arabic philosophy, the question of practical purification is expressed in particular through the language of Aristotelian virtue ethics. When adopting the classical idea of philosophy as a way of life, however, the philosophers writing in the new context of prophetic religion necessarily must adapt the idea of philosophical life to fit with the religious ideals of Islam. Even for the most rationalistically oriented Peripatetic philosopher, individual effort alone is not sufficient for attainment of happiness, and hence religion occupies a central place within the moral molding of the individual. Hence, I strive to reconcile the philosophical-ethical and religious aspects of purification together, and see how they fit within a general view of the soul’s ascent. Moreover, I outline some general ideas about how the philosophical and religious methods of purification operate in relation to the ultimate goal of theoretical perfection.

Finally, in the seventh chapter I present my interpretation of the Gnostic aspect of philosophical knowledge, that is, of philosophy as a theoretical ascent to happiness. Theoretical philosophy assumes a form in which each of its constituent parts has its specific place within the ascent. Theoretical philosophy in the end serves to transform the human soul from its initial sensible state to a grade of pure intellect and complete spirituality, but the transformation must take place gradually in order to be plausible. Philosophy is then like a “ladder to salvation,” in the words of the Brethren of Purity, which guides the student of philosophy towards his intellectual perfection. To this are related the general ideas about classification of philosophy, in which the parts of philosophy are arranged to form a seamless progression according to the ontological status of their objects of study. While not all philosophical knowledge is equally important for the attainment of happiness, even the sciences that at first instance appear as purely theoretical have a specific purpose within the soul’s ascent. Hence, philosophy as a whole, even logic and mathematics, serves the practical purpose of man reaching his happiness and salvation.
2 Peripatetic background

2.1 Development of Peripatetic philosophy

Arabic philosophy was born as a consequence of the great translation movement of the 8th to 10th centuries, which resulted in the transfer of the majority of Greek scientific literature available in the eastern part of the classical world to the Arabic language and culture. In the field of philosophy, this included practically the entire philosophical output of Aristotle, paraphrases of Plato’s dialogues, and Neoplatonic treatises summarizing the philosophy of Plotinus (d. 270 CE) and Proclus (d. 485). Specifically, it continued the tradition of the philosophical schools of late Antiquity in Athens and Alexandria, which were primarily Neoplatonic, but in which Aristotle was incorporated to the Neoplatonic curriculum. This tradition was mediated to the Arabs mainly by Syrian Christians, who translated the Greek works to Syriac and Arabic.

Therefore, just as in the various other sciences adopted from the Greeks, in its beginnings philosophy was also a foreign and borrowed enterprise. The Arabic philosophers themselves were of course keenly aware of the Greek and pagan origin of their discipline, as well as of the opposition that such origin might arouse in some of the more conservative circles. Therefore al-Kindī (d. 866), who is usually held to be the first of the Arabic philosophers, almost apologetically defends the notion of thankfully adopting from the bygone centuries and nations their contribution towards attaining the truth, even if those who produced it were neither Arabs nor Muslims, since truth can only be reached through the combined work of successive human generations.

By the turn of the 10th century, Arabic philosophy, or the discipline known in Arabic as falsafa, had emerged as a largely independent endeavor self-consciously continuing the tradition of Greek philosophy. Its primary scientific foundation was Aristotle, as is illustrated by the fact that he was generally known by the name of First teacher (al-mu’allim al-awwal). The bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm’s famous bibliography from the late 10th century shows the wide variety of Arabic translations of the works of Aristotle and his commentators that were available at that time. To a large degree Arabic philosophy therefore initially was Aristotle’s philosophy, as his works acted as at least the starting point in most areas of philosophical knowledge, especially in natural philosophy and logic. In Ibn Sinā’s classification of the philosophical sciences a century later all the individual parts of physics and logic are given a work of Aristotle on which they are based, while an early 13th-century biographer of the

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8 This does not mean the reduction of Arabic philosophy to a mere transmission of Greek sources, nor does it exclude originality from the philosophers of the Arabic tradition in adapting Greek philosophy to an Islamic environment. However, the early Arabic philosophers such as al-Fārābī are themselves the first to admit their indebtedness to the Greek philosophers. Since philosophy in the Islamic world was born out of the translation of Greek philosophers into Arabic, it is only natural that at its early phases the starting point would be in these sources, even if newly interpreted to answer the questions relevant for the nascent Islamic culture.


philosophers claims that it was “... because of Aristotle that philosophy and other ancient sciences proliferated in the Islamic lands.”

In practice, however, this devoted Aristotelianism was never so pure, but was mixed especially with the Neoplatonic tradition. Neoplatonism had been the prevailing school of Greek philosophy ever since its foundation in the 3rd century by Plotinus (d. 270). In it, philosophy was perceived essentially as a systematization of Plato’s “divine” philosophy, which Plato himself had presented in an unsystematic form in the dialogues. Still, ever since Plotinus Aristotelian and other philosophical elements were incorporated into their doctrine, and in the Neoplatonic curriculum of late Antiquity, Aristotle represented the “lesser mysteries” that were to be studied before the higher mysteries of Plato. Therefore most Greek Neoplatonists after Plotinus wrote commentaries on Aristotle’s works, in which Aristotle was interpreted in Neoplatonic light, some of which were later translated into Arabic. Behind this was a syncretistic idea of the history of philosophy, where Aristotle and Plato were seen to be in an agreement concerning the essential truth, despite occasional disagreements on details.

By the time of the Arab conquests, the study of philosophy flourished especially in the only remaining philosophical school of Alexandria. The school had been Christianized during the preceding century, and possibly to tone down the elements in most blatant contradiction with Christianity, during its final years it concentrated on teaching Aristotle, rather than Plato. It is especially as a continuation of the Alexandrian school of philosophy that Arabic philosophy emerges, even if by the 10th century most philosophers were not particularly aware of this connection.

Within Arabic philosophy the situation was then a reversal of Greek Neoplatonism, in the sense that it was Aristotle who occupied the highest place of honor, even though Plato also was highly regarded. However, Arabic philosophy also adopted from late Antiquity the Neoplatonic syncretistic notion of the relationship between Plato and Aristotle. Among the Arabic philosophers and historians there was some awareness of Greek philosophical schools and their history derived from Greek and Syriac sources. In the Arabic tradition Aristotle was often perceived as a continuator of the philosophy of Plato, rather than having founded a school of his own based on fundamental disagreements with his tutor.

Al-Fārābī names seven Greek philosophical schools (firaq), but does not distinguish between Platonism and Aristotelianism, lumping them instead together

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13 Words like “Neoplatonism” and “Middle Platonism” were coined in the 19th century to emphasize the supposed distinction with respect to the thought of Plato. Plotinus and his followers, however, saw themselves as faithful disciples of Plato, rather than as innovators, and many modern scholars have increasingly tended to agree. See, Gatti 1996.
14 Blumenthal 1996, pp. 21-34.
16 There were, however, teachers in Baghdad around 900 who traced their origins to Alexandria, as did al-Fārābī also. See, Peters 1979, p. 26. For a general account of the Arabic adoption of the philosophy of late Antiquity, see, Endress 2003.
17 The history of Greek philosophy is presented not so much in the works of the philosophers themselves, as in the genres of gnomological and bibliographical literature, among which the bookseller Ibn al-Nadim’s *Fihrist* is especially noteworthy, as it was used by most authors in the genre during the subsequent centuries. See, Gutas 1975, pp. 332-3, 381-2 and Gutas 1985a, pp. 68-9 for the agreement of Plato and Aristotle in the gnomological tradition.
into one single school. This he calls the Peripatetic (al-mashshāʿūn) school, which in the Arabic tradition therefore in practice never means pure Aristotelianism in the same the way as it did for the Greeks.\(^{18}\) When Ibn al-Qīfī (d. 1248) repeats al-Fārābī’s list, he says two of them, the Pythagorean and Peripatetic, are the most magnificent of the Greek philosophical schools, the two foundations on which philosophy rests.\(^{19}\) Since for Ibn al-Qīfī Plato appears as a disciple of both Pythagoras and Socrates, while Aristotle obviously is a disciple of Plato,\(^{20}\) there is a perception of the unity of the Platonic-Pythagorean and Aristotelian traditions.

Even though Plato was acknowledged as a major philosopher and founder of the Peripatetic school, his influence was for the most part mediated through Neoplatonism. As is well known, the Arabic Neoplatonic sources were either anonymous or falsely attributed to Aristotle, and hence the Arab philosophers were mostly unaware of such names as Plotinus or Proclus, who nevertheless were the two major Neoplatonic philosophers that affected them. That the most important Neoplatonic treatises were attributed to Aristotle further facilitated the syncretism of Platonic and Aristotelian thought.\(^{21}\) Of other Neoplatonists Porphyry was known mainly for his Eisagōgē, or introduction to Aristotelian logic.

The nature of Neoplatonism is more religiously oriented than that of Aristotelianism, and hence it suited well for the needs of all three monotheistic religions to reconcile a religious world view with philosophy. Of all the different fields of philosophy, metaphysics has the strongest Neoplatonic element, for most philosophers explained the creation and ultimate principles of the universe through the Neoplatonic hierarchical order of emanation. Neoplatonism also provided the philosophical language for eschatology, as the counterpart of emanation is the soul’s reascent to its home in the intelligible world. Also, despite the fact that psychology largely followed Aristotle’s *De anima*, the conception of the human soul was Platonic. The soul was seen as a substance independent of the body, whose ultimate goal was to liberate itself from its material and bodily attachments.\(^{22}\)

Besides the Neoplatonic mediation, Plato’s dialogues were also used directly to some extent. Al-Fārābī’s *Philosophy of Plato* (Falsafat Aflāṭūn) shows that he was relatively familiar with the contents of Plato’s dialogues, even if they were probably reproduced in Arabic as paraphrases and fragments, rather than complete translations. Plato was a direct influence especially in the political philosophy of al-Fārābī and his

\(^{18}\) The Arabic word mashshāʿūn is a rather literal translation of the Greek *peripatētikos*, “one who walks about.” Aristotle’s school was apparently called so because of the covered walkways (peripatoi) in the Lyceum, where the members of the school met. According to a later legend, the word referred to Aristotle’s habit of walking while he was teaching. For al-Fārābī, reflecting late Alexandrian perceptions, both Plato and Aristotle had this habit in order to “train the body together with the training of the soul.” For Ibn al-Qīfī, it was Plato who used to teach his disciples while “walking around the gardens,” and therefore Plato’s school was called Peripatetic. Al-Fārābī, *Mā yānbaghī an yuqaddam qabla ta’allum falsafat Arisūt*, pp. 3-5; Ibn al-Qīfī, *Ikḥbār*, p. 26.

\(^{19}\) Ibn al-Qīfī, *Ikḥbār*, p. 27.


\(^{21}\) Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, however, were probably aware of the non-Aristotelian origin of works like *Theology of Aristotle*.

\(^{22}\) Already in Greek Neoplatonism the relationship between body and soul was perceived in Platonic dualistic terms, while the operations of the embodied soul were explained by means of Aristotelian faculty psychology. See, Blumenthal 1983.
followers, which was based on Republic and Laws, while Aristotle’s Politics was apparently never translated into Arabic.23

The expression Peripatetic philosophy as used in this study therefore refers to the mainstream of Arabic philosophy, which is based on the Platonic-Aristotelian foundation sketched above, such as it was adapted in the Islamic world to answer to the specific questions within that culture. Among the individual philosophers there is variation as to their philosophical leanings, but all of them share the common Platonic-Aristotelian base. There is no general consensus among scholars of Arabic philosophy on clear-cut philosophical schools in the sense of those existing in Greek philosophy. It is only about two centuries later that there arise the Illuminationist (ishrāqi) school founded by Suhrawardī and the “mystical” school of Ibn ‘Arabī, which explicitly reject Peripatetic rationalism and substitute or complement it with philosophically understood Sufism.24

During the 10th and early 11th centuries the term Peripatetic is largely synonymous with falsafa, or those who voluntarily adopt the designation of philosopher. Among them there are distinct currents of thought, such as al-Kindī and his followers and the school of Baghdad, to which al-Fārābī also pertains.25 Both of these currents culminate in Ibn Sīnā, the most influential Muslim philosopher of all times, who for later thinkers like al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) more than anyone else represented Arabic Peripatetic philosophy.26

Peripatetic philosophy does not form a homogenous school, however, but rather there are various strands of thought within the tradition of falsafa. Despite his high appraisal of al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā stands in conscious opposition to the Baghdad Peripatetic philosophers of his own time, and hence represents another strand of “eastern” (mashriqi) Peripatetic philosophy.27

In this study Peripatetic philosophy is contrasted with Ismaili philosophy, which does not form part of the tradition of falsafa, but rather is expressly critical towards those who call themselves philosophers. Still, it is philosophy in its attempt to form a coherent and rationally argued view of the world, whose foundations are as much in the Greek philosophical tradition as they are in the doctrinal history of the Ismailis.

23 While al-Fārābī explicitly attributes true philosophy to Plato and Aristotle at the end of Attainment of Happiness (Taḥṣīl al-sa‘āda), Ibn Sīnā does not share his predecessor’s reverence for Plato. In the Sophistic of Healing (al-Shifā) [cited and translated by Gutas] he concludes that: “if the extent of Plato’s achievements in philosophy is what came down to us of him, then his wares were paltry indeed and philosophy in his time had not matured to the point of reaping. Whoever affects allegiance to him with only the amount of knowledge about Plato that has been transmitted to us at his disposal, then he does this either out of envy for Aristotle or out of a foolish notion that the prior in time is also in a discipline prior in rank. The truth, however, is the opposite.” Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 196; Gutas 1988, p. 38.

24 This tripartition of Arabic philosophy is suggested, for example, in Leaman 2006, pp. x-xi.

25 Netton (1992) refers by the term ‘school of al-Fārābī’ to a rather loose group of philosophers, such as Ibn ‘Adī, Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, al-‘Āmirī, and al-Tawhīdī. One could perhaps rather speak of the Baghdad Peripatetic school, proceeding from the Christian logicians through al-Fārābī to Ibn ‘Adī and his followers, to which the circle formed around al-Sijistānī, as chronicled by al-Tawhīdī as one of its members, were loosely connected. See, Kraemer 1992, pp. 103ff. for a vivid portrayal of the philosophical groupings in 10th-century Baghdad.

26 See, the chart of Arabic philosophy and its “schools” in Gutas 2002, p. 7.

Due to the mixture of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements in Arabic Peripatetic philosophy, in the scholarship al-Fārābī and his successors have been designated rather interchangeably either as Aristotelians or Neoplatonists. This seems to imply some uncertainty as to which element is actually prevalent in their thought. Hence, for example, Fakhry designates al-Fārābī as the first systematic expositor of Neoplatonism, as opposed to al-Kindī’s Aristotelianism.28 Others have tended to see them rather as pure Aristotelians, even up to the point of rejecting the Neoplatonic element altogether. Walker goes as far as to regard al-Fārābī as responsible for making philosophy to be seen essentially as philosophy of Aristotle, and denies that they were Neoplatonists even in their metaphysical views.29

If one regards the creation of the universe through an emanative hierarchical process as distinctive of Neoplatonic metaphysics, most of Arabic philosophy is Neoplatonic in this respect. As comes to the subject of this study, Peripatetic philosophy can be perceived as thoroughly Neoplatonic. The ultimate happiness of man is perceived in Neoplatonic terms as the soul’s liberation from the material sphere of existence and reunion with the intelligible world, which in the wider cosmological drama constitutes the soul’s reascent to the Intellect.

2.2 The Straussian question

One major problem concerning the interpretation of Arabic philosophy has been the possibly esoteric nature of Arabic philosophical writing. As is well-known, a distinction between exoteric (zāhir) and esoteric (bāṭin) knowledge became prevalent in many intellectual traditions within the Islamic world, particularly in Sufi mysticism and Shiī thought. The main purpose of such a division was to explain the relationship between the literal meaning of religious revelation and the inner esoteric meanings developed by various intellectual and mystical groupings. Usually both the exoteric and esoteric levels of knowledge were perceived as equally valid. Exoteric religious truth, consisting especially of the interpretation of the literal meaning of revelation and of religious law, was in possession of the religious scholars and was open to everyone. Esoteric inner truth, however, was open only to those initiated into the particular spiritual tradition, and had to be guarded from all others.

The distinction seems to be at least partly defensive in nature, since it was the only way that allowed free intellectual speculation without overtly contradicting the religious dogma construed by the ‘ulamā’. Hodgson envisions three major kinds of such esoteric knowledge within classical Islamic culture: Shiī interpretation of revelation, Sufi mysticism and speculation, and the metaphysics and some natural sciences of the philosophers. Over time these three intellectual currents were partly independent, but partly influenced and penetrated each other.30

In philosophy the problem largely revolves around whether the philosophers deliberately concealed or blurred some of their true opinions in order to guard their

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28 Fakhry 2004, p. 204.
29 Walker 1993, pp. 35-6. Walker seems to perceive only Plotinian metaphysics as truly Neoplatonic. His arguments are different from the Straussian ones discussed below, even though he refers to them for support. While the Straussians deny that al-Fārābī actually believed in emanationist metaphysics at all, Walker argues that al-Fārābī’s emanationism is not Neoplatonic.
doctrines from non-philosophers, or those who were not naturally disposed to philosophy. The idea of secret philosophical teachings also had a long history within Greek philosophy. At least since Plutarch (d. ca. 125 CE), and especially among the later Alexandrian Neoplatonists, such secret teachings were attributed to Aristotle, even though Aristotle himself did not distinguish between exoteric and esoteric writings.

Partly the distinction mirrored the division of philosophy into theoretical and practical: ethical and political philosophy, as well as parts of logic, were considered as exoteric, while theoretical philosophy and other parts of logic were considered esoteric. For some late Alexandrian philosophers the distinction was in exposition, rather than content, insofar as the exoteric teaching was merely a simplified adaptation of the esoteric truth. The perception of Greek philosophy as an esoteric art of wisdom was to some extent adopted by the Arabic tradition. Ibn al-Nadīm claims that in ancient times wisdom was forbidden from all except those naturally disposed to it, and the philosophers would first examine the suitability of anyone desiring to learn philosophy before teaching him.

There is some evidence that at least some of the early Arabic philosophers adopted the notion of esoteric philosophical writing. For the likes of Brethren of Purity writing within the Hermetic and Ismaili traditions this is particularly clear. But even a Peripatetic like al-Fārābī appears to at least condone it in his Greek predecessors. According to al-Fārābī, both Plato and Aristotle employed a technique of concealment, even if of very different kinds. Plato was reluctant to write his ideas down at all, but when he finally did so, he deliberately buried them beneath symbolic and obscure language so that only the philosophically inclined would understand them. Aristotle’s clear and unambiguous style is superficially different, but when accused of excessive openness by Plato, he claims to have ordered his writings in such a way and employed such expressions that would ensure that only those capable were able to grasp their true meanings. In his introduction to philosophy, which closely follows similar late Alexandrian Greek works, al-Fārābī names three reasons for Aristotle to have deliberately obscured (īghlāq/īghmād) his teachings: to test whether the pupil’s character is fit for philosophical instruction, to avoid wasting philosophy on non-philosophical minds, and to train thinking by making the pursuit of knowledge more difficult.

Due to such evidence the scholars related to the Straussian school in particular have claimed that Arabic philosophers employed an esoteric form of writing in order to conceal part of their philosophical opinions from non-philosophers. Leo Strauss
himself believed that a so-called theological-political problem lay in the background of all premodern philosophy. For Strauss philosophy is more than anything a unique way of life based on an effort to attain rationally grounded knowledge of the world. At any time this is possible for only very few, while the great majority are guided by the conventional opinions that under-pin the society.

Since the very premise of philosophy is then rebellious towards the values guiding the larger society, there always exists a natural hostility between the two. This troubled relationship antedates the rise of monotheistic religions, and is shown already by the fate of Socrates or the criticism that Aristophanes directs against philosophy. At least since Plato, philosophers understood the special position that they occupy in the society and shaped their writings accordingly. In Strauss’ thinking his fascination with this “lost art” of esoteric writing merges together with his hermeneutical requirement to understand pre-modern philosophers as they themselves did, rather than “better than themselves.”

Strauss was deeply influenced by the writings of al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, Ibn Rushd, and Maimonides in his ideas, but did not write extensively on Arabic philosophy. His impact has, however, been very widespread within the field. Following the classically Straussian position Mahdi maintains that Arabic philosophy remains unintelligible unless one takes into account the initial incompatibility prevailing between religion and philosophy. The traditional view of Arabic philosophy as a syncretistic blend of Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic elements into a successful resolution between religion and philosophy is at least partly erroneous, since such resolution mostly represents the exoteric doctrine aimed at non-philosophers.

In general the texts of Arabic philosophers must be studied with the distinction between exoteric and esoteric in mind so that the true doctrines may be discovered from beneath the disguise of orthodoxy. This may manifest itself either in a division to exoteric and esoteric works of a philosopher, or esoteric doctrines deliberately hidden in a single work behind the exoteric exterior that can be discovered only by the philosophically adept.

The critics of this view deny the Straussian premise that conflict between philosophy and religion would be of central importance for understanding Arabic philosophy. Both Leaman and Gutas see it rather as a product of the history of western scholarship, which has devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to the

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37 See, e.g., Strauss 1952; Strauss 1954; Pangle 1983, pp. 9-23; Tamer 2001, p. 1. While Strauss modestly placed himself among scholars, rather than the very elect group of philosophers, his interest in classical and medieval political philosophy went beyond purely scholarly motivation. For him classical political philosophy seemed to provide an answer to the problems of relativism and historicism that characterized modernity, and that made founding of objective values impossible. He did not write any extensive works, however, but expressed himself through a multitude of small studies. Hence his own ideas have sometimes been equally hard to interpret as he claims pre-modern philosophers to be. His critics have accused him and his followers of forming an elitist sect propagating radical nihilistic and anti-democratic views hidden beneath the garb of scholarship. In the American media his influence has been traced all the way to the neoconservative figures operating behind the Reagan and both Bush administrations.

38 Tamer 2001, the first extensive study about Strauss’ relationship to medieval Arabic philosophy, stresses this influence.


40 See, Leaman 1980 for an overview of what he calls the “standard interpretation” of Arabic philosophy.
relationship between philosophy and religion. This applies both to those earlier scholars who perceived Arabic philosophy as a successful resolution between the two, and the Straussians who see such resolution as merely illusory. When liberated from this distorted perspective one observes that in their philosophical works Arabic philosophers are mostly concerned with questions that have nothing to do with this relationship. Besides, the supposed persecution of the philosophers in reality was practically non-existent, and furthermore al-Fārābī in particular quite publicly supported very unorthodox ideas which he seemed to have no reason to conceal.41

A second problem concerns the Straussian methodology. There is no generally agreed upon method to uncover the presumed true opinions of the philosophers, and such an attempt therefore necessarily remains arbitrary. Strauss and his followers have endeavored to discover these views from supposedly meaningful omissions and differences in al-Fārābī’s or Ibn Rushd’s Aristotelian commentaries with respect to the originals on which they comment. They, however, for the most part seem to overinterpret and mystify the texts by reading into them ideas that in reality are not there. If philosophical writing truly had been so complicated, then understanding philosophy correctly would have been practically impossible even for the contemporaries. As Gutas points out, it seems unlikely that as keen a student and critic of philosophy as al-Ghazālī would have failed to detect the hidden doctrines that the modern Straussians have no problem in finding.42

Despite this, it is quite plausible that there was some degree of dissimulation of philosophical ideas. Arabic philosophers generally did not hide their view that philosophy should be taught only to those disposed to learn it, and that it should be withheld from others. Such a view probably influenced the nature of philosophical writing to incorporate ways that would make it less accessible to non-philosophers.43 But it just was not necessary to make philosophy an incredibly complex puzzle to prevent it from being attractive to the non-philosophically minded.44

2.3 Al-Fārābī

In many ways Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950), a son of a Persian army officer from the city of Fārāb in Khurāsān, is the real founder of the Arabic Peripatetic school of philosophy.45 Earlier philosophers, such as al-Kindī and his disciples, the translators

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43 As an example one may mention the elliptical style of Ibn Sinā’s *Remarks and admonitions (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīḥāt)*, which might be interpreted as a conscious stylistic method to prevent its accessibility to non-philosophers, especially since Ibn Sinā explicitly urges its concealment from them. See, Inati 1984, pp. 2-4.
44 Hodgson (1974, II, pp. 311-5) points out the practices of reading and writing that would have both encouraged and enabled a disguised form of writing. The small intellectual elite, especially within a single field like philosophy, largely had read the same books and shared the same presuppositions. Therefore many things could be left implicit. On the other hand, manuscripts were scarce, expensive and worn-out and were read slowly and repeatedly, enabling a careful pondering of each word. Besides the preferred mode of reading was orally with a teacher, who would explicate what the text itself left implicit.
45 For the sometimes rather conflicting accounts of al-Fārābī’s life as presented by the Arabic biographers, see, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, *ʻUyun*, pp. 557-64, Ibn al-Qiftī, *Ikhbār*, pp. 210-2, Ramón Guerrero 2003, and Vallat 2004, pp. 11ff. As for al-Fārābī’s ethnicity, Vallat refutes the often repeated thesis of him being Turkish, agreeing rather with Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a’s assessment that his father was of “Persian
of Greek philosophical works, and the logicians of Baghdad, had an important role in appropriating the Greek philosophical tradition into the Arabic-Islamic culture. But none of them had the lasting influence of al-Fārābī, whose own original philosophical synthesis paved the way for his followers, particularly Ibn Sinā in the east and the Andalusian line of philosophers in the west. It is for a reason that he became known by the title “second teacher” (al-mu’allim al-thānī), that is, after Aristotle. Hence, the Arabic biographical tradition is full of praise for al-Fārābī. He is the “undisputed Muslim philosopher” and the philosopher “who brought the philosophical sciences into their perfection”, elucidating what al-Kindī had left unrevealed. Al-Fārābī’s high esteem seems to have taken at least half a century to grow, however, as in the contemporary sources he goes largely unnoticed.

Al-Fārābī does not, however, seem to build much on the thought of his well-known predecessors, such as al-Kindī or Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, but rather tends to ignore them completely. His philosophical system appears then in contrast to, rather than as a continuation of, the tradition of al-Kindī. Al-Fārābī himself traces the origins of philosophy to the Chaldeans of Iraq, from whom it passed through Egyptians, Greeks, and Syrians to the Arabs.

In his account of the genesis of philosophy in the Islamic world, he moreover portrays a direct continuum between the Alexandrian school of late Antiquity and the Peripatetic “school” of Baghdad, in the context of which al-Fārābī himself was instructed into philosophy. According to this account, after the coming of Christianity the teaching of philosophy was put to an end in Rome, but continued in Alexandria in a form circumscribed to mere logic, while the rest was concealed as harmful to religion. After the coming of Islam, some of these Alexandrian teachers moved to Antioch, where the Alexandrian tradition continued for some time. It is under a disciple of one such teacher of Antiochian provenance, Yūḥannā Ibn Ḥaylān, that al-Fārābī himself was initiated into philosophy, even though his teacher could guide him only until Aristotelian logic. Al-Fārābī apparently then ventured on his own towards the higher truths of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy. Al-Fārābī therefore seems to carry on rather consciously the tradition of the Alexandrian school, from where he also derives his conception of the nature and purpose of philosophy. More immediately his background is rooted among the logicians of Baghdad, the most distinctive of whom were Christians, such as his teacher Yūḥannā Ibn Ḥaylān (d. 908-32) and his contemporary Abū Bishr Mattā Ibn Yūnus (d. 940).

origin” (fārisī al-muntasab), apparently serving in Fārāb, “one of the Turkish cities of Khurāsān” (madīna min bilād al-turk).
47 Ibn al-Nadīm (d. ca. 998) passes al-Fārābī with only few lines, despite his close association with the Baghdad Peripatetic philosophers, such as al-Fārābī’s pupil Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī. See also, Vallat 2004, p. 24.
48 See, e.g., Gutas 1988, pp. 242-9; Reisman 2005, p. 52. Gutas sees a major divergence in the Kindian and Baghdadian philosophical schools in their relation to Aristotelian metaphysics, which the former treated more purely as theology.
49 Al-Fārābī, Tawḥīl, p. 181.
51 This is also illustrated by al-Fārābī’s above-mentioned introduction to philosophy which closely follows its Alexandrian predecessors.
Like most Arabic philosophers, al-Fārābī wrote extensively on almost every branch of the philosophical sciences. Due to the great influence and high esteem that he enjoyed, a considerable number of these works has survived, even if they probably represent only a minority of all of his writings. True to the Baghdad logical tradition, al-Fārābī was particularly appreciated for his contribution to logic. He wrote both commentaries on the Aristotelian logical corpus and independent treatises dealing with logical and linguistic questions. What is particularly noteworthy about al-Fārābī, however, both with respect to his predecessors and immediate followers, is the prominence he gives to practical philosophy, and political philosophy in particular. Consequently, the question of attaining happiness seems to emerge as the central problem within his philosophy.

A significant number of his works are therefore at least partly relevant for this study. The most important group are his major original works dealing in large part with ethical and political philosophy in the context of his holistic philosophical system. Secondly, there are the works that situate him within the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, where he presents both his own perception of the thought of these two Greek philosophers, as well as attempts to prove, possibly for apologetic purposes, their essential agreement. In addition, there are various smaller treatises dealing directly or indirectly with ethical and political questions.

Al-Fārābī treated similar questions in many works, sometimes in similar and sometimes in differing ways. As al-Fārābī still remains a relatively under-studied philosopher, in comparison with Ibn Sīnā, for example, there is no generally accepted scholarly view of the picture that is formed of the compound of these works. One way to explain doctrinal differences between individual works would be to assume an evolution in al-Fārābī’s thought. However, despite various attempts, there is no general agreement on the relative chronology of his writings.

Unlike Ibn Sīnā, al-Fārābī did not write an autobiography, and while the medieval bibliographers give a few hints as to the dates of his works, they were not interested in presenting a precise chronology. For example, Virtuous City, Political Governance, and Aphorisms of the Statesman all treat similar ethical and political questions, and are often assumed to be among his later works probably dating from around the same period. Aphorisms of the Statesman is, however, very different in style and content, already because it is arranged into aphorisms (fuṣūl) supposedly drawn from the ancients. In contrast to the twin political treatises, it also lacks a part dealing with metaphysics and other parts of theoretical philosophy. But whether this means that it represents al-Fārābī’s later evolution towards greater realism in his political thought,

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52 These include the twin political treatises, Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City (Mabādī‘ arā‘ aḥl al-madīna al-faḍīla) and Political Governance (al-Siyāsā al-madaniyya), as well as Attainment of Happiness (Taḥṣīl al-sa‘īda) and Book of Religion (Kitāb al-milla).

53 This group would include his summary of Plato’s Laws (Talkhis nawa‘īs Aflāṭūn), Philosophy of Plato (Falsafat Aflāṭūn), Philosophy of Aristotle (Falsafat Aṛisṭūlīș), and Agreement Between the Opinions of the Two Philosophers (Jām‘ bayna ra‘ay al-hakīma‘īn).

54 Of particular relevance are: Aphorisms of the Statesman (Fuṣūl al-madānī), Enumeration of Sciences (Iḥṣā‘ al-‘ulūm), Exhortation to the Way of Happiness (Al-Tanbīh ‘alā sabīl al-sa‘īda), Book of Letters (Kitāb al-hurūf), and the introduction to philosophy with the title What Must Be Learned Before Studying Aristotle’s Philosophy (Mā yanabaghi an yuqaddam qabla ta‘allum falsafat Aṛisṭū).

55 See, Abouzaid 1987, p. 88.

56 As is suggested, although cautiously, by Abouzaid 1987, p. 89.
or that it is just a work with different objective in mind, seems unclear. Also, arguing from the supposed “maturity” of a certain work for it to represent the culmination of al-Fārābī’s philosophical thought seems hazardous, especially since everyone seems to have opted for a different work as the most mature one.57

Therefore, we may agree with Galston that even if a certain chronology was attainable, it would not provide a certain means for distinguishing between al-Fārābī’s youthful and evolved opinions.58

A more fruitful way to interpret al-Fārābī’s works is through classifying them by their intended objective, although here also scholars have held widely divergent opinions. This might enable one to elevate certain of al-Fārābī’s works over others as the crucial ones that best represent his own philosophical views. For the Straussians such evaluation is based on their underlying assumption of the political context of all Arabic philosophy. For them the corpus of al-Fārābī must be interpreted based on the intended audience, whether philosophers or non-philosophers, and hence al-Fārābī’s works may be divided into philosophical and popular.

According to Mahdi, the truly philosophical or scientific works are his commentaries, whereas the political works are popular at least in their theoretical parts. Al-Fārābī uses emanationist metaphysics only for rhetorical purposes to legitimate his political ideas, to appease the religious sentiments of the common populace, or to hide his real unorthodox views. Therefore the apparently theoretical parts of his two political treatises must be understood as political, rather than theoretical, philosophy.59

Since Straussians believe al-Fārābī to practice the ancient art of concealment of truth, even in the philosophical works his own ideas are not necessarily explicit. Parens follows the methodological lead of Strauss himself in attempting to find al-Fārābī’s true opinions in the silences and omissions of his paraphrase of Plato’s Laws.60 Galston, on the other hand, rejects the traditional Straussian division into philosophical and popular works, but rather attempts to interpret al-Fārābī’s political works as a unified group, the way she believes they were supposed to be read. The doctrinal differences between them then reflect al-Fārābī’s complex method of

57 For Walzer “it is certain” that Virtuous City is al-Fārābī’s last work, while Dunlop claims Aphorisms as last, and for Rosenthal Attainment is the most mature. As Mahdi points out, all editors of al-Fārābī’s texts seem to be certain that their text is the final one. Rosenthal 1958, p. 125; Dunlop 1961, pp. 16-7; Walzer, 1985, p. 1; Mahdi 1990, pp. 693-694.
58 Galston 1990, pp. 3-5. See also, Abouzeid 1987, pp. 77-89 for a summary of the attempted chronologies, and Dunlop 1961 and Walzer 1985 for their attempts. Like Galston, Druart (1987, p. 27) implicitly renounces the possibility of a chronology.
59 Mahdi 1962, pp. 4-5; Mahdi 2001a, pp. 121-124.
60 Strauss 1957; Parens 1995. Of course, since it is very unlikely that al-Fārābī possessed anything even remotely near the original Greek version of the text, such omissions probably tell more about al-Fārābī’s source than his carefully hidden opinions. Parens acknowledges the problem, but then concludes (p. xxix) that such a view “. . . reflects old and deep-seated prejudgment among many orientalists that the peculiarities and oddities of a text by a medieval Muslim thinker must be the product of external historical forces or of as yet undiscovered (preferably non-Muslim) predecessors rather than of the mind of the thinker. This prejudgment is an odd combination of the modern, democratic tendency to overstate history’s power over the individual, described by de Tocqueville, and of the view that Muslim thinkers in particular are constrained by their tradition from thinking independently.” The methodological problems are not exactly erased by this statement.
“dialectical multi-level writing,” where the intention is not so much to conceal, as to educate both philosophers and non-philosophers simultaneously.61

Among those approaching al-Fārābī with more conventional methodology, Reisman proposes a tripartite classification into introductory works, commentaries and paraphrases, and original works. While the middle category is rather self-evident, the introductory works for him comprise the great majority of al-Fārābī’s writings from logical to ethical, whereas the last consists solely of Virtuous City and Political Governance. This is because these two are his major works in the sense that they cover all of his philosophical system in a comprehensive way from metaphysics, through physics, to political philosophy, and especially present the emanationist order of creation and cosmology.62

Consequently al-Fārābī’s writings would appear as an ascent within his philosophical curriculum, where the logical and ethical works form a gradual introduction to philosophy, logic providing the tool and ethical works being a kind of exhortation to the practice of philosophy. The deeper philosophical truths of the original works are reached by the mediation of Aristotelian and Platonic commentaries and paraphrases. It does not seem, however, that Attainment of Happiness in particular would be introductory at least in the sense of being merely “exoteric” philosophy, for it rather appears to be one of the most important works presenting his original philosophical ideas, wedding theoretical with practical philosophy.

The classification proposed by Druart is an attempt to resolve the controversial question of Neoplatonic emanationism within al-Fārābī’s thought. Al-Fārābī’s writings seem to present a problem as to the interpretation of his metaphysical views. He gives his detailed emanationist account in the theoretical parts of his two political works, while in others he ignores it altogether. The fact that he does not attribute emanationism to Aristotle in works like Philosophy of Aristotle would moreover seem to show that he was aware of the un-Aristotelian origin of the doctrine.63 While the Straussian conclude from this that al-Fārābī in fact did not truly profess emanationism, Druart only agrees with that al-Fārābī is indeed aware of the un-Aristotelian origin of texts like Theology of Aristotle, but still sincerely supports emanationist views. The discrepancy in his works rather reflects al-Fārābī’s dissatisfaction with Aristotelian metaphysics, which he consciously supplements with Neoplatonic emanationism.

Therefore Druart divides al-Fārābī’s works into three categories based on their position on this question. In the Aristotelian texts al-Fārābī presents Aristotle’s views, and therefore omits emanationism.64 In the “programmatic” texts, such as Attainment

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63 Galston 1977. According to Galston, the only text where al-Fārābī does attribute emanationism to Aristotle is Agreement Between the Opinions of the Two Philosophers, where his intention is essentially apologetic: to undermine the traditional argument against philosophy that even its two greatest representatives could not find an agreement between themselves on important questions.
64 To this group pertains al-Fārābī’s little treatise On the Objectives of Metaphysics (Risāla fī aghrād mā ba’da al-ta.ib’î’). That al-Fārābī wrote such treatise shows that there was some degree of puzzlement as to the purpose of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, which reappeared later in Ibn Sīnā, whose confusion was settled precisely by the aid of this treatise. What was puzzling was apparently the
of Happiness and Enumeration of Sciences, he presents his own views for the program of philosophy within an Aristotelian context, but also calls for a metaphysics that goes beyond Aristotle to include divine science. Finally, in his “emanationist” works, Political Governance and Virtuous City, he presents his own account of trans-Aristotelian metaphysics.\textsuperscript{65}

Finally, there is the view of Vallat, who has made the greatest effort so far for a unified presentation of the whole of al-Fārābī’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{66} For Vallat the unity of al-Fārābī’s thought as reflected throughout his corpus far outweighs the doctrinal divergences. This unity has gone largely unnoticed by such approaches to his philosophy where his works are stratified into different classes according to their presumed objective. This study concurs with such a holistic perception of al-Fārābī’s philosophy, and agrees with Vallat’s assessment that al-Fārābī’s philosophical system emerging from the conjunction of his works is in fact largely coherent.\textsuperscript{67} Namely, from all of al-Fārābī’s philosophical works there emerges a perception of philosophy as a way to happiness, around which both his theoretical and practical philosophy are focused.

Nothing in this general picture would suggest a need for a Straussian reading of one or another of his treatises, nor for the arbitrary rejection of his Neoplatonic metaphysics as merely rhetorical. This does not of course exclude the notion that different works might serve different purposes, which would explain their distinct approaches to a specific question. Of al-Fārābī’s so-called programmatic texts, moreover, Attainment of Happiness, far from being merely introductory, seems to illustrate best al-Fārābī’s holistic conception of philosophy as an ascent to happiness in which theoretical and practical philosophy are intimately bound together. Moreover, the picture of philosophy that emerges from this work seems to be in harmony with the rest of al-Fārābī’s ethico-political treatises, including the emanationist account presented in the twin political treatises. Namely, the philosophical ascent to happiness is the counterpart of the creative process of emanation in al-Fārābī’s Neoplatonic soteriology.

2.4 Ibn Sīnā

Abu ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), known as Avicenna in the west and as the “chief master” (al-shaykh al-ra’īs) in the east, is probably the most influential Muslim philosopher of all time, besides the fact that his medical works were equally influential in both the Islamic and Latin world. Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical synthesis represents the culmination of the Islamic Peripatetic tradition, building on the influence of al-Fārābī in particular. But his later influence is not limited to the Peripatetics, but is also relevant to the evolution of the mystical traditions of Arabic philosophy, particularly the illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardī more than a century after his death. In contrast to al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā’s influence is still very much

\textsuperscript{65} Druart 1987.
\textsuperscript{66} Vallat 2004.
\textsuperscript{67} Vallat 2004, pp. 25-6.
alive today especially in Iran. While there is definitely more of a religious dimension to Ibn Sinā’s writings than those of al-Fārābī, the mysticism in his own thought is a controversial question. In addition to his clearly Peripatetic works he wrote a series of allegorical treatises that convey another side of his thought. Moreover, there is the problem of his “eastern” (masḥriqī) philosophy.

Ibn Sinā’s own intellectual and philosophical growth is rather better documented than that of most others as he wrote an autobiography, complemented by a biography of his disciple al-Jūzjānī. The autobiography is rather sketchy and concise, but even so it depicts his own view of his early development and philosophical education. Ibn Sinā grew up in Bukhārā Khurāsān within the sphere of Ismaili influence. While both his father and brother had adopted Ismailism, and especially the Ismaili doctrines on soul and intellect, Ibn Sinā claims to have rejected them, although even at an early age he states that he had no trouble in understanding them. Besides Ismailism his family was at least rudimentarily educated in philosophy and mathematics which also pertained to the topics of discussion among the family. During his early years he received an education in the Quran, Arabic literature (adab), Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), as well as the basics of calculation from a greengrocer.

Unlike al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā was not initiated into philosophy by a major philosopher working in an environment of fervent philosophical activity. After the arrival to Bukhārā of a man named al-Nāṭīlī, this self-claimed connoisseur of philosophy assumed Ibn Sinā’s instruction into the philosophical sciences. But like al-Fārābī, he could attain only the beginnings of logic under his instruction, for Ibn Sinā soon surpassed his teacher and proceeded to the study of the deeper parts of logic and mathematics, and later physics and metaphysics, through independent study of the texts. The main bulk of these philosophical texts presumably would have consisted of Aristotelian works and commentaries, including the pseudo-Aristotelian Theology of Aristotle on which he later wrote a commentary. The only external aid he claims to have required was to understand the purpose of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, where he found help in a chance encounter with al-Fārābī’s small treatise, Epistle on the Objectives of Metaphysics.

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68 According to Corbin (1960, p. 6), in Iran it is customary to divide philosophers into Peripatetics (masḥṣīṭī) and Illuminationists (isḥāqīyyīn), both of whom are Avicennan at least to some extent.

69 Ibn Sinā’s autobiography was transmitted by largely the same Arabic biographers as al-Fārābī’s biography, such as Ibn Abī Usaybī’a. For the roots and prevalence of autobiography in classical Arabic culture, see, Reynolds 2001, which argues against the misconception of autobiography as a rarity in Arabic literature.

70 Ibn Sinā, Ṣīrāt al-shaykh al-ra’īs, pp. 16-21 and pp. 120-1, note 2. The possible impact of this early Ismaili influence on Ibn Sinā has not really been studied. In two variants of the autobiography he claims that both he and his father also studied the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. If not a later addition, which, however, is likely according to Gutas (1988, p. 24, note 7), this would be very interesting both because his father was an Ismaīlī, thus supporting an early Ismaīlī affiliation of the Brethren of Purity, and because Ibn Sinā’s first encounters with philosophy would have taken place through these epistles.

71 According to Gutas (1988, p. 26, note 15), the expression zawāhir al-mantiq means here a literal-minded reading of logic, while Ibn Sinā delved by himself to its deeper subtleties (daqāʿiqiyya). The reference here is then to two ways of interpreting Aristotelian logic. Ibn Sinā would therefore have finished the entire Organon with his teacher, and not only a part of it, as Gohlman and most other translators have assumed.

72 Ibn Sinā, Sīrā, pp. 20-35 and p. 122, note 30. Gohlman expresses his doubts that al-Fārābī’s treatise by the very name mentioned by Ibn Sinā, Fī ʿaghīrād mā baʿda al-jābiʿa, could have been so helpful to
By the age of eighteen he had fully assimilated the philosophical sciences, and although his knowledge later might be “more mature, otherwise it is the same; nothing new has come to me since.” Like the allegorical tale Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), Ibn Sīnā’s autobiography then depicts a picture of a supremely intelligent autodidact philosopher, with the exception that Ibn Sīnā assumes the philosophical truth through studying the Aristotelian corpus, rather than through independent reflection of reality.

As in so many medieval writers the question of esotericism arises also in Ibn Sīnā. In the introduction to his main Peripatetic work, Healing (al-Shifā’), he makes a distinction between that work and eastern philosophy (al-falsafa/hi̇kma al-mashriqīyya), on which he says he has written another book. Ibn Ṭufayl writes a century and a half later that in Healing Ibn Sīnā presented his Peripatetic doctrine following Aristotle, whereas he expressed his true philosophical opinions in his book on eastern philosophy, which for the most part has not survived. Suhrawardī (d. 1191), on the contrary, downplays the difference between Ibn Sīnā’s eastern and Peripatetic philosophy to occasional changes in forms of expression.

Many modern scholars have followed Ibn Ṭufayl in interpreting Ibn Sīnā’s eastern philosophy to contain his mystical and esoteric doctrine. For Corbin, who views Ibn Sīnā from the perspective of Iranian spiritualism, eastern philosophy emerges as a counterpart to the Peripateticism of Baghdad. Eastern, besides Khurāsān, Ibn Sīnā’s point of origin, refers to the spiritual sphere of existence referred to as eastern in his allegorical treatises, as opposed to the west of the material world. Nasr follows Corbin, and sees the contents of the lost eastern philosophy to be reflected in the allegorical treatises and the last chapters of Remarks and Admonitions (al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt). For both of them Ibn Sīnā’s eastern philosophy is a bridge between his Peripatetic philosophy and illuminationism, which is the true eastern philosophy that first becomes fully actualized in Suhrawardī.

A majority of western scholars rejects this interpretation as unsubstantiated mystification, or projection of later Iranian tradition to Ibn Sīnā himself. For Gutas there is no distinction of substance between Ibn Sīnā’s eastern/Khurāsān and western/Peripatetic philosophy, only of method. In his eastern philosophy Ibn Sīnā intends to express what he holds to be the philosophical truth only, without giving philosophical arguments or variant opinions. This is also what Ibn Sīnā himself clearly declares to be doing in his introduction to Healing, and it is supported by the surviving parts of the eastern philosophical texts. On the whole Ibn Sīnā’s eastern

Ibn Sīnā, and suggests Book of Letters instead. While the former treatise is mainly a very short summary of the contents of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, it explains the purpose of Aristotle’s metaphysics of which theology forms only a minor part.

Whether all of the self-glorification in the autobiography is to be taken at face value, or whether some of it must be attributed to the topos of exaggeration characteristic of the biographical genre, is another question. Gutas believes that the primary purpose of the autobiography for Ibn Sīnā is to illustrate his epistemological theory, specifically the function of intuition (ḥads) in the learning process. Gutas 1988, pp. 115-8; Gutas 1994. Since most of Ibn Sīnā’s book on eastern philosophy had been destroyed much earlier, neither had at their disposal at least more than what we have today, i.e., parts of logic and possibly physics. Gutas believes the name of the work to be Easterners (al-Mashriqīyyūn).

Corbin 1960, pp. 5-6, 271-8; Nasr 1964, p. 181, 185-196; Nasr 1996.
philosophy then represents a stage in his philosophical evolution, where he gradually departs from the Aristotelian manner of exposition. In his latest phase Ibn Sīnā discards the term ‘eastern philosophy’ altogether, since there is no longer a trace of it in *Remarks and Admonitions*, which Gutas argues to be his latest and most independent work. There is also not much trace of this eastern philosophy in Ibn Sīnā’s disciples or the subsequent Islamic tradition.  

Michot and Reisman similarly see the distinction as an intellectual rivalry between Ibn Sīnā’s “Khurāsānī” philosophy and the over-literal Peripateticism of Baghdad, rather than one of exoteric and esoteric doctrine. Ibn Sīnā’s distinction between eastern and western philosophy then illustrates his difference of view with the Baghdad Peripatetics, where one major point of divergence is the separability and survival of the soul. Still, Ibn Sīnā was considered an Aristotelian by both his opponents and other philosophers.

It does not seem then that Ibn Sīnā would have devised two separate systems of philosophy, one Peripatetic and one “eastern.” But even in Gutas’ theory there is an evolution from more rigid Aristotelianism towards an independent synthesis. Among his voluminous corpus of writings two major works, and the two major sources for this study, *Healing* (*al-Shīfā*) and *Remarks and Admonitions* (*al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanhīhāt*), stand out. Both of them present the entirety of Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical system proceeding from logic through physics, and mathematics in *Healing*, to metaphysics, and finally practical philosophy. In addition, there is the much shorter *Salvation* (*al-Najāt*), which does the same as *Healing* in a very concise form, although it apparently is not its summary as is commonly believed.

Gutas places Ibn Sīnā and his conception of philosophy firmly within the Aristotelian tradition as mediated by the Alexandrians. From the Alexandrian tradition he adopts both the idea of philosophical knowledge as essentially that which is contained in the Aristotelian corpus, and the classification of the parts of that knowledge. But in his form of exposition Ibn Sīnā consciously departs from the traditional convention of writing commentaries and treatises on specific subjects. Ibn Sīnā is the first to actualize the philosophical curriculum implicit in the Alexandrian classification of Aristotelian sciences into a coherent account of all knowledge. The names of his two most Peripatetic summas, *Healing* and *Salvation*, reveal their ultimate purpose. They provide the philosophical path of knowledge through which the rational soul is actualized, and hence healed from ignorance and saved from error.

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78 Reisman 2000, p. 565.
81 Gutas 1988, pp. 86, 125-6, 101-3, 199-211, 219. The metaphor of philosophy as medicine or healing of the soul was a commonplace in Greek philosophy, besides the fact that it obviously fits well with Ibn Sīnā as a distinguished practitioner of the art. The other famous philosopher-doctor, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī,
Even though Ibn Sīnā in *Healing* and *Salvation* follows the Aristotelian tradition, what he presents in them is his own synthesis of it, and he is not afraid to depart from the Aristotelian doctrine when necessary.\(^{82}\) In *Remarks and Admonitions*, probably his last complete presentation of philosophy, he proceeds further from the Aristotelian style of exposition towards giving only the philosophical truth in its most naked and allusive form. For Gutas this is the culmination of what Ibn Sīnā attempted already during his “phase” of eastern philosophy. The work is written in a deliberately elliptical style, partly for guarding its knowledge from non-philosophical minds, and the student is expected to elaborate the rest by himself presumably through help of oral instruction.\(^{83}\)

The last part of metaphysics dealing with practical philosophy differs decisively from *Healing* in style, and those advocating Ibn Sīnā’s eastern philosophy have often seen it as representing his eastern doctrine. Because he in it employs the vocabulary of Islamic mysticism, it has also been connected to Sufism.\(^{84}\) Gutas is strongly against such association, and sees this part only as further elaboration of Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical epistemology, although admittedly using non-philosophical language at times. Especially in the ninth section (*namat*) of the last part of *Remarks*, titled “On the stations of the knowers” (*Fī maqāmāt al-ʿārifīn*), Ibn Sīnā, however, seems to go beyond Peripatetic epistemology in describing the spiritual journey towards ultimate happiness in mystical, experiential terms.\(^{85}\) But even here the exposition falls well within Ibn Sīnā’s holistic philosophical system such as it was presented already in *Healing*, and it may be described as mysticism only in the same sense as Platonism in general.\(^{86}\)

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\(^{82}\) See also, Nussbaum 1994, pp. 13ff. and chapter 6.7 below.

\(^{83}\) Gutas 1988, pp. 140-1. Ibn Sīnā states this explicitly in the work [cited and translated by Gutas 1988, p. 55]: “What follows are pointers to fundamental principles and reminders of essential elements. Whoever finds them easy will be able to gain insights through them, while he who finds them difficult will not benefit even from the most obvious of them. . . . Here I repeat my admonition and restate my request that the contents of these parts be withheld as much as possible from those who do not meet the conditions I stipulated at the end of these pointers.”

\(^{84}\) Inati in his translation titles it the fourth “Sufi part” of the work, although he does not claim that Ibn Sīnā was a practicing Sufi. Nasr refers to various, probably fictive, encounters between Ibn Sīnā and Sufi sages given in the Islamic sources, and ends up considering him as definitely influenced by the Sufi way. Inati 1996; Nasr 1964, pp. 191-6.

\(^{85}\) See, Marmura’s (1991, pp. 340-2) criticism of Gutas with respect to this question. However, Ibn Sīnā does seem to consider Peripatetic philosophy and the Sufi experience to be in essential agreement with each other, as when he claims the doctrine of the soul, which he has reached by demonstrative means, to be verified by the practitioners of asceticism (\(arbāb al-riyāda wa-ayshāb al-mukāshafa\)). Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fi maʿrifat al-nafs al-nāṭqa*, p. 183.

\(^{86}\) See also, Ramón Guerrero 2000, pp. 65-71 for this view.
Besides the major philosophical compendiums, Ibn Sīnā wrote a great number of smaller works on distinct subjects. The soul and its fate is at the center of Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical system since it is in some sense related to all areas of philosophy, while the soul’s salvation to eternal happiness is in the end the ultimate purpose for the practice of philosophy. Therefore he wrote a number of separate treatises on subjects related to the question of happiness and its attainment. Some of these, however, were incorporated almost directly into the major Peripatetic works, and do not contain any doctrinal deviations in relation to them.87 Besides, there are some minor treatises on other subjects that are useful for this study.88

As for the series of allegorical narratives composed by Ibn Sīnā, they pertain to a genre distinct from straightforward philosophical writing, which Corbin calls visionary recital and Hodgson mythical-visionary writing. These recitals, such as Ḥayy Ibn Yaẓān, Recital of the Bird, and Salāmān and Absāl, treat in symbolic language the quest of the soul in the material and spiritual realms. As such they clearly form a bridge towards later non-Peripatetic philosophy, at least in the sense that they inspired the likes of Ibn Ṭufayl and Suhrawardī to compose similar narratives expressing philosophical truth in the form of an allegory. But rather than containing Ibn Sīnā’s mystical doctrine distinct from those set forward in his philosophical writings, they would seem to express a holistic vision of the same philosophical truth expressed in experiential, as opposed to analytical, language.89

2.5 Practical philosophy

In Arabic philosophy the question of happiness properly pertains to all of philosophy, since in the end the goal of philosophical knowledge is to elevate the rational soul from its ignorant, material state to a higher level of non-material existence. The intellectual aspect of this ascent is related to epistemology, and is therefore treated in the psychological part of physics. But it is the task of practical philosophy to specifically investigate the ways in which happiness may be realized.

In the primary division of philosophy the theoretical (naẓari) part investigates those objects of knowledge that exist independently of human volition, the physical, metaphysical, and mathematical entities. As such its objective is to attain comprehensive knowledge of the existence as a whole. The practical (‘amali) part, on the other hand, investigates the sphere of existence generated by human volition, and specifically the good actions and ways of life that lead man towards his ultimate goal. But the objective of the practical part is not merely acquisition of knowledge about these things, but action based on that knowledge. In Ibn Sīnā’s summary: “the

87 For example, the treatise The State of the Human Soul (Ḥāl al-nafs al-insāniyya) was copied into the De Anima parts of Healing and Salvation, while parts of Provenance and Destination (al-Mabdaʿ wa-l-maʿād) were transferred into their metaphysical parts. Other works include especially Short Treatise on the Soul (Maqāla fi al-nafs ʿalā sunnat al-ikhḥāṣ), the first work authored by Ibn Sīnā, or his “dissertation” in Gutas’ terminology, and his very last, Treatise on the Rational Soul (Risāla fi al-kalām ʿalā al-nafs al-nāṭiq). See, Gutas 1988, pp. 72-8, 82-6, 98-100, 254-61.
88 These include in particular Parts of the Intellectual Sciences (Aqsām al-ʿulūm al-ʿaglīyya), where Ibn Sīnā outlines his concept of philosophy and its parts, Treatise on Ethics (Risāla fi ʿilm al-akhlāq), Treatise on Love (Risāla fi al-ʾishq), Treatise on the Essence of Prayer (Risāla fi māhiyyat al-ṣalāt), and his autobiography.
In the classical division followed by Arabic philosophers, practical philosophy is further divided into three parts. The subject matter of practical philosophy is properly how man must be governed (tadbīr) for him to attain his perfection, and this is investigated on three levels of the individual, household, and society, thus generating the three practical sciences of ethics, economics, and politics.  

In Ibn Sīnā’s formulation, ethics gives knowledge about how the dispositions and actions of man must be formed so that he could attain happiness both in this life and the next, while economics investigates how man should govern his household in a way that would enable attainment of happiness.

Political philosophy properly investigates the way the things discovered in ethics can be actualized in the society. Hence, following the Platonic pattern, it investigates both the virtuous kind of governance leading to happiness, including the qualities of the first leader or “philosopher-king”, as well as the different classes of non-virtuous types of government. In the more specifically Islamic context there is, however, another part of political philosophy that is related to religion and religious law (shari‘a). According to Ibn Sīnā, through this part is known both prophecy and man’s need for a religious law in order for him to attain salvation.

In the curriculum of philosophical sciences practical philosophy follows metaphysics as the very last part of philosophy. On the other hand, the practice of ethics should be its very first part preceding the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Inclusion of practical philosophy as part or epilogue of metaphysics is not accidental, since such as it exists in al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, it forms an integral part of their holistic system of philosophy. In their ethical philosophy they do not investigate the nature of the good, justice, or other ethical concepts through independent reflection on the mundane reality, but as an integral part of the system construed in theoretical philosophy. In the theological part of metaphysics is portrayed the creation of the world through the emanative process from the First principle downwards, by the intermediacy of the separate Intellects of the spiritual world, down to the level of the material world.

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90 Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām, p. 105. See also, e.g., al-Fārābī, Iḥṣāʾ; p. 102; Tahiṣīl, pp. 140-2. Compare Aristotle’s assessment in Nicomachean Ethics, II.i, 1103b26ff.: “As then our present study, unlike the other branches of philosophy, has a practical aim (for we are not investigating the nature of virtue for the sake of knowing what it is, but in order that we may become good, without which the result of our investigation would be of no use). . .”

91 While Ibn Sīnā gives the full tripartition, al-Fārābī divides his political science (al-‘ilm al-madanī) only to ethics and political science proper. According to Ibn Sīnā, ethics is based on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (kitāb Arisṭāfāllīs fī al-akhlāq), economics on Bryson, and political philosophy on the “book of Plato and Aristotle on governance (nīyāsā)” and “two books on the laws” (kitābān humā fī al-nawāmīs). Economics was not really treated much by either of them. Nāṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s (d. 1274) Nasīrīān Ethics (Akhlāq-i Nāṣīrī) would be the most orthodox representation of a tripartite work on practical philosophy within Arabic philosophy.

92 Al-Fārābī, Iḥṣāʾ; pp. 104-7; Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām, pp. 107-8. The epistemological part of prophetology again pertains to the De Anima part of physics.

93 Abū Sahl al-Maṣḥḥī, a physician and companion of Ibn Sīnā, explicates in his classification of the philosophical sciences this double nature of ethics. Ethics is a science that should be both practiced and studied, as practiced it precedes theoretical philosophy, as studied it follows it. Gutas 1988, p. 152.
Ethics deals with the means to the reversal of this process, the Neoplatonic return (maʿād) of the soul to the spiritual level of existence. Hence, ethics mostly deals with the purification of the soul from its bodily entanglements, partly using concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Good and virtue are defined as the instruments that lead man towards his absolute good of ultimate happiness, while evil and vice are whatever prevents him from attaining it. Since the absolute good for man is fixed in a transcendental level of existence, spatially in the spiritual world and temporally mostly in the afterlife, this kind of ethics could be called transcendental ethics.94

Like ethics, political philosophy is also ultimately attached to metaphysics. Within classical Arabic philosophy al-Fārābī stands to a degree as an anomaly in his preoccupation with political philosophy, since neither his predecessors nor most of his followers ever treated it extensively. For Al-Fārābī, on the contrary, political philosophy seems to emerge as his foremost concern, as many of his most important works can be described as political. Both of his two most famous political treatises, *Virtuous City* and *Political Governance*, however, contain a structure, where the first part in fact treats theoretical philosophy, while only the second part is devoted to political philosophy. This raises the question of the relationship between the two parts which has seemed somewhat arbitrary to many.

The Straussians interpret the first part to represent political cosmology, theology, and psychology, or the opinions that the inhabitants of the virtuous city should adopt. Their rhetorical character is shown by the undemonstrative fashion of al-Fārābī’s exposition, where the true opinions are merely given without philosophical arguments.95 The peculiar structure, however, rather seems to mirror the intimate relation between metaphysics and political philosophy. The harmonious hierarchical order that exists in the cosmos and within man is the best possible order of things. Therefore this same divine model should be reproduced in the virtuous city, the most harmonious kind of society that men could create for themselves.

The prominence of political philosophy suddenly emerging in al-Fārābī has also seemed puzzling to his interpreters. Mahdi and Parens regard al-Fārābī as without precedents either in the previous Arabic tradition or late Greek philosophy in this respect. In fact al-Fārābī’s metaphysical Neoplatonism appears almost contradictory to his preoccupation with political philosophy, as generally Neoplatonism has been regarded as too otherworldly to be concerned with the political aspect of Plato.96 While Walzer also considers Neoplatonism as inherently apolitical, throughout his commentary on the *Virtuous City*, he also believes al-Fārābī to be reproducing some unknown Greek text from the 5th or 6th century.97

In his *Platonopolis*, O’Meara convincingly reconstructs the continuous existence of Greek Neoplatonic political philosophy. The ultimate purpose of Neoplatonic

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94 In case of Ibn Sīnā, Gutas calls it his metaphysics of the rational soul. As Gutas (1988, pp. 254-61) points out, Ibn Sīnā was never very interested in practical philosophy in any other context.


97 Walzer 1971; Walzer 1985, p. 8. For Walzer *Virtuous City* can be used to “reconstruct a consistent view of metaphysics, astronomy, physics, psychology, ethics, and politics held by one particular late Greek philosopher or by one particular group of late Greek philosophers with whose thought al-Fārābī became acquainted and whom he chose to follow.” Walzer seems to assume this a priori, without providing much evidence for the complete reductionism.
philosophy is the divinization of man, or assimilation to the divine to the degree possible for a human being. To achieve this, the practitioner of philosophy must follow an ascending scale of political, purificatory and intellectual virtues. Once the soul attains its highest possible state, union with the One in the case of Plotinus, it must return to share its goodness with others. It is in the nature of the absolute Good to overflow its goodness and give rise to the rest of existence. Similarly the perfected philosopher must return to the “Platonic cave” to communicate the vision that he has attained by legislating an image of it in the human world. While O’Meara is concerned mainly with Greek philosophy, in an epilogue he provides al-Fārābī’s *Virtuous City* as an example for the continuation of Neoplatonic political philosophy in the Islamic world, or an Islamic “Platonopolis.”

Al-Fārābī’s political philosophy is then firmly grounded in Neoplatonic philosophy, in addition to the direct Platonic influence of the *Republic* and *Laws*, and is as inherently related to his holistic philosophical system as its other parts. Therefore Gutas is right in asserting that it is not political philosophy in the modern sense of an autonomous discipline independently reflecting the political reality. But it is political philosophy in the Platonic sense of a philosophical utopia that is not directly related to the ephemeral affairs of the political world.

Still, since al-Fārābī did not live in a vacuum, it would seem natural, despite the abstract nature of his political philosophy, that al-Fārābī’s political and religious leanings would somehow manifest themselves in his thought. His political philosophy is placed in the context of a revealed religion in that the concepts of revelation, prophecy, and religious law occupy a central position in it. For Rosenthal, although he admits that Islamic political philosophy in general is tightly integrated to the general philosophical system, the acceptance of the authority of *shari‘a* largely conditions Islamic political philosophy and limits its range of speculation.

At least in the case of al-Fārābī religious law is, however, philosophically determined, and not the other way round. Al-Fārābī also uses Islamic concepts that relate his political philosophy to the general Islamic tradition of political thought that discusses especially the question of imamate and caliphate, or the legitimate form of rulership. Still Parens’ claim that the central goal of his political philosophy would be to investigate the idea of a universal Islamic state seems far-fetched. As for his more specific religious orientation, Walzer, based on both biographical factors and the contents of the work, believes al-Fārābī to be strongly sympathetic to twelver Shi‘ism and to propagate against the Ismailis and Abbasids, whereas Daiber finds Ismaili influences in his political ideas. Both alternatives seem plausible, although merely hypothetical, since there is nothing overtly Shii, whether Imami or Ismaili, in his political thought or in his use of the concept of imam.

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98 O’Meara 2003, pp. 3, 8-10, 40-4, 73-82, 185-96.
99 Gutas 2001, pp. 23-4. For Gutas, as for Rosenthal (1958, p. 3), the first political philosopher in the Islamic world in this strict sense would be Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).
100 Rosenthal 1958, pp. 3-4. Mahdi (2001, p. 97) depicts medieval political philosophy as essentially a philosophy of religion, classical political philosophy as a philosophy of the city, and modern political philosophy as a philosophy of the state. This seems accurate in the sense that religion occupies the same position of unifying communal concept as city does for Plato and state does for modernity.
In contrast to al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā devotes much less of his attention to political philosophy within the totality of his philosophical writings. While al-Fārābī was properly the founder of Islamic political philosophy, and the major influence on the subsequent writers on the subject, Ibn Sīnā’s treatment of it in the final part of Healing does not seem directly indebted to al-Fārābī. Nor does he treat in it all those topics that he elsewhere defines as the subject matter of political philosophy, such as the classification of the different kinds of government.

While Ibn Sīnā also partly bases himself on the Platonic-Aristotelian foundation, his treatment seems to be much more intimately bound to the Islamic context than that of al-Fārābī. Prophecy arises as the central theme of Ibn Sīnā’s political philosophy, and there is no trace of a philosopher-king as the leader of the virtuous city at least explicitly. He discusses the question of legitimate virtuous rulership within the context of imamate and caliphate, and the nature of that government within the context of religious law and observations. In addition, Ibn Sīnā goes beyond the abstraction characterizing al-Fārābī’s political philosophy to describe some of the specific regulations that the virtuous rulership should include.

103 Probably due to its scarcity Ibn Sīnā’s political philosophy has been studied rather little in comparison with al-Fārābī. See, e.g., Rosenthal 1958, pp. 143-57, Morris 1992, and Butterworth 2000 for brief overviews of the subject.

104 In the prologue to Healing Ibn Sīnā promises to later write a comprehensive work on practical philosophy. In addition, before Healing he wrote a larger work on the subject, called Piety and Sin (al-Birr wa-l-ithm), which has not survived. See, Gutas 1988, pp. 94-8, 238.
3 Ismaili background

3.1 Development of Ismaili doctrine

The Ismaili doctrine was first expressed in a philosophical form at the beginning of the 10th century. The birth and early phases of the Ismailis before this time still remain somewhat obscure, as the Ismaili literature truly developed only after the movement had risen to political prominence at the founding of the Fatimid state in 909. According to the tradition, the Ismailis were first separated from the twelver Shiis due to the dispute concerning the inheritance of the imamate after the fifth imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765). Up to this point the mainline of Imami Shiis had been able to agree on the succession of the imamate, each imam at least theoretically having appointed his successor during his lifetime. Due to the special circumstances and ambiguities involving the succession of Ja‘far, Shiis were irrevocably split into their two major branches, the twelvers and the Ismailis, each following a different line of imams from then on.

At this point the Shii doctrine still was not elaborated to the degree it was in the following centuries, and while the original separation apparently did not result from doctrinal disagreements, the two branches were to follow separate doctrinal evolutions as well. Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq himself, who was revered as one of the major authorities in knowledge by both branches, probably had a major role in formulating this early Shii doctrine. Its most important single ingredient, which distinguished all the Shiis from the rest of the Muslim community, was the doctrine of the imamate. Although originally the question was probably as much political as it was spiritual, an increasing number of spiritual ideas were attributed to the function of the imam, the most radical ones of the ghulāt “extremists” often influenced by the pre-Islamic religions of Persia.

Even if the mainline of Shiis following Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq rejected the most radical of these innovations, which might at times elevate the imams above even the prophets in reverence, the Shii tradition as a whole was also influenced by some of the ghulāt ideas. If originally the imam was for the Shiis the legitimate political and spiritual leader of the Muslim community due to his descent from the prophet through his daughter Fāṭima and cousin ‘Alī, now he became much more than that.

According to the developing Shii doctrine, the imam was designated (naṣṣ) by his predecessor, normally from among his sons, and was distinguished from ordinary people by his special knowledge (‘ilm). It was this knowledge, that had descended to the imams from the prophet, that made him the rightful leader of all Muslims, even if the majority of Muslims would not recognize him as such, and which made his presence at all times necessary for the existence of the world.

Related to the developing concept of imamate was the esotericism that increasingly characterized Shii thought. In it knowledge in general, but especially that concerning prophetic revelation, was divided into its exoteric (zāhir) and esoteric

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105 Madelung 1961, pp. 43-6. In fact the situation among the supporters of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq was probably initially considerably more complicated, with the existence of various groups noted in Shii and Sunni sources, from which the later twelver and Ismaili Shii movements developed.

(bāṭīn) aspects. The fundamental esoteric truth behind the literal meaning of revelation was the secret knowledge possessed by the imam, from whom it was divulged to the general cadre of believers, or at least the select few who were sufficiently advanced in their spiritual development to comprehend it.\(^{107}\) It was the Ismaili brand of Shiism that was to develop this esoteric view of knowledge the furthest, with all its elitist implications.

The following century, between the separation of the Ismailis from the twelvers, and their emergence as a major force in the Islamic history at the end of the 9th century, is the most obscure period in the history of the Ismaili movement. It is also the most crucial period for its development, since by the reappearance of the Ismailis in written sources many of their most distinguishing doctrines had already been formed. For later Ismailis, the time after Ismā‘īl is the beginning of the period of occultation (ghayba), when the seventh Ismaili imam Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl retreated into hiding from visible presence in his community.\(^{108}\)

As a distinctive religious movement Ismailism was probably born around the middle of the 9th century, when Ismaili missionaries were dispatched to several parts of the Islamic world. When the Ismailis first were noted in outside chronicles at the end of the century, they had developed into an active and centrally governed religious organization, achieving major success especially in Iraq and Persia.\(^{109}\)

The Ismailis of the time were united in their belief in Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl as the last seventh hidden imam. By this time the powerful eschatological aspect, which characterizes all Shiism, had been well integrated into the Ismaili doctrine of the imamate. The Shii idea of the imam as an intermediary figure between the divine and the worldly spheres requires the imam to be present in the world throughout its history. While Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl had not been visibly present for a century now, the Ismailis believed him to still be alive, awaiting his return as the mahdī, the messianic redeemer figure of the world, that existed in both Sunni and Shii Islam, but was especially important for the latter. For the Ismailis, the final imam was the qā‘im, the rectifier, who would fulfill the final consummation of history on the judgment day, through bringing justice and truth to the world. Thus he would bring an end to the period of the concealment of truth (dawr al-satr), as well as probably to the whole physical world.

One of the most characteristic features of Ismailism is the cyclical view of history, to which the doctrine of the imamate was incorporated early on.\(^{110}\) The qā‘im as the consummator of divine history is preceded in time by six cycles (dawr), himself being the initiator of the seventh and final era. Each cycle, moreover, consists of a “prophet-speaker” (nātiq), bringing a new revelation and religious law, i.e., the exoteric aspect of the religion, followed by his legatee, known as the “silent one” or the “foundation”

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\(^{107}\) See, e.g., Daftary 1990, pp. 84-6. Obviously Shiism is not the only branch of Islam to develop an esoteric view of knowledge and reality, but while for the Sufis this kind of knowledge was at the end of a long spiritual path for anyone, for the Shii it was in the possession of a single, divinely selected individual.


\(^{110}\) Cyclical perception of time has been seen as a central feature of Ismailism by many, especially Henry Corbin (1957), who perceives in it traces of pre-Islamic Persian Mazdaism.
(waṣī/asās/sāmit), who would bring the corresponding esoteric interpretation. The foundation in turn is followed by seven imams, or completers (mutimm), whose task it is to retain the revelation in both its exoteric and esoteric aspects, and the last of whom is also the initiator of the next cycle, that is, the speaker. The revelation and religious law brought by each new prophet abrogated the law of the earlier era, while finally the qā’im would dispense with both law and exoteric religion altogether, once the period of concealment came to an end and the complete esoteric truth would be divulged to all humanity.

The idea that history consists of a series of messengers conveying the divine will to mankind was Quranic and pertained to the Islamic world view in general, but what was distinctively Ismaili was the cyclical perception of the emergence of prophecy in the world. The Ismaili doctrine implied to a certain degree a pluralistic view of religions, insofar as they all were valid exoteric expressions of the underlying esoteric truth. Still, from another perspective, the Ismaili view of history was also linear and evolutionary, since it involved an idea of the gradual unfolding of the truth, each prophetic revelation being more complete than the previous, hence making the last revelation, Islam, the most perfect of them all.

Another feature characterizing Ismailism already at this early stage, both doctrinally and as an actual religious movement, was its effective organizational hierarchy. Doctrinally, the Ismaili religious hierarchy formed the vertical counterpart of the mediation between the divine and terrestrial spheres, whereas the line of prophets and imams was the horizontal one. While at each time there was to be a divinely inspired mediator present in the world, in the person of the prophet, legatee, or imam, between him and the common believer there was to be a hierarchy of religious functionaries mediating the knowledge downwards. The Ismaili religious hierarchy was known as da’wa, or the call (towards the truth).

The precise organization of the early da’wa is not known very well, but apparently at the top of the hierarchy there were 12 ḥujjas, proofs (of God), who would direct the movement in their areas, and below them a descending hierarchy of dā’īs, or missionaries. Since at this point all Ismailis apparently believed the living imam to be in hiding, the ḥujjas were the highest actual representatives of the order. Before their final political and military triumph the Ismailis were known especially as a secretive and effectively organized religious organization, and it was this organization that was doubtless an important factor contributing to their eventual success.

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111 The figure seven in the number of cycles, and the number of imams within the cycles, was of central symbolic significance for the Ismailis, repeated in the cosmos in the number of the planetary spheres, etc.
112 See, e.g., Daftary 1990, pp. 136-40 and Madelung, 1988, p. 94 for a review of the early, pre-Fatimid doctrine.
113 The line of law-giving prophets given by the Ismailis was usually Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, although whether or not Adam actually brought an explicit law was a subject of debate. Since, according to one source, there had appeared 313 messengers (rasul) and 124,000 lesser prophets (anbiyā’) in history, most of them were perceived as legatees, imams, or lower representatives of the Ismaili hierarchy. See, Walker, 1993, pp. 28-9.
114 The term da’wa has of course been shared by a great number of movements as a term for missionary activity, including the Abbasids and other groups of both Sunni and Shi’i persuasion. Still, it is probably more developed and essential in Ismaili thought than anywhere else.
115 Daftary 1990, p. 137.
As already noted, the Ismailis were from the beginning characterized by an esotericism of a more profound nature than that practiced among the twelver Shis. Among the contemporaries the movement was known by many names during its early centuries, of which the most common was bā'iniyya, the holders of the esoteric truth. At least for the later Ismailis this esoteric view of reality meant that not only was there some more profound inner meaning behind religious scriptures and religious law, but that all reality consisted of an apparent, exoteric and hidden, esoteric aspect. For the Ismailis this esoteric truth could be reached by a method of allegorical interpretation (taʾwil). The method of taʾwil could not be practiced by just anyone of course, but only by those divinely inspired to do this. Hence, for the Ismailis their esotericism was bound to the idea of religious hierarchy, which made it an essentially elitist movement. The esoteric truth flowed within the Ismaili hierarchy from the imam downwards, and was solely in the possession of its members.

Hence, the Ismailis had the character of a Gnostic sect possessing the hidden truth indispensable for salvation. Despite their active missionary efforts, this truth was not actively divulged even to all Ismailis. For one to become Ismaili, one had to first be initiated (balāgh) to the movement and swear an oath of secrecy ('ahd/mīthāq). He would attain the esoteric wisdom only gradually, proceeding first through the lower levels of exoteric knowledge. Hence, for Ismailis the Shi'i concept of taqiyya meant also the necessity of the Ismailis hiding their esoteric truth from all those who were not entitled to it – whether non-Ismailis or Ismailis who had not reached a sufficient level of initiation.

As a consequence of these Gnostic perceptions, Ismaili literature evolved into a system of knowledge, comprising both the exoteric sciences, for example Ismaili jurisprudence (fiqh) and history, and the esoteric sciences dealing with the ultimate esoteric knowledge of reality (ḥaqqāʾiq). Initially this esoteric truth consisted especially of the Gnostic-type cosmology, which explained the creation and inherent nature of the world through Quranic, mythological, and even cabalistic concepts. At the top of the divine hierarchy, there is the completely transcendent God, the Absolute One, which is beyond human cognition. By the divine commandment (kun) are created the first, female principle Kūnī, known also as the preceding one (al-sābiq), and the second male principle Qadar, known as the following one (al-tālī). Their

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116 Al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) (Kitāb al-milal, p. 554) states them to have received this appellation due to their belief that for each exoteric truth there is an esoteric one. Besides he mentions the designations Ismāʿīliyya, mazdakīyya, qarāmiṭa, taʿlīmiyya, and mulhīda. The first name shows that he identifies the Ismailis with the Mazdakians, the second that he did not make a distinction between Fatimids and Qarmatians, and the third the centrality of the idea of instruction of knowledge among the Ismailis.

117 Daftary 1990, pp. 137-8. Taʾwil is contrasted with tafsīr, the explication of the merely external meanings of revelation (tanzil). There was never one precise method of taʾwil, however, for it could mean anything from numerological or cabalistic interpretation to the philosophical method of al-Kirmānī.

118 Daftary 1990, pp. 137-8; Halm 1997, pp. 18-20. Hodgson sees a close parallel and probable line of influence with Manicheanism, the pre-Islamic Persian Gnostic religion that was relatively common among elite circles in the Islamic world during the previous century, and vehemently opposed by the Islamic orthodoxy. While they shared the idea of Gnostic knowledge that they exclusively possessed, the Ismailis were less “Gnostic” in their practical orientation towards reforming the existing worldly order. Ismaili Gnosticism is not distinctly Manichaean, however, and the origins may lie in some unknown Gnostic sects of Iraq. Hodgson 1974, I, pp. 379-80; Halm 1996a.
seven Arabic consonant letters form the seven heavenly letters (al-hurūf al-‘ulwiyya), that function also as the heavenly archetypes of the seven prophets.

From these two primary principles three further divine principles, jadd, fath and khayāl, are emanated, that function as intermediaries between the spiritual and terrestrial realms, and were often identified with the archangels Jibrā‘īl, Mīkā‘īl and Iṣrā‘īl, that act as the agents of revelation enabling men to attain knowledge of the divine world. This cosmological myth is further bound to the Quranic tale of the fall of Iblīs, another of the spiritual beings of the divine world, who fails to submit to Qadar, interpreted as the heavenly, spiritual Adam. Finally, the lower, physical world is created by God through the mediation of the two highest principles.119

The early Ismaili cosmology is of clearly Gnostic inspiration, even if the names of the spiritual beings are mainly Quranic, and early Ismaili texts tend to legitimize them by references to coded allusions in the Quran. What is characteristically Gnostic about the creation myth is that the material world is created by a lower “god,” instead of God himself, and that at least in some texts an arrogant assumption of omnipotence by the lower divinity is involved, implying the Gnostic theme of creation of the lower world due to the fall of a spiritual being.120

Even if Gnostic cosmology at times seems rather complex and even arbitrary, it had the practical function of explaining to man the ultimate nature of the cosmos and man’s place within it: the absolute distance between God and the material world, the divine origin of man, and the reason for the soul’s fall to the material level of existence. Ismaili cosmology provided the initiate the saving knowledge (gnōsis), which was the only means by which his soul could be saved to the spiritual existence of the afterlife.121

The 10th century represents the period of greatest political success for the Ismaili movement, which also had a major impetus on its doctrinal development. First of all, at the turn of the century the Ismaili da‘wa was split, when its leader in Salamiyya, ‘Ubayd Allāh, introduced a huge doctrinal innovation to the doctrine of imamate. According to the new doctrine, ‘Ubayd Allāh and his predecessors, who until now were regarded as hujjas mediating between the absent imam and the common believers, were elevated to the status of imams. By implication this presupposed a continuous line of imams, as well as abolishment of the expectation of the return of Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl as mahdī. The other branch of Isma‘īls, that came to be known as Qarmatians, refused these Fatimid innovations, and instead carried on with the anticipation of Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl’s return.122

119 Madelung 1988, pp. 94-5; Halm 1996a. Many of the pre-Fatimid texts, such Kitāb al-‘ālim wa-l-ghulām, Kitāb al-rushd wa-l-hidāya, and Kitāb al-kashf do not give a systematic picture of the early cosmological doctrine. Halm 1996a is based especially on a text by Abū ‘Isā al-Murshid dating to around the Fatimid conquest of Egypt.

120 Halm 1996a, pp. 80-3. See also Halm 1978 for a more detailed study of early Ismaili cosmology. In al-Murshid’s treatise Kūnī in her arrogance imagines herself to be the creator, resulting in the emanation of six more spiritual principles from it, in order to show her that there is an invisible Creator above her.

121 Moreover, as in Isma‘īli thought cosmology is always inherently connected to everything else, due to the harmony prevailing in the world, it is never irrelevant for any other sphere of knowledge.

122 Madelung 1961, pp. 69-72; Madelung 1988, pp. 95-6; Daftary 1993. Daftary sees it as possible that there always existed a group among the Isma‘īlis holding a continuous line of imams since Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, corresponding to the Fatimids’ own historical perception, where the true identity of the imams
Both branches attained some degree of political success; Qarmatians were the first
to found a state in Bahrayn in 899, from where they continued their attacks and
tries at expansion to the central regions of the disintegrating caliphate during the
following century. Of even greater significance was the founding of the Fatimid
caliphate in North Africa in 909, from where it expanded to Egypt in 969, and to Syria
and Arabia during the final decades of the century. These events made Fatimid
Ismailism an official religion of a major territorial state and therefore unavoidably
transformed its nature. Diffusion of Ismailism was, however, by no means determined
by the borders of these states, which rather acted as the central points of Ismaili
learning and propaganda. Ismaili ambitions were always towards universal
propagation of the true faith, and the da’wa remained particularly strong in Iran and
Iraq, while in the Fatimid heartlands the great majority of the population remained
Sunni throughout their rule.\textsuperscript{123}

The so-called classical Fatimid period initiated by the founding of the caliphate
manifests itself, among other things, in the blooming of Ismaili literature. During this
period Ismaili thought reaches its greatest summit in both philosophy and other
branches of knowledge.\textsuperscript{124} For the Fatimids there was an obvious need for the revision
of the Ismaili doctrine of the imamate with respect to its sixth and final historical
cycle in order to fit the present reality into the cyclical perception of history. This
involved especially a re-evaluation of the temporal and eschatological roles of the
qā‘im Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl and of the sequence of imams during the sixth era,
which was expanded by adding additional heptads of imams.

At the time of the influential fourth caliph al-Mu‘izz (953-75) the doctrine, which
in part revoked modifications enforced by ‘Ubayd Allāh, and as formulated especially
by the famous Ismaili jurist and theologian al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān (d. 974), now came to
interpret the qā‘im as a figure with multiple degrees (ḥadd), both spiritual and
corporeal, appearing in the alternating periods of concealment (satr) and
manifestation (kashf). When appearing as the seventh imam of the era of Islam,
Muḥammad Ibn Ismā‘īl, qā‘im attained his first degree bringing the esoteric truth, but
since he appeared during a period of concealment both he and his message remained
hidden. The Fatimid caliphs and their ancestors were now interpreted as deputies of
the qā‘im, or his second corporeal degree, who finally manifested themselves openly
at the appearance of ‘Ubayd Allāh and founding of the caliphate. They would rule
until the end of the sixth era and of the physical world, when the qā‘im would appear

\textsuperscript{123} The relationship between the two main branches of early Ismailism seems quite ambiguous at times,
and non-Ismaili contemporaries often did not make the distinction at all. After the initial rupture at 899,
Stern suggests a later rapprochement, in which the Qarmatians of Bahrayn recognized the Fatimid
caliphs as “. . . lieutenants” of the mahdi, rather than as actual imams, while Daftary perceives the

\textsuperscript{124} Daftary defines the classical period as between the establishment of the caliphate in 909 and the
death of the eighth Fatimid caliph al-Mustanṣir in 1094, which leads into yet another split in the Ismaili
movement and the gradual decline of Fatimid power. Daftary 1990, p. 144.
in his final spiritual form passing judgment to mankind, and ultimately ascending to be united with the Universal Soul.\textsuperscript{125}

The doctrine of imamate did not remain constant even during the Fatimid period, however, but evolved in time. Apparently, initially many \textit{dā'īs} did not accept the Fatimid caliphs as imams in the full sense, but remained somewhat ambiguous towards them. During the period of al-Ḥākim (d. 1021), and of al-Kirmānī, the mere deputies of the hidden imam had, however, evolved into a continuous line of repeated heptads of imams of the sixth era.\textsuperscript{126} On the whole, the main structure of pre-Fatimid Ismaili doctrine remained intact during the Fatimid period. The general cyclical view of prophetic history and the conception of the exoteric and esoteric aspects of knowledge remained characteristic of Fatimid Ismaili thought. Most Fatimid works, however, emphasize the importance of balance between exoteric and esoteric aspects against any antinomian tendencies. Doctrinally one of the most important changes involved the content of the deepest kind of esoteric knowledge, when during al-Mu‘izz’s reign the mythical, Gnostically inspired cosmology was replaced by the Neoplatonic cosmology of the Ismaili philosophers.\textsuperscript{127}

\textbf{3.2 Development of Ismaili philosophy}

The 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries of the classical Fatimid period were also the classical period of Ismaili philosophy, during which the philosopher-theologians still today revered by the modern-day Ismaili communities were active. It was in the eastern lands of Islam where the philosophical form of Ismailism was developed, rather than in the Fatimid heartlands. All of the Ismaili philosophers of the period were Persian, even though with the exception of Nāṣir-i Khosrow (d. ca. 1088) they wrote in Arabic, and for the most part they operated in the hazardous vocation of \textit{dā'īs} of the Ismaili mission in the Persian lands governed by dynasties mainly hostile to the Ismaili cause.\textsuperscript{128}

Initially Ismaili philosophy was in no way bound to the Fatimid state. The earliest of the Persian Ismaili philosophers, al-Nasafī (d. 943), Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934), and al-Sijistānī (d. 971) during his early period, probably rejected the imamate of ‘Ubayd Allāh and the legitimacy of the Fatimids.\textsuperscript{129} One major objective of the doctrinal changes implemented by al-Mu‘izz was precisely to attract the dissident eastern Ismailis to the fold of the Fatimids by reverting some of the more radical

\textsuperscript{125} Madelung 1961, pp. 86-90, 100-1; Daftary 1990, pp. 176-80, 234.
\textsuperscript{126} Walker 1993, pp. 9-12, 28.
\textsuperscript{127} Daftary 1990, pp. 232-4. Most scholars see the development of Ismaili doctrine as presented here, where Neoplatonism represents a secondary stage of evolution. Some, however, perceive it as possible that the philosophical and Gnostic-type doctrine always existed side by side. While the scarcity of pre-Fatimid sources makes such speculation possible, the earliest surviving texts do not seem to contain Neoplatonic influences.
\textsuperscript{128} According to the mainly Sunni accounts used by Stern, al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī were executed by Samanid and Saffarid rulers respectively. As Stern’s account of early Ismaili \textit{dā'ī}s in Persia shows, the political situation of the Ismailis was volatile. Stern conjectures that the \textit{da'wa} in Persia targeted the ruling elite, while in the western Islamic lands it rather targeted the common people. While it achieved some temporary successes at times through the conversion of some of the notables in Persia, it was unable to attain any larger success. Stern 1960, pp. 79-82.
\textsuperscript{129} Daftary 1990, pp. 234-5. It is not always very clear, however, what is their stand towards the question of the status of the actual ruling Fatimid caliphs, as Sijistānī, for example, does not refer to them by name, and does not even discuss the question of the imamate in detail.
changes made by ‘Ubayd Allāh to the doctrine of imamate. This proved successful as all subsequent Ismaili philosophers, al-Sijistānī, al-Kirmānī, al-Shīrāzī (d. 1078), and Nāṣīr-i Khosrow, subscribed to Fatimid Ismailism. While carrying out most of their careers in the east, they usually spent at least a part of their lives in the service of the Fatimid caliphs in Cairo, the religious and intellectual epicenter of the Ismaili world.

Since all the Ismaili philosophers were major dā’īs of their time, whether Qarmatian or Fatimid, they played their part in the formulation and revision of the Ismaili doctrine. Therefore, they all confessed to the main dogmas of Ismailism described above, even if they might have disagreements on the specific questions involved. The major doctrinal revision brought about by the philosophers was the portrayal of this doctrine in the terms of Greek philosophy, where Ismaili cosmology especially was transformed into Neoplatonic form, drawing from the Arabic treatises paraphrasing Greek Neoplatonism. At this the Ismailis were not alone, since Neoplatonism was clearly the common language of the intellectual circles of the early 10th century. Still their cosmology was by no means identical with the Peripatetic philosophers, but represented a distinct trend of Neoplatonism, which in some respects followed more closely the Greek precedents.

Neoplatonism was probably first introduced into Ismaili thought by al-Nasafī, of whose major philosophical work, Book of the Yield (Kitāb al-maḥṣūl), only fragments survive in the mainly critical responses of his followers. The work dealt with both cosmology and the cyclical history of the seven prophetic eras, and included the rather heterodox idea that the Islamic era had already ended with the appearance of qāʾīm Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl, and therefore the final seventh era had begun and the exoteric law had been abolished. Al-Nasafī’s antinomianism was vehemently criticized by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī’s Book of Correction (Kitāb al-īslāḥ), where the author defines the era following Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl’s first appearance as an “interim” period (fatra) terminating the era of Islam, in which the world is governed by the deputies of imam. Al-Sijistānī, on the contrary, devoted a now lost work, Book of Support (Kitāb al-nuṣra), to the defense of al-Nasafī’s views, but seems to have later changed his mind, as his surviving works do not contain the more radical ideas attributed to him, and suggest that he recognized the validity of the Fatimid caliphs.

131 The Qarmatian communities of Iraq and Iran in general were either absorbed by the Fatimids or otherwise vanished altogether towards the end of the 10th century, surviving only in the Isma’ili state in Bahrain for one more century. Madelung 1988, p. 101.
132 Other examples of early 10th century Neoplatonists, besides the actual faḥṣīfa, include the Jewish philosopher Isaac Israeli (d. 955) and the “Nabatean” popular philosophy of the Iraqi Ibn Washshiyya embedded within his agronomical treatise. See, Altmann and Stern 1958 and Mattila 2007.
133 According to Daftary (2004, p. 29), the book was written around 912.
135 Madelung 1961, pp. 102-6; Daftary 1990, p. 238. Kitāb al-nuṣra survives, in addition to al-Rāzī’s refutation, in the quotations of Al-Kirmānī’s Kitāb al-riyāḍ (Book of the Meadows), which contains the latter’s assessment of the theological discussions of the previous generations of dā’īs. In the work al-Kirmānī criticizes both al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī, siding with al-Rāzī against the antinomian tendencies of his predecessors. Still, he recommends all three of them as introductory reading for his Rest of the Intellect. Al-Sijistānī’s writings present the same problem for research as most Isma’ili authors in that they have survived through the continuous transmission of the modern-day Isma’ili communities.
Al-Nasafi was clearly an influential figure in his time, and possibly represented an early Khurāsānī school of Ismaili thought, whose influence survived for some time as a current of its own, but then waned. Hence, his works were no longer copied, and have not survived.  

Whatever doctrinal differences al-Rāzī and al-Sijistānī might have had with al-Nasafi, they both adopted his Neoplatonic cosmology. Since al-Rāzī was much less a systematic philosopher than he was a theologian, it was al-Sijistānī who made the most lasting contribution to the development of Ismaili Neoplatonism, being also by far the most important philosophical precursor for al-Kirmānī.

While al-Sijistānī’s philosophical system is an innovation in its Neoplatonism with respect to the Gnostic-type cosmology of early Ismailism, it also carries it on. Al-Sijistānī preserves the most essential features of Ismaili theology, the absolute distance between the ineffable God and the creation, and the hierarchy of spiritual entities mediating between the terrestrial and spiritual worlds. His cosmological system also serves the same function of explaining the place of man within the order of creation, and the final destiny of his return to his spiritual home. Moreover, al-Sijistānī himself identifies the two cosmological systems, preserving many of the older layers of Ismaili cosmological language alongside the novel Neoplatonic terminology.

At the top of al-Sijistānī’s cosmological hierarchy is the absolute oneness of God, which completely transcends both being and non-being. Hence, God is beyond attribution through human concepts pertaining to the created world, and is neither a substance nor an Intellect, in contrast to the hybrid Aristotelian-Plotinian God of the Peripatetic philosophers. In its complete transcendence and ineffability God then rather approximates the One of Plotinus. In fact al-Sijistānī goes beyond Plotinus in God’s transcendence, since while for Plotinus the One may be approached at the end of a spiritual path through a supra-rational experience, for al-Sijistānī there is no mystical state by which man could rise beyond the level of the Intellect. In distinction of both Plotinus and Arabic Peripatetic philosophy, however, the world is not produced from the One through timeless and involuntary emanation, but God creates (abda’a) the Intellect (’aql) ex nihilo by his timeless divine Commandment (amr) or Word (kalima), that in itself acts as a complex intermediary entity between being and non-being, and that corresponds to the pre-Neoplatonic kun.

especially the Bohras of India in the case of al-Sijistānī, and all the surviving manuscripts are recent. Especially in the case of al-Sijistānī, who was not a major authority for later Ismailis, it is quite possible that they have undergone revision to conform to later changes in doctrine. Possibly these revisions were in part made by himself, since both al-Kirmānī and Khosrow claim that he modified his views between earlier and later works. See, Walker 1993, pp. 19-20. Al-Bustī speaks of such a school in his Kashf al-asrār al-bāṭiniyya (Disclosure of the Secrets of the Ismailis), citing its differences with other schools, and mentions the followers of al-Nasafi as continuing its tradition. According to Walker (1994, pp. 351-2), this early school would have been distinguished precisely by its adherence to the doctrines of al-Maḥṣūl, drawing heavily from cosmology, physical sciences, astrology, and alchemy to describe the relationship between the human soul and the physical world. There is also a distinction of both Plotinus and Arabic Peripatetic philosophy, however, the world is not produced from the One through timeless and involuntary emanation, but God creates (abda’a) the Intellect (’aql) ex nihilo by his timeless divine Commandment (amr) or Word (kalima), that in itself acts as a complex intermediary entity between being and non-being, and that corresponds to the pre-Neoplatonic kun.

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137 See, Daftary 1990, p. 241; Walker 1993, p. 86. While the falāsīfa rejected creation ex-nihilo, and perceived the universe as eternal, al-Sijistānī’s solution seems a compromise that only produces a paradox.

138 Daftary 1990, p. 241; Walker 1993, p. 86. While the falāsīfa rejected creation ex-nihilo, and perceived the universe as eternal, al-Sijistānī’s solution seems a compromise that only produces a paradox.
The Intellect (‘aql) is in a way the real creator-God of the Ismailis, since as the archetype and source of all existing things it is the real creator of the visible world. It is also the highest spiritual entity of which something may be known, or which man may pursue to know. In al-Sijistānī’s cosmology, as in that of Plotinus, Intellect is the first created being (al-mubda’ al-awwal/al-awwal), that encompasses in itself the whole of creation in the sense of the Platonic world of ideas. It is perfect in its essence and activity, and completely motionless and tranquil in its timeless eternity. It is furthermore the source of all being below it, like the Sun at the top of the Neoplatonic hierarchy from which being flows downwards in a timeless procession. As such Intellect corresponds to the kānī of the early Ismaili cosmology, and al-Sijistānī also refers to it with the characteristically Ismaili term Precedent (al-sābiq), as well as with terms of Quranic origin, such as Throne (‘arsh) or Pen (qalam).139

To complete the Plotinian trinity of hypostases, from the Intellect emanates the Soul (al-nafs), or the Universal Soul (al-nafs al-kullīya), which is the principle of motion in the universe, making it inherently deficient in contrast to the perfect tranquility of its source. Despite its movement, it also is eternal, and eternally desires to return to the tranquility of its creator. Intellect and Soul together constitute the two spiritual roots (ālān) of the universe, from which everything else is derived. Soul is the spiritual counterpart of Intellect, the qadar of the older cosmology, and for each designation employed by al-Sijistānī as a synonym of the Intellect, there is a corresponding term for the Soul: the Second (al-thānī), the Follower (al-tālī), the Moon, the Footstool (kursī), and the Tablet (lawḥ).

Still, breaching somewhat the near-complete correspondence of the cosmological system with Plotinus, al-Sijistānī preserves the three angelic spiritual entities of old Ismaili cosmology, jadd, fatḥ, and khayāl, which emanate from the two higher principles completing the spiritual pentad. As for Plotinus, it is from the Soul that celestial spheres, nature, and the sublunar world, emanate. And as for Plotinus, for al-Sijistānī the workings of the sublunar world of generation and corruption are also best left to Aristotelian physics.140

While the lower world, in contrast to the unchanging simplicity of the Intellect, is a realm of the ever-changing compounds of the four elements, both spiritual hypostases are present there as well. Intellect engenders the Soul, and through the Soul it participates in nature and the physical world created by the latter. As the Intellect contains the archetypes of all existing things, nature in fact is an embodied intellect (‘aql mujassam). Consequently, the material world is not evil in itself in a Gnostic sense, even if it is deficient in comparison to its divine archetype. Moreover, all entities existing in the sublunar world are hylomorphic compounds of matter and form, both of which have their ultimate origin in the Soul. At the top of the terrestrial hierarchy is man, whose composition of a spiritual soul and material body makes him

139 Walker 1993, pp. 87-91; Daftary 1990, pp. 242-3.
140 Daftary 1990, pp. 241-3; Walker 1993, pp. 95-106. Al-Sijistānī has no problem with the scientific world-view of the philosophers in the realm of the natural world, since Aristotelian physics is for the most part neutral in regard to the truths of revelation. An exception is the claim for the eternity of the material world, which al-Sijistānī rejects as contradictory with divine revelation.
an intermediary between the spiritual and material worlds, and in whom all of creation is contained in a microcosmic form.141

In the Neoplatonic creation story, creation of the visible world, manifested in the Soul’s descent to matter, has its counterpart in the soul’s re-ascent, which completes the cycle of creation. In this process man is the means through which the Soul can realize this ascent, and therefore becomes the centerpiece of the wider cosmological drama.142 The partial souls of men are part of the Universal Soul, and the Soul desires to return to the tranquility and perfection of its creator, the Intellect. Therefore the ultimate quest of the partial souls in the material world is to attain their intellectual perfection by ascending from the level of material and sensible existence and, in the end, rejoining the Intellect. All this manifests itself in the ideal of a gradual ascent along the ladders of knowledge towards its most profound esoteric forms, so that man may ultimately grasp the real intelligible nature of the cosmos behind the veil of its material and sensible exterior.143

Up to this point al-Sijistānī’s thought appears to be in agreement with the Peripatetic philosophers. The world is intelligible in its essence, man’s ultimate goal is to perfect his intellect through grasping the intelligible nature of the world, and even man’s ultimate end in the after-life consists of an intellectual bliss akin to that of the philosophers, as al-Sijistānī also refutes resurrection of the body. Since nature is an embodied intellect, al-Sijistānī’s cosmology also encourages man to the study of nature as the starting point of his intellectual journey.

Al-Sijistānī’s major divergence with respect to the philosophers, as of Ismailis in general, is that he denies the possibility of the human intellect to reach the ultimate intelligible knowledge without divine aid. Due to its entanglements in the physical world, even the most perfect of human intellects reflects the pure Intellect only in part. Hence, the benefits (fawā’id) of the Intellect are transmitted to the human souls by means of the divinely supported speaker-prophets, who for al-Sijistānī are embodiments of the divine Intellect even more so than nature, and thus convey the ultimate esoteric truth to the core of believers through the da’wa hierarchy.144

Another major difference between Ismaili Neoplatonism and the Neoplatonism of the Greeks and the falāsifa is that in Ismaili Neoplatonism the normally ahistorical

141 Walker 1993, pp. 92, 97, 102-107. While the idea of man as a microcosm is of ancient origin in philosophical thought, in the Islamic world it is especially common in Ismaili thought, which in general perceives an ontological analogy between different levels of existence.

142 The question why the Soul would have to descend to the inherently deficient material world in the first place concerns all Neoplatonic thought. The standard answer requires the perfectness of being to be actualized in full, bringing about its complete hierarchy down to the lowest levels of being, however deficient.

143 Daftary 1990, pp. 244-5; Walker 1993, pp. 107-9.

144 Walker 1997, pp. 92-3, 107-42. Neoplatonic and Gnostic thought share much with each other, such as the idea of generation of the spiritual and material worlds through a hierarchical progression of spiritual and material entities, and a strong dualism of material and spiritual spheres. Even the Gnostic idea of the generation of the material world due to the “fall” into hubris of a lower divinity is also present in Plotinus, where the Soul’s audacity (tolma) to believe itself self-sufficient leads to its descent into the material realm. Even after adopting Neoplatonism, Ismailism still retains its character as a Gnostic sect in the sense that it is characterized by the idea of saving knowledge (gnōsis), which is essential for salvation, and is transmitted to the initiated through the religious hierarchy. Even this idea is, to a lesser extent, present in the falsafa as well, as we will see during this study. See, Armstrong 1992 for a comparison of Gnostic and Neoplatonic dualism.
procession of descent and re-ascent of the soul becomes unfolded in cyclical history. The Intellect is manifested at each historical moment through the prophets, and translated into a law and religion corresponding to the needs of that specific moment. The occurrence of historical events in the terrestrial world is further connected to the world of the spheres, since the celestial forces play a major role in influencing the unfolding of cyclical history.

This history is divided into the seven eras, five of which are initiated by a messenger bringing a new religion, while the qā’im as the last one of them will restore the initial antinomian state of the first era of Adam. At this eschatological end point of history all veils will finally be removed from the full truth, eliminating also the need for exoteric religion or law, and the Soul will reunite with the Intellect. Hence, for Ismaili Neoplatonism the Neoplatonic reascent of the soul is realized through a process of 7000 years of history, where man is at the center of the cosmological drama.

3.3 Al-Kirmānī

Many believe al-Kirmānī to be the most important Ismaili philosopher of all times. Like most Ismaili philosophers, he continues to enjoy much more than an academic or antiquarian interest, as his works are still read as spiritual guides by members of modern day Ismaili communities. With respect to the tradition of Ismaili Neoplatonism preceding him, especially that of al-Sijistānī, on one level al-Kirmānī fully continues it, blending Ismaili doctrine with the philosophical influences. But on another level, al-Kirmānī also represents a major doctrinal innovation with respect to the preceding tradition, as Ismaili cosmology in particular once again undergoes major changes.

If al-Sijistānī’s Ismaili cosmology with its Plotinian triad of God, Intellect, and Soul was rather consonant with Greek Neoplatonism, al-Kirmānī now transforms it to conform to the prevailing Arabic Peripateticism of al-Fārābī and his followers, thereby showing the clear lines of influence existing between falsafa and Ismaili thought. In al-Kirmānī the evolution towards a purely philosophical cosmology also becomes completed, since the elements of Ismaili mythical cosmology, still present in al-Sijistānī, are much less prevalent in his thought.

Due to the partly Fārābian cosmology adopted by al-Kirmānī, Walker considers his philosophy to be an Aristotelian version of Ismailism, in contrast to the Neoplatonism of al-Sijistānī, and concludes that the term Neoplatonism should not be employed in relation to al-Kirmānī at all. Still in al-Kirmānī’s system also the world is created through a hierarchical procession of timeless emanation, where each

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145 The question of whether or not Adam as the first prophet brought a law was a controversial one among the Ismaili authors, related to the accusations of antinomianism. Al-Nasafi held that Adam did not bring an exoteric religion, an idea which was refuted by al-Rāzī and again held by al-Sijistānī. See, Dāftary 1990, pp. 236-9.
147 It is, however, significant to note that al-Kirmānī’s adoption of Peripatetic cosmology did not become universally prevalent among Ismaili thought for a long while. His most important followers during the next century, al-Mu‘ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shirāzī and Nāṣir-i Khosrow, still profess to the traditional Neoplatonic triad of God, Intellect, and Soul.
148 Walker 1993, pp. 35-6 and 168, note 47; Walker 1997, pp. 90-2, 98. In contrast, De Smet has assigned the word Neoplatonism to the title of his study on al-Kirmānī.
emanated being is inferior to the former in light and perfection. Even more relevant for this study, it contains the characteristically Neoplatonic relation between cosmology and eschatology, where the creation myth comprises the descent of the spiritual entity down to the material existence, and the reascent is bound to man and his salvation. As in Ismaili thought in general, in al-Kirmānī also the frustratingly complex cosmology serves an ultimately practical purpose, as he is not interested in philosophical speculation for its own sake.

There is almost no knowledge about the life of al-Kirmānī in the contemporary sources, and practically everything known about him is therefore derived from the few references he makes to his personal life in his own writings. Hence, even his origin cannot be known for certain, as his nisba could either mean that he came from the Persian province of Kirmān, or that he was active there during his later life. The main lines most relevant for contextualizing his thought within the Ismaili tradition are known, however.

Firstly, al-Kirmānī occupied a very high position within the Fatimid da’wa during the rule of the famously unpredictable caliph al-Ḥākim (d. 1021). The Ṭayyibī Ismailis of Yemen and India later attributed to him the title ḥujja of the two Iraqs (Hujiyat al-‘Irāqayn), or of Iraq and the western Persian lands, which would make him the head of Ismaili da’wa in this area.149 As can be deduced from the titles of his works and some passing references, his main area of operation seems to have been Iraq, and Baghdad in particular.150 At the end of his life, around year 1015, he was summoned to the Fatimid capital of Cairo to act at the direct service of the caliph, possibly for the purpose of fighting against the heretical currents of thought within Fatimid Ismailis, such as the movement declaring al-Ḥākim’s divinity, which would later lead to the genesis of the Druze religion.151

As for his writings, a considerable number survive and have been edited in recent years, but their critical assessment presents numerous problems peculiar to early Ismaili literature. Al-Kirmānī’s writings seem to have had almost no influence outside the Ismaili community, and it takes almost a century and a half after his death before he is mentioned by any non-Ismaili author.152 Al-Kirmānī’s works rather survived within the living Ismaili religious tradition, particularly amongst the Ṭayyibīs of Yemen and India, who adopted him from the beginning of the 12th century as their most important intellectual authority.153 The purpose of these works was to serve the da’wa in the instruction of the Ismaili community, not philosophical speculation or dialogue, and it was in this context that al-Kirmānī’s works were transmitted from one generation to the next. Due to the peculiar nature of their transmission, and the fact that all the surviving manuscripts are relatively recent, there is no way in which to

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149 This title is given to al-Kirmānī, for example, in 1682 by the copyist of Rest of the Intellect. See, al-Kirmānī, Rūḥat al-‘aql, p. 591 and Walker 1999, pp. 10-1.

150 Walker 1999, pp. 10-1.

151 De Smet 1995, p. 7; Walker 1999, pp. 9-11, 16-24. Even the date of his death is unknown, but must be after 1020. Al-Kirmānī dedicated at least one treatise specifically to refute the doctrine of the “proto-Druze.”


153 For example, around the end of the 18th century, al-Kirmānī’s Rest of the Intellect is mentioned as one of the four major spiritual works for the Indian Dā‘ūdis (Ṭayyibīs), together with the Brethren of Purity, al-Qāḍī al-Nu’mān, and al-Shīrāzī. Fyzee 1965, pp. 245-6.
reconstruct critical editions of them. It is also difficult to determine a precise relative chronology for his works, since many of them contain mutual cross-references, implying that they were re-edited at various times.154

For the purposes of this study the work used to represent his philosophy is his major systematic philosophical treatise, the Rest of the Intellect (Rāḥat al-ʿaql). The rest of his works may be divided, following De Smet, into three categories: philosophical, dogmatic, and polemical.155 Of the other philosophical works, Book of the Meadows (Kitāb al-riyāḍ) is devoted to philosophical discussions of the previous generations of Ismaili philosophy, while the remaining minor treatises are devoted to single, mainly metaphysical, problems also discussed in Rest of the Intellect. The so-called dogmatic works are relevant especially for al-Kirmānī’s political thought, as they treat in more detail the questions of prophecy and the imamate.156

The remaining works are polemics against various currents of thought or single authors, such as the philosophers or Muʿtazili theologians. While they are helpful for contextualizing his thought within the wider intellectual history of the period, they are not especially relevant for this particular study. In any case the scholarship concerning al-Kirmānī is still in its early stages, and there still has been no attempt at a holistic interpretation of his thought based on all his surviving works.

Of all his works, Rest of the Intellect is the most philosophical in style, methodology and content. It is the only work that discusses systematically the whole of his philosophical system, starting out from metaphysics, and proceeding through physical world to human soul and political philosophy, resembling quite closely in arrangement al-Fārābī’s political treatises. Al-Kirmānī’s complex cosmology is a combination of Ismaili tradition and Fārābian cosmology. As such it represents the other major cosmological variant in Ismaili philosophy, besides the Plotinian, which was prevalent among Ismaili philosophers both immediately before and after al-Kirmānī.

In contrast to the Peripatetics, and following his Ismaili predecessors, God is not an intellect, substance, or a necessary being, but completely transcends both existence and non-existence, and consequently all categories of human thought. Intellect as the first perfect being does not emanate from God in involuntary emanation of His being (fāyaḍ), but is created by God through eternal, active origination (ibdā’) out of nothing.157 However, al-Kirmānī departs from his predecessors in denying any separate existence as an intermediate entity to the divine commandment, for he conceives it as a violation against the ultimate goal of preserving the absolute unity of God (tawḥīd).158 For al-Kirmānī also, it is the Intellect that is properly speaking the

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156 Among these noteworthy is particularly al-Maṣḥābīh fi istiḥbāt al-imāma (Lights on the Establishment of the Imamate).
157 Ibdā’ does not mean creation in time in Ismaili philosophy, but “eternal Existentiation,” in Corbin’s (1957, p. 35) terminology. Ibn Sinā (Fī al-ḥudūd, p. 101) defines it as “origination of a thing from nothing without an intermediary” (aʾšīʿ al-shay’ ʿalā ʿan shay’ wa-lā bi-wāṣiṭa taʿal-shay’). Al-Kirmānī contrasts it explicitly with the emanation of philosophers, apparently emphasizing its ex nihilo nature versus the flowing of God’s being through emanation. Still the term abda’a is also used by Peripatetics like Ibn Sinā to describe God’s creation. According to al-Kirmānī the exact nature of ibdā’ cannot be known by man.
God of the revelation, the God of which something may be said or known, the Gnostic "demiurge," or creator of all existent beings in the sense of the Aristotelian First Mover. It is from the Intellect that the emanative process of timeless creation (inbiʾāth) of the universe starts, producing in descending steps of perfection the pleroma of nine lower Intellects adopted from al-Fārābī, as well as the corresponding planetary spheres: the outermost sphere of spheres (falak al-aflāk), the sphere of the fixed stars, and those of the seven planets.159

Al-Kirmānī also binds his essentially Peripatetic cosmology to the Ismaili tradition, for he employs alongside Peripatetic cosmological terminology traditional Ismaili cosmological terms, such as the pairs of Pen (qalam) and Tablet (lawḥ), Throne (ʿarsh) and Footstool (kursī), Precedent (al-sābiq) and Follower (al-tālī), and First and Second, as well as the seven heavenly letters (al-ḥurūf al-ʿulwiyya), even if they now refer to different cosmological entities than they did for al-Sijistānī. In al-Kirmānī’s novel Peripatetic cosmology the first part of the couple still refers to the Intellect as the active and perfect first principle, while the place of the Soul seems to be taken by the Second Intellect, which resembles the Universal Soul in its lower emanative aspect.

It seems to be only the Third Intellect that truly introduces the element of imperfection, and consequent descent to nature and matter, to the perfection of the first two Intellects, and therefore more properly occupies the position of the latter part of the couple.160 The seven heavenly letters in turn refer to the seven lower Intellects and planetary spheres, which retain their original function as mediators between man and the spiritual world.

All of the intellects and spheres play their part in the demiurgy of the sublunar material world. The Third Intellect is also called Prime Matter (al-hayālā al-ūlā), and is the principle for the existence of the corporeal world, although the Platonic forms as paradigms of corporeal existents are first formed in the First, and distributed through the Second until the Tenth Intellect, from which the material world is actually emanated. While it is the Tenth Intellect that directly governs the material world, the planetary spheres act as its intermediaries in both its creation and governance.161 By their aid the ascending complexity of the material world is created from the four elements upwards, and is arranged into the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, with man as their culmination. As for al-Sijistānī, the material world in itself operates in an essentially Aristotelian fashion.162

160 Ibid. There is an apparent confusion here in al-Kirmānī. In Rest of the Intellect he claims both the First and Second Intellect to be Pen, while the Second is also called Tablet at another point, as is the Third. In al-Risāla al-Waḍī’a, the First is the Pen and the Second is the Tablet. Since the Second Intellect is said to be like the First in its perfection, and it is the Third that it is the principle of the bodily sphere and prime matter, it would appear to be the most logical candidate to occupy the position of passivity related to the second part of the couplet. In later variations of Ismaili philosophy, Third is also referred to as the Spiritual Adam (al-Ādam al-rūḥānī), the Gnostic demiurge, which introduces the hubris that conduces to its fall to the material realm. Interestingly this Spiritual Adam also appears in the Brethren of Purity. See Walker 1997, pp. 97-8 for a discussion of the contradiction and Corbin 1957, pp. 37-41.
161 Sun and Moon, and the corresponding Seventh and Tenth Intellects, especially play a major part in governance of the material world and its generation.
162 De Smet 1995, pp. 311-27.
The influence of the higher world on the terrestrial world is not limited to its creation. On the contrary, the totality of the Intellects, mediated by the related astral bodies, continuously play such a major role on the events of the material world, that it becomes almost completely determined by them. This is partly in agreement with Peripatetic philosophy, where the providence of the Intellect guides the existents of the lower world. Hence, it helps them to develop towards their respective perfections and arranges them in a harmonious and rational manner as a reflection of the wisdom of the Intellect. What is more typical to Ismaili philosophy specifically, is the importance of the influences (āthār) of astral bodies in determining events of the terrestrial world, and the consequent importance given to astrology, which was regarded rather lightly by many Peripatetic philosophers.163

It is also from the Intellect, mediated by the Sun as the central astral body, that the souls come to the lower world.164 Unlike in al-Sijistānī or Plotinus, for al-Kirmānī, the souls in the lower world no longer form part of a larger spiritual entity called Universal Soul, but are an effect of the Intellect, that represents the luminous presence of the spiritual world in the corporeal world and give life and form to its beings. All beings of the material world are ensouled to some extent, and share the desire to return to their spiritual origin. This is the ultimate goal of all existents, or their second perfection (al-kamāl al-thānī) in Aristotelian terminology, and all beings in the terrestrial hierarchy strive towards it in their own way through approaching the Intellect to the greatest extent possible, and professing the Oneness of God (tawḥīd).

But only man as a microcosm and the culmination of terrestrial hierarchy has the potential to be completely reunited with the Intellect, through leading the highest, rational part of his soul from passivity to actuality. It is this that is the final goal of human existence, or his ultimate happiness, to become a completely actualized intellect, forming part of the world of the Intellects, and becoming a microcosm (‘ālam ṣaghīr) fully reflecting the perfection of the macrocosm.165

As in all Neoplatonism, the attainment of human perfection is intimately bound to the wider cosmological drama. It is through the actualization of human intellect and its reunion with the spiritual realm that creation is brought to its completion. As in previous Ismaili Neoplatonism, in al-Kirmānī also this process is bound to a historical process of seven consecutive cycles. In order for man to become fully actualized, he needs to actualize both the theoretical part of his intellect through knowledge and the practical part through moral purification.

However, unlike for the Peripatetics, even the most perfect of men is not capable of achieving this alone. The terrestrial presence of the fully actualized Intellect, incarnated in the divinely supported prophets and imams, is required for the actualization of human intellect. It is then the instruction (ta’līm) provided by these incarnations of the Intellect, through the intermediary of the ladders of da’wa

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163 De Smet 1995, pp. 335-50. As De Smet notes, even the Peripatetics do not deny the influence of the astral bodies as such, but only their arbitrary effects. Al-Fārābī in particular criticized the use of astrological calculations of, for example, certain planetary conjunctions to explain contingent events of the terrestrial world. See, Fakhry 2002, pp. 42-4.

164 In both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity, the Sun plays a role in governing the psychic and the Moon the corporeal sphere. Such “solar theology” has a long history, and appears in Greek Neoplatonism, as well as the Arabic Hermetic corpus. See, De Smet 1995, pp. 335-42.

165 De Smet 1995, pp. 312, 327-55.
hierarchy, that adopts the position of direct emanation of Active Intellect in Peripatetic thought. In practice for an Ismaili initiate the way towards perfection forms a spiritual road, which consists of ascending grades of theoretical (al-‘ibāda al-‘ilmiyya) and practical (al-‘ibāda al-‘amaliyya) worship, as they are called in Ismaili terminology.

3.4 Brethren of Purity

The Epistles (Rasā’il) of the anonymous group of authors known as the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’) form the other major source used in this study to represent Ismaili philosophy. While the exact nature of the relationship of the Brethren of Purity to the Ismaili movement is problematic, at the very least they are influenced by Ismaili thought. But, in contrast to al-Kirmānī and the other philosopher-dā’īs, it is highly unlikely that they would represent the official doctrine of Ismailism. The nature of the Epistles is extremely secretive and enigmatic, and hence there remains a multitude of unresolved questions regarding it. In fact these questions have aroused such curiosity among scholars during the last two centuries that the majority of research has concentrated on answering them, rather than on the actual substance of their philosophy.

The two major enigmas concerning the Brethren are the interrelated issues of the dating of the epistles and the identity of their authors. In addition there are several minor problems, such as the exact number of the epistles, the manner of their arrangement and possible later editing, or the relative chronology of the epistles. There will be no attempt to resolve these questions here, although they will be discussed to the extent that they are relevant for this study. However, since the question of the Ismaili nature of the epistles is of obvious importance given the starting point of this study, it will be treated in more detail, and an effort will be made to support the view shared by the majority of scholars, that the authors of the Epistles were affiliated to Ismailism in one way or another.

Due to the ambiguous nature of the Brethren of Purity I have chosen to discuss them only after al-Kirmānī, despite the fact that in all probability the Epistles are chronologically prior to him, and would hence represent an earlier stage of development within Ismaili thought. It is much easier to assess the degree of their Ismaili affiliations against the background of al-Kirmānī’s undisputedly orthodox Fatimid Ismailism.

166 De Smet 1995, pp. 352-68. At least in some later Ismaili forms of the cosmology of ten Intellects, the seven lower Intellects and seven cycles are bound together. The realm of the Intellects represents eternal time. The whole cosmological drama consists of the “fall” and “redemption” of the Third Intellect, and it takes the “time” of the emanation of the seven lower Intellects for it to redeem itself. This is the spiritual archetype of the seven historical cycles of terrestrial time, consumed by the historical process of redemption. Corbin 1957, pp. 39-41.

167 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ wa-Khillān al-Wafā’. There is as yet no critical edition of the entire Epistles, although there is one in preparation in the series recently initiated by the Institute of Ismaili Studies. A critical edition will hopefully alleviate especially the problem of possible later interpolations within the Epistles, as the existing printed editions are based on rather late manuscripts. See, Poonawala 2008 and Hamdani 2008, pp. 92ff.
The Epistles of the Brethren of Purity consist of 52 treatises, which are divided into four sections. These are the 14 mathematical (riyādiyya taʿlimiyya), 17 physical (jismāniyya ṣabīʿiya), 10 psychical-intelligible (nafsāniyya ʿaqliyya), and 11 political-religious (nāmūsiyya ilāhiyya/sharʿiyya dīniyya) epistles. The actual reality of their arrangement and content does not always conform to this neat division, probably because they were re-edited, arranged, and moved during a period of time, and the end result did not completely conform to the original plan. Still, the epistles form a rather coherent philosophical compendium that goes through all the branches of philosophical knowledge in a carefully arranged manner. The precise nature of this arrangement, and the pedagogical ideas and conception of knowledge underlying it, is of central importance for this study, and will be treated in more detail in the later chapters.

The actual contents of the epistles are an interesting variety of philosophy and philosophical argumentation, mixed with a great number of edifying stories, as well as prophetic citations used to support their views. The term that has been most widely used to describe the epistles is eclectic, as the philosophical, religious, and other sources used by them pertain to a very wide spectrum of thought. First of all, there is the Greek philosophical and scientific material, and, unlike most Ismaili philosophers, the Brethren acknowledge their Greek influences by name. Of these the standard sources of Arabic philosophy, Aristotle and Neoplatonism, play a major part, as do Plato and Socrates, the latter mostly as an exemplary figure represented in the often repeated story of his death.

In addition, however, they portray a much greater influence than usual of Pythagoreanism, visible especially in the importance given to numbers and numerical relations as underlying all existence, and of the so-called Hermetic corpus, which is, however, not always easily distinguishable from Neoplatonism. They also employ various Greek scientific authorities, such as Ptolemy or Euclid. Marquet believes the Greek influence to be mediated by the Sabians of Harrān, who would essentially determine their understanding of Greek philosophy and the prominence of Pythagorean and Hermetic ideas in their doctrine. While the Brethren do not refer to Arabic philosophers by name, al-Fārābī at least seems to be an influence.

Besides the philosophical-scientific stratum, there are also the religious Islamic, Christian and Judaic, and popular Persian and Indian influences, visible especially in the stories. Of all these the Brethren clearly aspire to form a synthesis, in which the

\[168\] While this is the actual number of epistles in the manuscripts and printed editions, in fact there probably should be only 51, which is what the Epistles themselves and many contemporary authors mostly state their number to be. Marquet believes the excess and out of place epistle to be the penultimate, 51st. epistle, while Abouzeid, for example, argues that all of them are original, even if the initial plan was to write only 51 epistles. The Comprehensive Epistle (al-Risāla al-fāmīʿa, p. 537) states the number as 52 and proceeds to summarize all of them, although it postpones the 45th. epistle until the very end, and hence confuses the numbering. Marquet 1973, pp. 10-11; Abouzeid 1987, pp. 172-84.

\[169\] Both Marquet (1973, pp. 10-14) and Abouzeid (1987, pp. 184-202) are convinced that the epistles were not written in their present order, and attempt to reconstruct a relative chronology with largely similar results.

\[170\] See, Marquet 1973, pp. 21-31 for his view of the sources used by the Brethren.

\[171\] This is the conclusion of Abouzeid’s (1987) dissertation comparing the political philosophies of al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity. Taking into account the possibility of a lengthy period of composition of the Epistles, it could of course also be the case that it was the Brethren who influenced al-Fārābī.
ultimate truth behind all the philosophical and prophetic wisdom of the previous centuries is revealed.

Besides the actual 52 epistles there is yet another epistle, called the Comprehensive Epistle (al-Risāla al-Jāmi‘a), that in its two extensive volumes summarizes one by one all of the preceding epistles.172 While there has been some doubt as to its authorship, it is now rather generally acknowledged as having been written by the same authors as the original epistles, as it is quite uniform with them both in content and style, and the original epistles anticipate it repeatedly.173 The Comprehensive Epistle is more than just a summary of the previous epistles, however, and it is clearly more esoteric in nature than the original ones, and more oriented towards the afterlife as the goal of human existence. Its self-declared purpose is to reveal the ultimate truth and furthest mysteries behind each of the treatises that were only alluded to in the original epistles, rather than summarize precisely their doctrinal content. In a way the 52 epistles act as an introduction to it, and the Comprehensive Epistle repeatedly emphasizes that it should not be read before one has mastered the original treatises. All in all it is very important for understanding the nature of the epistles in general, and for this study in particular.174

The main lines of the philosophical system presented in the epistles conform to Plotinian Neoplatonism. Hence, among the two main cosmological varieties present in early Arabic philosophy, the Brethren go together with al-Sijistānī, rather than the Peripatetics and al-Kirmānī. At the top of the emanative process of creation is the Plotinian triad of God, (Universal) Intellect and (Universal) Soul, from which emanate the six further levels of existence: Prime Matter (al-hayūlā al-ūlā), Nature (al-ṭabi‘a), Absolute Body (al-jīsm al-mu'laq), Sphere (falak), Four Elements (arkān), and the Generated Beings (muwalladāt). The nine levels of being are equated with the nine numbers, manifesting the Pythagorean notions underlying the Brethren’s thought throughout, and the related need to find a correspondence between ultimate and mathematical reality.175

In contrast to the general Neoplatonic idea of creation, there is, however, a breach in the process between the spiritual and material realms. After the timeless and pre-eternal emanation of the spiritual world down to Prime Matter, the material world from Nature downwards is created gradually in time, which in itself comes to being only through the movement of the spheres. This is probably because the Brethren vehemently oppose the doctrine of the world’s pre-eternity, professed by most Aristotelian philosophers.176 Cosmologically the universe may be divided into three

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173 See, e.g., Netton 1983, pp. 2-3. In contrast, the so-called Risālat jāmi‘at al-jāmi‘a is not mentioned in the epistles, and seems to be a later summary, since the Comprehensive Epistle with its 542 pages of the printed edition does not accomplish this function in a very convenient way.
174 The scholarship on the Brethren has dealt surprisingly little with the Comprehensive Epistle, often even tending to completely ignore it. Hence, there is no comprehensive study of the relationship between it and the other epistles.
175 See, Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, pp. 341-2. With the exception of Absolute Body, all nine are present in Plotinus. However, the Brethren seem to give them an independent status as hypostases. Still, for the Brethren as for Plotinus Nature, for example, is the lower manifestation or faculty of the Soul, and matter, which is absolute non-being for Plotinus, has similar characteristics in the Brethren.
176 Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, III (32), pp. 196-8; Jāmi‘a, pp. 482-6; Marquet 1973, pp. 41-2. The Brethren distinguish between eternal time (dahr) and physical time (zamān) in their account of creation, the
spheres: at the top is the purely spiritual world, in the middle the partly spiritual and partly material world of spheres (‘ālam al-aflāk), and at the bottom the material world of darkness.\textsuperscript{177}

As in all Neoplatonism, the cosmology is bound to eschatology: the Soul’s desire to reascend to its source in the Intellect reflects the partial souls’ quest to purify their souls. Through moral purification and intellectual perfection, to which the epistles themselves promise to be the ultimate guide, man must free himself of his material chains, accept the emanations of the Intellect and reascend to its level, and thereby return to his original home in the spiritual world. To attain this goal is actually the motive for the writing of the epistles in the first place, something that is emphasized throughout them, and in the \textit{Comprehensive Epistle} in particular. To this end is also bound the name by which the anonymous authors call themselves – and those like them. They are the Brethren of Purity and Friends of Loyalty (\textit{Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ wa-Khillān al-Wafā’}), who have purified their souls and attained true knowledge.

For the Brethren the ascent of the particular souls is gradual. At the end of the descent, all the faculties of the Universal Soul, including embodied particular souls, are gathered at the center of earth, which is the lowest depth of the material world. Due to the “original sin” of Adam the particular souls were banished from paradise, that is, the spiritual world, and descended towards the center of the material world, inhabiting its bodies and immersed in the depths of matter. The actual ascent of the souls is temporal, culminating at the apocalyptic event of greater resurrection and the destruction of the material world, when the faculties of the Universal Soul reunite to re-ascend to the spiritual world. The virtuous human souls hence rise from the material world, through the world of spheres, up to the spiritual world, with Intellect as its upper limit. As in Ismaili philosophy in general, man again appears as the ultimate goal of creation, through which the cosmic cycle of history is completed.\textsuperscript{178}

The two questions concerning the dating of the epistles and the identification of the authors go hand in hand, and both probably can receive only indefinite answers. Various methods have been employed to arrive at a more precise dating, such as the astronomical conjunctions mentioned in the text, quotations of known poets, or presumed references to major historical events. Still, the estimates have varied anywhere between the late 9\textsuperscript{th} and early 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{179}

A very early date, such as that of Hamdani at the decades before the establishment of Fatimid caliphate in 909, is improbable, assuming, for example, al-Fārābī (d. 950) as an influence on the work, as he seems to be, or the quotation of the poem of al-Mutanabbī (d. 965) as authentic. The latest estimates, like those of Casanova at 1021-

former pertaining to the spiritual world. In fact there is slight inconsistency in the Brethren as to the doctrine of emanation already in the first step, since they also want to preserve God’s omnipotence and active will. Hence they also describe the act of creation through God’s commandment (amr) and word Be! (\textit{kun}) as an act of His volition (irāda), rather than something flowing from His essence automatically. Parallels to Ismaili cosmology, such as that of al-Sijistānī or Nāṣir-i Khosrow, are again apparent, where both \textit{amr} and \textit{kun} are also incorporated into Neoplatonic cosmology. See, Marquet 1973, pp. 56-60.

\textsuperscript{177} Marquet 1973, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{178} Marquet 1973, pp. 205-7.
\textsuperscript{179} That is among datings based on “scholarly” argumentation. Some of the attributions to Ismaili imams would locate them even as early as the late 8\textsuperscript{th} century.
37 based on astronomical conjunctions, are equally unlikely, because the work was known at least in some form to Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d. 1001) and his pupil al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023) in the 980s, according to the account of the latter. To complicate the matter even more Marquet also proposes a very long period of editing lasting over most of the 10th century, with various generations of authors and editors.\footnote{Marquet 1973, p. 8. Hamdani 1996 and Abouzeid 1987, pp. 283-309 summarize the views of the dating of the epistles in both medieval Arabic and modern scholarly literature.}

While for the purposes of the present study it is sufficient to date the work to the general philosophical climate of the 10th century, the most probable date for its composition falls between 950s and 980s, or between the active years of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, bearing in mind, however, the possibility of a longer period of editing. This period between the two famous Peripatetic philosophers, vividly portrayed by Kraemer as the intellectual “renaissance” of Buyid Iraq, would provide a suitable context for the philosophical-religious group described in the Epistles. Hence, the circle of the Brethren of Purity in Basra is set by Kraemer alongside other philosophical and theological groupings booming in Baghdad at the time.\footnote{Kraemer 1992, pp. 165-78.}

A question that is more relevant here is that of the identity of the authors and especially their doctrinal affiliation. The first to mention the epistles is the philosopher Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī who attributes them to a single person called Abū Sulaymān al-Maqdišī, whereas his pupil al-Tawḥīdī names a group of people in Basra as authors, mentioning some by name, including al-Maqdišī.\footnote{For the philosophical circle of al-Sijistānī as portrayed by al-Tawḥīdī in general, as well as their relations with and perceptions of the members of the Brethren of Purity in particular, see Kraemer 1992, pp. 139-78 and Kraemer 1986.} Neither relates the Brethren to any particular sect, even if al-Tawḥīdī perceives their doctrine as heretical.\footnote{Al-Sijistānī, Siwān al-ḥikma, p. 361; al-Tawḥīdī, Al-imtā’ wa-ʾl-mu’ānasā, pp. 219-20.} Al-Tawḥīdī’s account was rather widely held in medieval times among non-Ismaili authors, and among modern scholars it has been both accepted and rejected.

As for locating the Brethren to Basra, this receives additional support from the epistles, which contain many references that would make an Iraqi-Persian environment probable, and there is a rather wide scholarly consensus on this issue.\footnote{Daftary 2008, p. xv.} Attempts to attribute the epistles to a single, specific individual have also been rather unsuccessful, and there does not seem to be any reason to reject al-Tawḥīdī’s claim of group authorship.

From the accounts of al-Sijistānī and al-Tawḥīdī, the Brethren of Purity appear as an enigmatic society of individuals in Basra who hold sessions (majālis) discussing mainly philosophical themes, and attempt to divulge their “esoteric” doctrine, related in particular to the salvation of the soul and reconciliation of philosophy with religious law, through their epistles. It further appears that their doctrines were considered as suspect by their contemporaries, even by philosophers, including al-Sijistānī and al-Tawḥīdī themselves. Still, some of the members of the Brethren of Purity did frequent the same intellectual circles as al-Tawḥīdī, and were personally known to him.\footnote{Kraemer 1992, pp. 165-78.} Since the names on al-Tawḥīdī’s list are fairly unknown in external

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sources, even accepting the account still allows various theories for their doctrinal affiliation. While the Brethren have been variously related to Mu'tazilī theologians, Sufis and twelver Shiis, the Ismaili theory of authorship has received by far the most support among scholars.\(^{186}\)

It was the Ismailis themselves who first claimed the Brethren as their own, although it seems to have taken more than a century for them to fully adopt them, at least according to the surviving sources. The epistles were first mentioned by the Syrian Nizārīs at the end of the 11th century, attributed to various dāʾīs operating under the hidden imam Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl or his son ʿAbd Allāh. A century later they were also incorporated to the Ṭayyibī literature in Yemen, and later India. The Ismaili sources have been very divergent, however, in the more precise identification of the authors, naming various dāʾīs or imams as candidates.\(^{187}\)

The fact that the Ismailis embraced the epistles as their own is in itself an argument for their Ismaili character, since at least it shows that there was sufficient doctrinal familiarity for this to happen. But, on the other hand, Fatimid authors like al-Kirmānī never mention them at the time when they were already fairly well-known among non-Ismaili authors. In fact, until recently it has appeared that the Epistles had no influence whatsoever on Ismailism until much later.\(^{188}\)

According to Baffioni, however, it seems likely that the Brethren did influence Fatimid Ismaili authors despite the fact they do not refer to them explicitly. Even al-Kirmānī appears to have drawn from the Epistles for inspiration, although the parallels between al-Kirmānī and the Brethren remain on a more general level. Nāṣir-i Khosrow, writing about half a century later, however, goes as far as directly translating passages from the Brethren in his Jāmiʿat al-Hikmatayn (The Compendium of Two Wisdoms). Insofar as the Ismailis had a tendency to mainly quote authors of their own persuasion, this would suggest a much more intimate link between the Brethren and the Fatimid Ismailis than what has been previously assumed.\(^{189}\)

The presence of Ismaili ideas in the epistles is sufficiently evident that practically all modern scholars have accepted at least some level of Ismaili influence in them. Still, again at a more precise level of identification there has been a great variety of views. The most cautious, such as Tibawi, Nasr, Lewis, or Netton, while admitting Ismailism as an influence, possibly merely as one among many, do not see there to be enough evidence to label the Brethren definitively as Ismailis.\(^{190}\)

Others have been more confident in positioning them precisely within the context of Ismaili thought. Stern believes that the Brethren, whom he identifies with the list given by al-Tawḥīdī, are affiliated with the Ismailis, but that their doctrine is of their own elaboration, and as such not harmonious with orthodox Ismaili views.\(^{191}\)

\(^{186}\) Tibawi 1976, Abouzeid 1987, pp. 212-82, and Daftary 2008 present summaries for the history of the distinct theories of authorship. Among modern authors Awa (1948, pp. 48-9) identifies them as close to the Mu'tazilites and Nasr (1964, pp. 25-33) as close to Sufis, although recognizing the Ismaili connection.

\(^{187}\) Abouzeid 1987, pp. 254-6; Daftary 1990, p. 248. As an example, the manuscript of the Comprehensive Epistle edited by Muṣṭafā Ghālibī, himself an Ismaili, is attributed to the "concealed" imam ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ismāʿīl.

\(^{188}\) See, e.g., Daftary 1990, p. 248.

\(^{189}\) See, e.g., Baffioni 2008a and 2008b.


\(^{191}\) Stern 1964, pp. 417ff.
claims the epistles to be definitely non-Fatimid, representing rather another non-
Persian current of Ismaili Neoplatonism, and associates them with the Qarmatian
community influential in Baṣra at the time.192 This view is further supported by the
contemporary account of the Muʿtazilite theologian ʿAbd al-Jabbār who relates the
group loosely to the Qarmatians.193 Marquet, on the contrary, believes the epistles to
represent the early orthodox Fatimid doctrine. According to him the authors clearly
pertained to the top of the Ismaili hierarchy, and the work was probably at least
sanctioned by the imams, if not written by them.194 More recently, Baffioni has also
suggested that the Brethren might be dāʿīs propagating the Fatimid cause.195

Marquet is the one who has most vigorously endorsed the Ismailism of the
Brethren of Purity, providing arguments both for their general Ismaili and specifically
Fatimid character. Some of the latter often involve interpreting ambiguous statements
as allegorical references to specific historical events, such as the founding of the
Fatimid caliphate in 909, and are not particularly convincing. As for generic Ismaili
features, according to Marquet all of the doctrines presented in the epistles are also
found in the writings of one Ismaili author or another. Some of the characteristically
Ismaili doctrines apparently missing from the epistles, such as the daʿwa hierarchy,
are explained by him through the general character of the work, which targets an
audience going beyond the Ismailis.

Among the major Ismaili characteristics mentioned is the importance given to
astrology, and historical cycles determined by astronomical conjunctions, an idea that,
according to him, is present only in Ismaili thought. While the Brethren puzzlingly
never mention the Ismailis by name, Marquet interprets one of the doctrinal groups in
the epistle dealing with Islamic sects to refer to them. Furthermore, he also views the
number and letter symbolism prevalent in the epistles as yet another sign of their
Ismaili character.196 Baffioni further supports the Brethren’s Ismaili affiliations by
noting that they clearly perceive questions related to the figure of the Prophet and his
succession from a Shīi perspective, while discarding the idea of the “hidden imam.”197

As for Marquet’s arguments that the epistles represent Fatimid orthodoxy, he also
claims that the fact that such Ismaili contemporaries as al-Sijistānī or al-Qāḍī al-
Nuʿmān never mention the Brethren of Purity, demonstrates that they considered them
as correct, and accordingly saw no need to refute them.198 It seems much more likely
that either the epistles were completely unknown to these authors, or that they
considered them irrelevant. The epistles therefore might represent some divergent
form of Ismaili thought, along the lines of the views of Stern and Daftary, even if they
also appear to have had some impact on later Fatimid authors.

As we have seen, there always was more than one form of Ismaili thought even
within the Fatimid context, and it is mainly the Fatimid sources that have survived

193 Kraemer 1992, pp. 176-7. According to this account, the group would consist of secretaries and
government officials practicing astrology and leaning towards the Qarmatians in their views.
194 Marquet 1973, pp. 8-10. Marquet still believes that the people on al-Tawḥīdī’s list might pertain to
the last generation of authors.
197 Baffioni 2003, pp. 37ff. and 2008c, pp. 60ff.
198 Marquet 1985, p. 76.
from this early period. Clearly, however, the Brethren themselves also play an active part in formulating a synthesis of distinct philosophical and religious elements, rather than merely reproduce a doctrine of a religious sect. But still the Ismaili influences are sufficiently widespread that the epistles may be called Ismaili philosophy in the context of this study, even if their Ismailism is rather unorthodox in comparison with the official Fatimid creed voiced by the likes of al-Kirmānī.

Against this background the philosophical system of the Brethren may be contrasted with the Peripatetic tradition. In fact, while holding ancient philosophy in high esteem, the Brethren are extremely critical towards contemporary philosophers.199 Doctrinally the cosmology presented in the epistles is not that of the Peripatetics, but is relatively close to al-Sijistānī, according a major role to astral bodies in demiurgy of the material world and determination of earthly events, as is common in Ismaili philosophy. Like al-Sijistānī, the Brethren also employ Ismaili terminology at times when speaking of the highest pair of hypostases, Intellect and Soul, referring to them as the two roots (aşlān), the Precedent (al-sābiq) and Follower (al-tālī), Throne (ʿarsh) and Footstool (kursī), or Pen (qalam) and Tablet (lawḥ).

While Netton finds it strange that the doctrine of the imamate does not appear prominent in the epistles, imams are discussed at times, even if the focus is more in the salvation of the individual. In the context of prophethood and the imamate, the Brethren do resort to distinctly Ismaili terms at times, such as the “master of the age” (sāhib al-zamān) or the “speaker-prophet” (al-nātiq).200

The epistles are also throughout more eschatologically oriented than Peripatetic philosophy. The ultimate goal of the epistles is to attain salvation through moral and intellectual purification. In the epistles this is not merely an individual ahistorical quest, but it focuses around messianic anticipation of the day of resurrection (qiyāma), an apocalyptic event that is also called the second creation (al-nashʿa al-ukhrā/al-thāniya), taking place at the appearance of the “pure soul” (al-nafs al-zakiyya), both of which are terms employed by al-Kirmānī.201

The human history culminating in the resurrection is divided into cycles of occultation (dawr al-satr) and manifestation (dawr al-kashf), when the true realities are either hidden or revealed. Furthermore, ultimate knowledge is manifested in seven virtuous men or prophets, who appear at seven points in time, each initiating a new cycle, and bringing a religion (sharīʿa) that abrogates (naskh) that of his predecessor. The seventh of these appears at the end of time combining the knowledge of his six

199 Despite naming a multitude of Greek philosophers and scientists, they never do this for Arabic philosophers. Presumably al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, or the contemporary Peripatetic philosophers of Baghdad might be among their targets.

200 See, Netton 1980. When discussing the Prophet’s succession, the view point of the Brethren is Shii, for example, when emphasizing the need for the successor to possess the esoteric interpretation (taʾwil) of the exoteric revelation. Also, the Brethren mourn the death of the third imam Ḥusayn in the battle of Karbalāʾ, which is of course characteristically Shii. For the Brethren, as for al-Kirmānī, the Intellect is always represented on the earth by a virtuous individual, the “master of the age” (raʾs zamān al-ʿalām/sāhib al-zamān), a term employed by al-Kirmānī for the imam. Interestingly, there is also a parallel among the Ismailis for the Brethren’s relative omission of an explicit discussion of the imamate, since, according to Walker, al-Sijistānī also seems to avoid treating the question of the imamate, concentrating rather on prophecy. See, Walker 1993, pp. 27-8, 114; Ikhwān, Rasāʾil, IV (46), p. 75; IV (47), p. 125; Jāmiʿa, pp. 287-8, 520.

201 See, Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, p. 75 and al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 582-3.
predecessors, and through him the world is brought to its perfection, whereby creation finally returns its full cycle to the beginning. This seventh leader is the master of the pure brethren (sayyid ikhwān al-ṣafā’).  

All this together more than vaguely recalls the Ismaili doctrine, although the Brethren’s refusal to consistently employ explicitly Ismaili terminology is puzzling. The enigmatic nature could be explained by the proselytizing goals of the epistles in a hostile environment. The epistles were devised in Iraq, rather than in the Fatimid lands, where the Ismaili missionary zeal had to be veiled to prevent the hostility of the Sunni populace. An alternative explanation would be that the epistles aspire for an audience transcending the Ismailis, as suggested already by Marquet, thus presenting the Ismaili doctrine in non-Ismaili terms.

However, the precise affiliation of the Brethren of Purity to the Ismaili movement still remains unclear. Their variety of Ismailism must be considered highly peculiar, and their affiliation to the Ismailis should also not be over-emphasized. In the end, they may best be viewed as a group of philosophically-minded individuals promoting their own idea of philosophy, religion, and virtuous brotherhood as a path to salvation, merging the philosophical and Ismaili ideas current at their time into their own peculiar doctrine.

### 3.5 Methodology of Ismaili philosophy

Another level where the thought of the Brethren converges to a large degree with al-Kirmānī is what may be called the methodology of Ismaili philosophy. While demonstrative argumentation as the principle method of philosophy is also used by Ismaili philosophers, there are also other means for acquisition of knowledge characteristic to Ismaili thought. These so-called methods reflect a more profound difference between Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy, especially in regard to what is considered to be the source of philosophical knowledge.

De Smet identifies two such methods in al-Kirmānī, that are closely related to each other and characteristic of Ismaili thought in general. The first is ta’wil, or the principle of allegorical interpretation, by which the ultimate esoteric (bāṭin) truths are supposedly drawn from exoteric (zāhir) knowledge. The second is the so-called balance of religion (mīzān al-diyānā), which is concerned with the analogy presumed to exist between different levels of reality. To these two must be added the principle of taqiyya, or concealment of esoteric truth, which also has repercussions for the presentation of philosophy.

The principle of ta’wil is founded on the essential epistemological and ontological principle beneath Ismaili thought, that behind all apparent realities there are more profound inner realities (haqāʿiq). This applies not only to religious revelation but also to reality itself, where things of the exoteric level immediately grasped by the

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202 Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 285-7, 406-10, 467, 470. Under each of these seven leaders, furthermore, there are 12 men working as the “proofs of God” (taqūm al-ḥujja li-llaḥ), who deliver his mission (daʿwā) and conduct the initiation (baḥāgh) in the 12 areas of the world (jazīra). This would seem to be a clear reference to the 12 ḥujjas leading the daʿwa hierarchy in their geographical areas in Ismaili thought. The sequence of prophets given by the Brethren is: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, while the seventh is not named.

senses are signs of an esoteric level of being initially hidden from man. Both levels are equally existent and true, as Ismaili philosophers like al-Kirmānī are careful to emphasize.

As a specific Ismaili method *ta’wil* is then the device by which the esoteric truths may be extracted from the exoteric ones. In the practical reality of Ismaili doctrine it provides the bridge between religion and philosophy, as the scriptures as the exoteric truth are seen as symbolic representation of the inner realities of Ismaili philosophy. The precise manner of *ta’wil* is not really defined anywhere, however, and it could mean anything from numerological or cabbalistic interpretation of Qur’anic passages to their seemingly arbitrary interpretation as references to specific philosophical doctrines. From the perspective of the Ismailis, *ta’wil* was of course never a method to be used, or even understood, by just anyone, but only by the imam and those among the higher echelons of the *da’wa* hierarchy.204

Even Peripatetic philosophers in a sense resort to a distinction between exoteric and esoteric knowledge to explain the relation between religious revelation and philosophy, but Ismaili thought is esoterically oriented in a more profound way. In both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity the distinction is essential, for all things of the sensory level, especially the external level of religious revelation, contain hidden meanings and mysteries that can only be reached by those advanced in knowledge and divinely inspired in some way.

The concept of hidden saving knowledge of the Gnostic kind, open only to those initiated to it, characterizes the thought of both the Brethren and al-Kirmānī. Both also resort to allegorically interpreted scriptural passages as a method of argumentation. It is especially in the *Comprehensive Epistle* that the Brethren promise to reveal these hidden esoteric truths, while the whole of the *Rest of the Intellect* of al-Kirmānī consists of the esoteric teaching of the highest level. While for al-Fārābī exoteric religious scriptures are derivative of the philosophical truth attained by the human intellect, and therefore not a source of philosophical knowledge, for al-Kirmānī and the Brethren they are rather two levels that refer to each other.

Even more interesting as a philosophical method is what al-Kirmānī calls the balance of religion.205 Like *ta’wil*, it is bound to an in itself unproven ontological presupposition of the ultimate nature of reality, and in fact *ta’wil* may be seen as its particular instance. Whereas *ta’wil* presupposes an ontological correspondence between the sensible and intelligible worlds, and hence epistemological correspondence between revelatory and philosophical knowledge, balance of religion extends the assumption of such correspondence further to a harmony prevailing between various levels of reality. The existence of this harmony goes back to the idea of tawḥīd, or the essential unity of all being, and the divine wisdom (*ḥikma*) behind creation.

While al-Kirmānī says the balance to be concerned with the equilibrium (*muwāzana*) between religious things and existents, it seems to be more than that. Al-Kirmānī distinguishes between several levels of existence or “worlds” in reality, such as the world of the Intellects (‘ālam al-ḥabīb), the physical world (‘ālam al-fābi’a),

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205 See, Rāḥat al-‘aql, pp. 480, 494.
the religious world (‘ālam al-dīn) of the da‘wa hierarchy, the normative world (‘ālam al-wa‘d) of religious law, and the microcosmic world (al-‘ālam al-ṣaghīr) of man composed of body and soul. Between all these worlds there is presumed to exist an essential harmony in their structure, which goes all the way down to the number and quality of their individual components. Therefore, it is possible to deduce from any of these levels to another, which leads to the surprising conclusion that knowledge about sharī‘a, for example, increases knowledge about the cosmos. While the principle of cosmic harmony and correspondences is essential for all Ismaili thought, al-Kirmānī, according to De Smet, is the first Ismaili thinker to use it as extensively and methodologically as he does.206

A similar general view of cosmic harmony is also very much present in the epistles of the Brethren. For both of them the general idea probably goes back to the alchemical corpus of Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, as it was to his name that the science of balance (‘ilm al-mīzān) was generally related.207 The Brethren offer endless lists of correspondences, in which the individual members of seemingly unrelated entities are seen as analogous with each other. This goes back to the idea of a correspondence existing between the different “worlds”, so that it is assumed natural that, for example, the twelve movements of the physical world have their counterparts in the world of religion.208

Man as a microcosmic world comprising in itself all reality is particularly important for the Brethren, although for them also it probably in the end represents an individual case of the harmonious structure existing in the universe as a whole. And also for the Brethren the existence of such correspondences can at least to some degree be seen as a tool towards acquisition of knowledge. Since the same kind of hierarchies of entities that exist in other levels of existence also exist in man himself, both in his soul and his body, it is possible for him through enquiry of his self to attain knowledge of the universe as a whole.209

The Brethren also employ the concept of balance as a method, distinguishing between three kinds of balances for “measuring” things: material, linguistic, and intellectual. It is, however, especially the intellectual balance, that is, demonstration by means of Aristotelian logic, rather than a “balance of religion”, that is primary for the Brethren, thus making them more rationalistic in spirit than al-Kirmānī.210

A third characteristic feature of Ismaili philosophy shared by al-Kirmānī and the Brethren is the concept of taqiyya as understood in the Ismaili sense, that is, as concealment of knowledge.211 The need for taqiyya for both of them arises out of their esotericism and emphasis on Gnostic-type saving knowledge reserved for the chosen few. Both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren agree that the esoteric truths are meant only for

206 De Smet 1995, pp. 27-31. See also Walker 1993, pp. 68-9 for the appearance of the similar perception in al-Sijistānī.
207 Corbin 1973, pp. 79-82; Kraus 1986, pp. 187ff.; De Smet 1995, pp. 30-1. According to Kraus (1931, p. 7), the Jābirian corpus also appears to have been born in an Ismaili context.
208 Ikhwan, Jami‘a, pp. 466-72.
209 See, Maukola 2009 for the presence of the idea of microcosm in the Brethren, and its epistemological consequences.
210 De Smet 1995, pp. 30-1. The Brethren’s abundant interest in Aristotelian logic seems to be one of the characteristics that distinguishes them from mainstream Ismaili philosophers.
211 The epistles do not use the term taqiyya, but the principle is present nevertheless.
those at the higher levels of initiation, and must be concealed from all others. For al-Kirmānī *Rest of the Intellect* and for the Brethren the epistles as a whole, but especially the *Comprehensive Epistle*, supposedly contain the esoteric truth, and hence must not be divulged freely. Moreover, both hint, however, that even in these works they do not reveal all of the truth explicitly, but only allude to it in a way that is presumably understandable for those advanced in knowledge.

For the Ismaili initiate rising in the ladders of esoteric knowledge instruction occurred in sessions of wisdom (*majālis al-hikma*) headed by the dāʾīs. Works like *Rest of the Intellect* were therefore never meant for solitary contemplation, but were supported by oral teaching. De Smet suggests the possibility of retrieving al-Kirmānī’s orally transmitted doctrines from the Ṭayyībī literature, since it was their community that carried on the instruction of al-Kirmānī, and even of the Brethren, through the following centuries.\(^{212}\) If the Brethren of Purity were an actual group of people convening in sessions of philosophical discussion and teaching, their instruction would probably also have been transmitted orally in part. However, since no-one has so far attempted to retrieve the hidden orally transmitted doctrines of either of them, for the present the only esoteric truth of al-Kirmānī or the Brethren that a scholar can reach is the one they divulge voluntarily in writing.

\(^{212}\) De Smet 1995, pp. 31-3. As De Smet notes, it would still be next to impossible to distinguish which of the later Ṭayyībī doctrines go all the way back to al-Kirmānī as opposed to being a later elaboration.
4 The nature of happiness

4.1 Happiness and perfection

According to al-Fārābī, in order to become happy man must first know what happiness is, secondly set it as his goal, thirdly know the actions by which happiness is achieved, and finally carry out those actions. Therefore, the first task confronting this study must also be to find out what it is precisely that the philosophers mean when they discuss happiness. While there are some differences as to the content of the concept of happiness between the four philosophers discussed in this study, on the general lines they are very much in agreement. Their view of human happiness has its origin in Greek Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophy, and hence they all share the basic concept.

For both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers happiness represents the absolute peak of human existence, which they believe can be known by means of reason. Since man’s highest part is his theoretical intellect, happiness also is essentially intellectual, even if it is intimately bound to a simultaneous moral virtue of a practical nature. Intellectual perfection is the ultimate goal towards which all men should strive in this world, and the final reason for which they exist. Such a state is what Islamic philosophers call happiness (saʿāda), as a translation of Greek eudaimonia, or sometimes ultimate or eternal happiness (al-saʿāda al-quswā/abadiyya), as opposed to the lower forms of merely transient happiness.

As man’s final goal, happiness is also the ultimate motive for the practice of philosophy, for it is through philosophy that man can ascend towards it. Therefore in a sense happiness forms the core concept of philosophy, around which its distinct branches are centered. The practical aspect of finding happiness is the goal of ethical and political philosophy. As intellectual perfection happiness consists of acquiring theoretical knowledge, which is the subject matter of epistemology, while the content of that knowledge is contained within the philosophical system as a whole. As a union or contact of the rational soul with an immaterial Intellect of the higher world, happiness is also a metaphysical concept. And finally, as the philosophical portrayal of the afterlife, happiness is related to eschatology. All in all, the idea of happiness in Arabic philosophy is a much more complicated issue than it would seem at first glance.

For the philosophers the symmetrical opposite of happiness is misery (shaqāwa), which then refers to the absolute imperfection of man, or the state of engrossment in the sensual pleasures of the material world, as opposed to the realization of one’s true intellectual nature. Since it is precisely such material states that are popularly called happiness, true happiness must be distinguished from merely imaginary happiness (al-saʿāda al-maznīna). At times the philosophers also make a distinction between the happiness attained in this world (saʿādat al-dunyā/al-saʿāda al-dunyawiyya) and otherworldly happiness (saʿādat al-ākhira/al-saʿāda al-ukhrawiyya). Both are supposedly attained through the practice of philosophy, but it is the latter that is the

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213 Al-Fārābī, al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, p. 78.
214 In Altmann’s (1969b, p. 73) summary: “There is a remarkable unanimity amongst the medieval philosophers of Islam and Judaism as to what constitutes man’s ultimate felicity.”
ultimate goal of human existence. In general, however, it is the ultimate happiness fully actualized in the afterlife that is meant by Arabic philosophers when they discuss happiness.

The most popular way for Arabic philosophers to define happiness philosophically is as the perfection (kamāl) of the human rational soul. Such a perception is firmly grounded in the Aristotelian-Platonic background of all Arabic philosophy. In the Aristotelian teleologically oriented universe all existents have their proper perfection towards which they strive. While most existents of the lower world attain their inherent perfection by nature, for man this is not the case. As the crown of the sublunar world he must attain his perfection through his own efforts, by first becoming aware of its true nature and then by an active choice to pursue it. It is up to men themselves to decide whether they aspire to their highest intellectual nature, or rather choose to remain at the lowest level of sensual pleasures.

In Neoplatonism this perfection is further entwined with emanationist metaphysics. In the emanationist account of creation each entity occupies its proper position within the hierarchy of being located between the two entities immediately above and below it. From the being above it receives its existence as an emanation, while it gives existence to the being below it. As the counterpart of the downwards procession of emanation, there emerges the inherent desire of each being towards an ascent or return (epistrophē/maʿād) to its source, which in a sense is the moving force of the universe. For each being it is the reascent to its cause that represents its own perfection. The human soul’s perfection is then composed of its reascent to the Intellect, which in Plotinian metaphysics is bound to the Soul’s desire as a hypostasis to attain a reunion with its creator, the Intellect.

Since the main lines of Arabic psychological theory were drawn from Aristotle’s De Anima, Arabic philosophers also adopted the Aristotelian definition of soul as the first entelekheia of an organic body. The concept of entelekheia was coined by Aristotle himself, translated sometimes as actuality (energeia/fiʿl), where the first entelekheia refers to a capability to perform a certain function, whereas the second entelekheia refers to the actual practice of that capability. The soul as the entelekheia of a body is the principle that gives the body its life-producing activities. In Arabic entelekheia was translated as perfection (tamām/kamāl/istikmāl), and, as in the intermediate Neoplatonic Greek tradition, it was identified with both final cause and ultimate goal (ghāya). Hence, in the Neoplatonic understanding of things the soul’s being the entelekheia of a body, and accordingly its final goal, meant that the soul was separable from the body, and that the body existed for the sake of the soul.

All Arabic philosophers adopted the Platonic notion of the soul as a separate substance, rather than the minimal interpretation of Aristotelian entelekheia, where the soul is inherently inseparable from the body with the possible exception of the intellect. The main consequence of this question was of course the survival of the soul after the demise of its body, which both Greek Neoplatonists and Arabic philosophers wanted to preserve.215 It is against this Aristotelian-Platonic background that the philosophers of this study also employ the concepts of first and second perfection in relation to man. Within this distinction second perfection is virtually identified with

215 See, Wisnovsky 2003 for a discussion of the complex history of the concept of entelekheia in relation to the soul-body question in Greek and Arabic philosophy.
actuality, as opposed to the deficiency (naqṣ) and potentiality (bi-ʾl-quwwa) of first perfection. First perfection is an initial state of the human soul, or the state of the minimal existence of man. Second perfection, in contrast, is the state of best possible existence, the ultimate goal towards which man must ascend by his own efforts, or the completely actualized rational soul in which all of its initial potentiality is realized.\footnote{See, Wisnovsky 2003, pp. 107-41; al-Fārābī, al-Madīna al-fādila, pp. 204-6; al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 123, 493; Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, p. 235.}

The philosophical concept of happiness is then largely synonymous with human perfection, which in turn is identified with actuality. While both perfection and actuality are ultimately metaphysical concepts, they are further identified with the ethical concept of goodness (khayr), thus giving Arabic ethical philosophy its metaphysical foundation. Ibn Sīnā defines the good of each existent as “the thing which it desires and through which its existence is completed.”\footnote{“al-khayr bi-ʾl-jumla huwa mā yatashawwqahu kull shay’ wa-yatimm bihi wujūduhu.” Ibn Sīnā, al-Mabda’, p. 10.} Hence, the good for each being consists of the actuality and perfection of that particular being. They are, however, perfection, actuality, and goodness only in relation to that particular being, whereas absolute perfection, actuality, and goodness are represented in the First Cause of all existence, in which there is no deficiency or desire for anything more to complete itself. But the greatest good attainable for man is the perfection and actuality of his human essence, that is, ultimate happiness.

4.2 Intellectual happiness

For all the philosophers discussed here, happiness then consists of the perfection of the rational soul, and particularly the theoretical intellect as its crowning part. Therefore the true nature of happiness is intellectual and theoretical, while its practical aspect seems to be more of a means towards attaining theoretical perfection. This view of happiness may be called the contemplative ideal, where, as in Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, man’s highest moment is seen to be endless contemplation of the highest objects of thought, the divine ideas.\footnote{See, e.g., Fakhry 1976 for a review of the contemplative ideal in Aristotle and Ibn Sīnā.} Following Aristotle, the Brethren, for example, affirm that the best possible state of the soul is for it to “... know the divine things and lordly knowledge and eternally relish and rejoice in them.”\footnote{“al-ḥsan ḥāl al-nuṭūs an takūn ‘ālima bi-ʾl-ṭumūr al-illāhiyya, ʾārifā bi-ʾl-ṣu’rīf al-rabbāniyya, multahdhha bihā, masāra faḥāna muna‘ama abad al-ābīdīn khālīda sarmādliyya.” Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, III (42), p. 516.}

That true perfection is intellectual is founded already on a metaphysical basis, since intellect resides above soul in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being. But the intellectual nature of happiness can also be argued by means of purely hedonistic personal ethics. Despite contradicting popular notions of happiness attached to sense pleasures, philosophical notion of happiness as man’s highest state is not supposed to be one of agony and torment, but on the contrary represents the greatest imaginable pleasure (hēdonē/ladhḍha). But just as true happiness must be distinguished from merely presumed happiness, similarly true pleasure is to be differentiated from the lower forms of pleasure. Obviously for the philosophers it is intellectual pleasure that is the highest kind that man can attain.
Ibn Sīnā makes a distinction between the highest kind of happiness and bodily happiness (al-saʿāda al-badaniyya), of which the former can be discovered by means of reason and demonstration, whereas the latter is discussed in revelation and cannot be verified by philosophical methods. He argues for the superiority of a happiness consisting of an intellectual bliss based on the concept of perfection and the Platonic tridivision of the soul into a desiring (shahwānī), irascible (ghadābī), and rational (nāṭīq) soul. Each of these parts may be defined as the first perfection of the body with respect to the activities of that part.

Besides being a first perfection, each of the parts also possesses a second perfection that represents the fullest actualization of its activities. According to Ibn Sīnā, it is the perception of the attainment of that second perfection, or some degree of it, that produces the feeling of pleasure. But like everything in the Neoplatonic world, the faculties of the human soul also form an ascending hierarchy of perfection and virtue. The pleasures of the lowest faculties of the plant soul are those derived from the indulgence in food, drink, and sex, while the pleasures of the middle irascible soul are related particularly to power and domination (ghalba).

The pleasures attached to the perfection of the intellectual part, however, are of a completely different nature than those of the lower faculties. It is the pleasure caused by acquisition of intelligible knowledge and of good moral qualities. It is like the pleasure experienced by the disembodied Intellects of the higher world, and hence much more pure and intense than anything related to the material sphere of existence. But just as a deaf person who has never heard music cannot miss hearing it, for even at best he can only have a vague idea of the kind of pleasure it might arouse in him, so only one who has actually experienced the highest kind of intellectual bliss can truly understand and desire it.

Al-Fārābī, the Brethren of Purity, and al-Kirmānī share the same psychological theoretical background and the related analysis of happiness and pleasure. The different faculties of the soul form an ascending hierarchy analyzable to three parts, where the faculties of the lower parts are necessary for the survival of the body, while the rational soul represents the distinctly human part for the most part functioning independently from the body. They also make a similar distinction between intellectual and bodily pleasures, of which the first are incomparably more intense and permanent, at least once the soul has reached its supreme degree of happiness.

Thus, even on purely hedonistic grounds man should seek intellectual happiness over the lower forms. The false forms of happiness are bound to the lower parts of

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220 Ibn Sīnā, al-Shīfāʾ: Ilāhiyyāt, pp. 347-8. Here also the concept of happiness is related to the afterlife, and bodily happiness refers to the Quranic portrayal of its sensual rewards, as opposed to the purely intellectual pleasures of the afterlife delineated by Ibn Sīnā.

221 Ibn Sīnā, al-Najāt, p. 197. While the division itself is Platonic, it is merged with the Aristotelian tridivision of plant, animal, and human souls. Furthermore, as in the Greek Neoplatonic tradition, the “parts” of the soul are understood in the context of Aristotelian faculty psychology, where each consists of a set of distinct faculties or activities of the soul, but they do not contradict its essential unity. Only al-Kirmānī does not seem to use Platonic nomenclature, but refers to the three parts only with Aristotelian terms.


223 For a distinction between corporeal and intellectual pleasure, see, e.g., al-Fārābī, al-Tanbih, pp. 15ff.; Ikhwān, Rasāʾil, III (30), pp. 52-83 (the epistle is devoted solely to an analysis of pain and pleasure); al-Kirmānī, Rāha, p. 116.
soul and their respective pleasures. Such is the case then when happiness is believed to consist of amassing of wealth, attainment of honor, acquisition of sensual pleasures, or of other things related to the lower psychical faculties. The corporeal pleasure gained from good food or aesthetic beauty is not bad in itself, but merely lower on the hedonistic hierarchy than the spiritual pleasure of the intellect.

In the best order of things the highest and most perfect part should govern the lower ones, just as is the case in the universe as a whole. In a balanced human soul it is then the rational part that directs the bodily faculties, rather than reason blindly following the desires and passions of the body. In such case, according to al-Fārābī, once man knows happiness in his rational faculty, he also desires it by his lower appetitive faculty (al-quwwa al-nuzū'īyya), and all the faculties of the soul together strive towards attaining that highest goal.

Despite the fact that the “perfections” of the lower psychical faculties are necessary for the maintenance of body, it is the bodily desires (shahawāt) that emerge as a hindrance to the attainment of true intellectual happiness. This is because they distract the rational soul from practicing its real intellectual nature. As Ibn Sīnā states, in its bodily state in the material world the human soul does not easily sense intellectual pleasure. Only after casting off the desires of the lower faculties, can the soul arise to yearn for the highest good for the human soul. Hence, happiness necessarily involves a practical moral side as a necessary instrument for attaining theoretical perfection, although in the end it seems to be subservient to the highest good of theoretical perfection.

For all the philosophers then happiness also consists of the liberation of the soul from its bodily and material entanglements. Happiness at its most complete manifestation therefore amounts to the rational soul becoming a pure intellect that no longer requires either the body or the lower psychical faculties bound to the body for its existence. Once liberated from matter, man also may attain the kind of happiness enjoyed by the angelic spiritual substances. According to Ibn Sīnā, one must therefore answer those asking what kind of happiness can there be in a state where there is no eating, drinking, or sex, that the state of the angels contains more pleasure and joy than that of the animals.

The nature of ultimate happiness portrayed here as intellectual perfection and liberation from matter seems to imply a very idealistic view of the capabilities of man. Happiness is conditioned on complete actualization of the intellect and acquisition of the totality of intelligible knowledge, since once the human intellect is perfected it would contain the forms of all existents within itself. Such a concept also seems extremely elitist in that happiness would be restricted to the few supremely intelligent philosophers capable of realizing it. In fact the absolute kind of happiness appears to be more of an ideal corresponding to the perfect man, whereas in actual reality there is more of gradation.

While happiness is conditioned on knowledge, that knowledge may be acquired by a variety of means. Only very few are capable of acquiring it through independent reflection, while the rest will have to gain it through instruction. Moreover, since men

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226 Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, p. 10.
vary in excellence in both their innate and acquired moral and intellectual dispositions, they similarly vary with respect to the happiness they attain.

While there are a number of things, according to al-Fārābī, that all men must know in order to acquire any kind of happiness, the primary distinction among men follows from the manner in which they are capable of acquiring that knowledge. The philosophers acquire it in an intelligible form through employing their own reason, while those following the philosophers attain the same intelligibles by learning from them. The majority of men are, however, unable to grasp the philosophical truth at all, and therefore have to gain it in the form of imitations in sensible images, which is famously what religious revelation consists of for al-Fārābī.

Therefore most people, in so far as they pursue happiness at all, seek it by means of their imaginative faculty (mukhayyala), whereas the fortunate few follow it as conceived (muṣawwara) in its true form in their intellects. The latter constitute the elect (khāṣṣa), since the knowledge they possess actually corresponds to the ultimate reality.227 And the elect, for al-Fārābī and his followers, is in essence composed of the philosophers, who alone are capable of reaching for the philosophical way towards happiness.

Since philosophical knowledge is of a qualitatively better kind than symbolic knowledge, clearly the elect must also enjoy a more noble kind of happiness. But besides the qualitative variety there is also a quantitative one. According to al-Fārābī the kinds of happiness are distinguished in virtue (tatafādal) in three respects: species (naw’), quantity (kammiyya), and quality (kayfiyya). The kind of happiness and pleasure gained varies according to both innate and acquired properties, and each one will have the degree of happiness that befits his nature.228

Therefore there emerges a hierarchy of happiness, at the top of which is the perfect man representing the absolute culmination of humanity, the philosopher-prophet, who enjoys the highest degree of happiness possible for man.229 The rest of mankind forms a descending hierarchy of virtue, where each man enjoys happiness according to his particular rank in humanity.230 Those at the bottom of the hierarchy who are incapable of attaining any kind of knowledge at all, such as the insane, are excluded from happiness altogether.231

Ibn Sīnā’s view comes close to al-Fārābī’s, especially in the dual ways of pure intelligible and symbolic revelatory knowledge reserved for the two classes of people.232 This view of course became a commonplace of Islamic political philosophy

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229 Al-Fārābī, al-Madīna al-Fāḍila, p. 244. In the philosopher-prophet the most complete happiness comes upon not only theoretical perfection, but theoretical perfection on which the faculty of prophecy is superimposed. As Galston (1990, p. 67) points out, this would seem to imply that practical perfection is not only a means to ultimate happiness, but its constitutive part, and therefore goes against the purely contemplative view of happiness argued for here. Nevertheless, practical virtue in the end does appear to be subjected to theoretical perfection, as we will see in chapter 4.5.
231 Al-Fārābī, al-Siyāsas al-madaniyya, pp. 74-5.
ever since al-Fārābī. As we will see in the discussion of the afterlife, the two groups also seem to enjoy different kinds of happiness in the afterlife.

But even in this life the happiness enjoyed by philosophers and their followers would have to be of a greater kind than any based on sensible images, given that Ibn Sinā has painstakingly argued for the intellectual nature of true happiness. As to their intellectual capabilities, for Ibn Sinā also people form a hierarchy descending from the perfection of the prophet down to the lowest of men who are incapable of learning anything at all. Since happiness is conditioned on intellection, this at least partly reflects on the happiness attained in the afterlife. Since prophets occur only at rare times in history, the majority of people fall somewhere below them, and hence attain only some portion of complete happiness.233

As for al-Fārābī, for Ibn Sinā also the prophet represents the highest instance of humanity, but such men only come to being at singular moments in history, since the kind of matter required to receive their perfection only occurs rarely in bodily compositions.234 Other men would lie somewhere between the complete fool and the prophet as to their intellectual capabilities, and presumably this state of affairs is also reflected on the hierarchy of happiness.

While in many respects the Brethren and al-Kirmānī are as elitist as the Peripatetics, sometimes they appear to be less so. The elitism of both comes from the Gnostic idea that only the elect group of people acquiring true knowledge attain happiness. But al-Kirmānī at least does not set the philosophers above common believers with respect to happiness. While as for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā actualization through intelligible knowledge is a prerequisite for the soul to attain happiness, this knowledge is not supposed to be acquired by means of independent reflection.

It is only the divinely supported prophets and imams who can attain such knowledge directly, while the rest attain it by instruction from them. Philosophers are therefore wrong to rely solely on their intellects in this question, while renouncing the divine proof, for this will only lead them to error. When the souls acquire their otherworldly happiness on the resurrection day, for al-Kirmānī also there seems to be some variation as to the degree reached by each. Each man will gain happiness in accordance with the knowledge he has acquired and the actions he has performed during his worldly life.235

4.3 Contact with the Intellect

Since for all these philosophers the state of ultimate happiness is identified with the perfection of theoretical reason, it is intimately bound to their epistemological theories. All of them also operate along the main lines of Aristotelian psychology in this respect, so that intellectual perfection for them stands for the last stage of the fully actualized human intellect, as opposed its initial state of potentiality, in which the rational soul has acquired the totality of intelligible forms.236 All of them also share the Aristotelian presupposition that for the intellect, as for anything else, to pass from potentiality to actuality an active element is required that itself is already fully actual.

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236 See, chapter 7.3 below for a brief discussion of the epistemological states of human intellect.
As is well-known, the distinction Aristotle makes in *De Anima* between the passive and active aspects of human reason proved to be one of the most bewildering parts of the treatise for the later interpreters of his epistemological theory, and developed to a voluminous amount of theorizing about the role and nature of the active intellect (*nous poiētikos/al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*) throughout classical and medieval times. In Aristotelian psychology, active intellect is the catalyst that makes the intelligible forms actually known for theoretical reason, commonly compared to the activity of light in transforming colors actually visible to the sense of vision.

In the post-Aristotelian Greek tradition this agent was variously placed within the human soul or outside it, as Aristotle himself had left this, along with many other questions, ambiguous. Among the Aristotelian commentators influential in Arabic philosophy at least Alexander of Aphrodisias (d. early 3rd century CE), Themistius (d. ca. 387), and John Philoponus (d. ca. 570) offered theories where active intellect was interpreted as a transcendent entity existing outside the human soul, variously identified with the Aristotelian First Cause in the case of Alexander, or a lower deity in that of Philoponus. Plotinus also followed the transcendental interpretation in relegating the functions of active intellect to his second hypostasis of Intellect. All Arabic philosophers followed such Greek predecessors in regarding the originally psychological entity of active intellect to be also a metaphysical entity existing outside the human soul.237

Hence, for Arabic philosophers in general the ultimate cause of man’s theoretical perfection is a separate entity existing in the non-material world, from which the intelligible forms are emanated to the human intellect once it is properly disposed towards receiving them. In fact, in a sense this supralunar Intellect is absolute human perfection, or at least the upper limit of perfection that man could ever hope to attain, although it may be that even in the best of cases he must fall short of it. In any case, all four of our philosophers are rationalists in the sense that they do not see a possibility for an ascent by suprarational means beyond the Intellect up till the Creator himself, unlike Plotinus and the Greek Neoplatonists, or mystical thinkers of later Islamic philosophy.

Human happiness as absolute theoretical perfection then appears as a state of some kind of contact (*ittiṣāl*) or even union (*ittiḥād*) with a transcendent Intellect, a semi-divine entity of the spiritual world, which is further identified with the Neoplatonic reascent of the soul to the intelligible sphere of being. This, however, gives human happiness, despite its inherent rationalism, also a definite mystical aspect, for it now involves a metaphysical ascent to a level of a non-corporeal spiritual being, a kind of lower deity. Within the history of Arabic philosophy the nature of this ascent has been interpreted in differing terms with varying degrees of mystical overtones. Moreover, the precise identification of which Intellect human soul is to ascend to is conditioned by the cosmological theory adopted by each of them. Therefore, the question of human happiness also becomes a part of metaphysics and cosmology.

The cosmology of nine concentric spheres each accompanied with a separate Intellect was first assumed by al-Fārābī, from whom his Peripatetic successors,

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237 See, Davidson 1992, pp. 13-18. None of them followed Alexander though in identifying active intellect as the First Cause, although the Peripatetics theoretically could have done this, since they did regard the First Cause to be an actual intellect.
including Ibn Śīnā, adopted it along the main lines, as did al-Kirmānī within Ismaili philosophy. The Arabic Peripatetics further adopted a somewhat unique solution in the long history of the concept of active intellect in that they identified the last tenth Intellect governing the terrestrial world as the active intellect of Aristotelian psychology. Hence, for al-Fārābī and Ibn Śīnā it is with this tenth and last Intellect that human rational soul forms contact to attain its theoretical perfection.

For Ibn Śīnā this interpretation preserves well the Neoplatonic symmetry of descent and reascent, since for him Active Intellect is not only the cause of human thought, but also the source from which sublunar forms, including the human soul, are emanated. Hence, theoretical perfection constitutes the reunion of human soul with its source. Man’s return to the level of the Intellects, on the other hand, constitutes the closing of the circle at the cosmological level, that is, the return of creation back to the first principles.  

In the case of al-Fārābī the symmetry is somewhat broken, however, since Active Intellect is only the cause of human thinking, while the origin of the existence of the human soul, as of all the sublunar world, seems to be located more vaguely in the celestial region. For both of them Active Intellect as a metaphysical entity is a bridge between the two worlds, spiritual and material, for while, on the one hand, it properly pertains to the spiritual sphere of being, on the other, it governs the sublunar material world.  

Al-Kirmānī also adopted the Fārābian cosmology, but not the straightforward identification of active intellect with the tenth separate Intellect. In fact he does not seem to employ the term active intellect at all, nor does he elevate precisely the tenth Intellect to the imposing role it enjoys in most Peripatetic philosophers. However, he does subscribe to the principle that in order to be actualized human intellect needs an already actual agent existing outside of itself. This active principle for him appears to be the (First) Intellect, mediated by the series of lower Intellects, and manifested in the terrestrial world in prophets and imams.

As for Ibn Śīnā the Neoplatonic symmetry is then complete, since once fully actualized the human soul returns to the Intellect from which the terrestrial souls were originally emanated. But unlike for al-Fārābī and Ibn Śīnā, for al-Kirmānī, it is apparently the (First) Intellect itself, rather than the last one, that is both the beginning and end for the destiny of the human soul. The return to the Intellect is the “rest of

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238 Ibn Śīnā’s probably most elegant and concise presentation of the Neoplatonic scheme of descent and reascent is the Provenance and Destination, in which the first two chapters constitute the descent through emanation, and the third the reascent in the material world culminated in the perfection of human soul.

239 See, Davidson 1992, pp. 44-94 for their theories of the Active Intellect.

240 As Ibn Śīnā (al-Mabda’, p. 98) says, all of the separate Intellects are of course active Intellects in the sense of being fully actual and acting on an entity below them, but only the last one is an active Intellect with respect to us (’aql fa’al bi-’l-qiyās ilaynā), that is, the active intellect of Aristotelian psychology.

241 De Smet 1995, pp. 332-4, 355-9, 368-9, 372-5. The alternative interpretation is that al-Kirmānī’s unspecified use of the term Intellect in these contexts refers to the pleroma of Intellects as a whole, rather than specifically the first one as the source of them all. The consequence would still seem to be that the human soul can ascend to the level of the first Intellect, since al-Kirmānī does not give a specific Intellect as the upper limit. This upper limit is where the soul “knows all existents, until only that from which all existents came to be remains. There it will stay amazed incapable of further ascent, . . . settling and submitting to its shortcoming.” (Η add lā yashidhdh mawjdūd fīhā ‘an ma’rifatih, ḥattā lā
the Intellect” promised in the title of al-Kirmānī’s main work, a state characterized by complete tranquility and rest for the soul.242

For the Brethren the harmonious relation between epistemology, metaphysics, and eschatology is in some sense even more elegant, for they hold to the original Plotinian triad of creation, instead of the more complex Peripatetic variant. (Universal) Soul as the third hypostasis is an emanation from the second hypostasis of (Universal) Intellect, and receives from its Creator the intelligible archetypes, through which it, or rather its lower “faculty” of Nature, creates the material world. Soul is torn between its double nature, governance of the material sphere it has created, and the desire to contemplate its own creator, the Intellect. While Soul is knowing in its essence, it is up to the guiding influence of the Intellect to gradually bring it towards perfection and actualization of its knowledge, a process which is fully culminated only at the destruction of the terrestrial world.

Like the Peripatetics, the Brethren also use the term Active Intellect to denote a metaphysical entity, as a synonym of Intellect, whereas Soul as a contrast is designated the Passive Intellect (al-‘aql al-munfa’īl). Since the human particular souls are “faculties” of the Universal Soul, their epistemology is seamlessly united to this metaphysical process. The human souls are actualized through the knowledge received from the Intellect, and as a result the “particular soul attains the happiness of the Universal Soul, once it reaches the degree of the Universal Intellect.”243 As for al-Kirmānī, this is the degree of complete rest (rāḥa) and serenity (ṭum‘unīnā/sukūn), since it is the final point of ascent where the soul withdraws from the movement characterizing natural world.244

Due to this metaphysical connection ultimate happiness appears as not only intellectual perfection, but also as a kind of divinization of man. Man attains the degree of a lower divinity, that of an immaterial Intellect of the spiritual world. This is part of the meaning of the classical Platonic idea of the ultimate goal of man, and hence of philosophy, as “becoming like god” (homoioísis theói/al-tashabbuh bi-ilāh), an idea which the Brethren repeatedly present in their epistles.245

For al-Fārābī ultimate happiness in the end therefore means that the human soul becomes like the immaterial Intellects, although still below the level of Active Intellect, in that the actualized human soul becomes a fully spiritual and intelligible substance like them, and thus no longer needs a body or its faculties for its existence.246 For Ibn Sinā the rational soul becomes of the substance of the Intellects, an intelligible world (‘ālam ‘aqlī) in which the whole intelligible order of existence is reflected.247 And similarly for al-Kirmānī soul becomes like the separate Intellects, a

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242 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 105; De Smet 1995, p. 20.
244 Ikhwān, Jāmi‘ a, pp. 51-2.
245 Ikhwān, Rasā‘ il, I (5), p. 225; I (10), p. 399. For the idea of philosophy as divinization, see chapter 5.1 below.
microcosm reflecting the perfection of the macrocosm in its essence.\textsuperscript{248} For the Brethren happiness is not likened to separate Intellects in the same way, because their cosmology does not consist of a series of such Intellects. Besides, the ascent of the soul is more gradual, through the world of spheres, up to the spiritual world. The semi-divinity of the perfected soul is expressed in it becoming a potential angel (\textit{malak bi-’l-quwwa}), transformed into an actual one at the death of its body.\textsuperscript{249}

One of the most debated points among scholars concerning ultimate happiness in Arabic philosophy has been its mystical or ecstatic nature. This question is related to the character of happiness as either a connection (\textit{itti\'Iāl}) or union (\textit{itti\'Iād}) with the transcendent Intellect. When Merlan defines mysticism as a doctrine teaching that the highest moment of man’s existence is his absorption into whatever he regards to be the divine,\textsuperscript{250} this would seem to be true to some extent in Arabic philosophy. In its absolute perfection the perfected human soul is absorbed to the divine sphere of Intellects.

However, for all four philosophers of this study this absorption is restricted, for the souls do not attain a complete union with the Intellects, and remain below them even at their highest perfection. They are merely conjoined with them, and hence they do not discard all their individual attributes, which would permit them to merge into one divine whole.\textsuperscript{251} They also fall short of complete mysticism in their rationalism. For Plotinus and the Sufi mystics, man’s highest state of perfection transcends reason, for it is a union with the ineffable Divine above the Intellect.

For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, while even the Creator himself is an Intellect in the Aristotelian fashion, He lies beyond the reach of human intellect. But the fact that the activity proper to the First Cause is to intelligize itself, which then constitutes the highest possible form of activity, pleasure and happiness, further enhances the divine nature of intellectual human happiness. For al-Kirmānī and the Brethren God as an absolute unity transcends the level of Intellect in the Plotinian manner, but, unlike for Plotinus, man cannot reach God by any other means either. Therefore while some scholars, such as Merlan and Fakhry, call this kind of state rational mysticism, others, like Davidson and De Smet, do not consider it to be a genuinely mystical state at all.\textsuperscript{252}

On an experiential level the main difference between the state of ultimate happiness and a mystical Sufi state seems to be that since the soul retains its individuality even after its conjunction with the Intellect, there is no annihilation of the self to the divine, nor a complete union of the soul with even a lower spiritual entity, let alone the Creator.\textsuperscript{253} Within the Islamic philosophy of the subsequent centuries both for some Peripatetics, such as Ibn Tufayl, and particularly for the illuminationists, the highest state of man will become more clearly identified with that of the Sufis. Still, even for our philosophers there is a degree of an ecstatic flavor to the experience of intellectual bliss. Al-Fārābī is probably the most sober of the four in

\textsuperscript{248} Al-Kirmānī, \textit{Rāha}, p. 481; De Smet 1995, p. 312.
\textsuperscript{249} See, e.g., Ikhwān, \textit{Jāmi‘a}, p. 125.
\textsuperscript{250} Merlan 1963, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{251} See, Davidson 1992, pp. 53-5, 103-6; De Smet 1995, pp. 375-6.
\textsuperscript{252} Davidson 1992, pp. 54, 105-6; De Smet 1995, pp. 372-7; Fakhry 1971; Merlan 1963, pp. 20-1.
\textsuperscript{253} Nor is there of course the related ontological supposition of the oneness of all reality.
this respect, for he never delves deeper into the experiential aspect of happiness, nor employs ecstatic language to describe it.

Ibn Sīnā, however, approaches the Sufi vision especially in Remarks and Admonitions, where he quite consciously employs distinctly Sufi terminology to describe the attainment of human perfection. In contrast to the more abstract philosophical portrayals of the corresponding passages in Healing and other works, here Ibn Sīnā goes beyond them to describe the actual experience of happiness such as it is “tasted” (ta’ama) by the “Gnostics” (ārifūn) proceeding on their way towards utmost perfection. The Gnostics are said to possess special stations (maqāmāt) and degrees (darajāt) that distinguish them from common people. Initially such degrees are moments of stupor (ghawāshin/awqāt) in which the light of Truth (nūr al-haqq) appears to the Gnostic as in flashes of lightning, bringing about ecstatic joy (wajd) in him. But when he proceeds on the spiritual road through knowledge and exercise, the occasional glimpses of light gradually transform into a clear flame, as he attains a more stable disposition towards attaining the truth, and the moments of stupor become a stable state of tranquility.

When he finally arrives (wuṣūl) at the end of his road, he becomes completely submerged in the ultimate reality so that the events of the sensory world appear to him as mere distractions. Ibn Sīnā admits, however, that portraying what are primarily experiential states by means of human language can never express them completely, which is probably why he, like so many of his Sufi contemporaries, also resorts to the alternative method of allusive symbolism through his allegorical narratives. Hence, despite the fact that at the level of ontology and epistemology ultimate happiness is a purely rational state, it definitely involves mystical and ecstatic elements on an experiential level.

Al-Kirmānī at times also describes ultimate happiness in poetic terms mildly reminiscent of Sufi language, for example when comparing it to the state of a lover trembling from joy upon reuniting with his beloved. Besides this there is nothing particularly mystical or ecstatic in al-Kirmānī’s depiction of the attainment of happiness. Like Ibn Sīnā, he compares the flowing of the intelligible emanation to sparks of light illuminating the soul with the light of knowledge. But al-Kirmānī does this only in the context of revelation and prophetology, for only the rarest and most noble souls can attain their knowledge this way. For others the intelligible knowledge that actualizes their souls is attained only by the mediation of prophets and imams, that is, through instruction, and they are not even supposed to seek private mystical states in this life.

As for the Brethren, they often portray man’s ultimate stage in eloquent terms, but as for al-Kirmānī such depictions seem to be connected more to the afterlife than to mystical states experienced by the soul in its embodied state.

As stated previously, any mystical states that our four philosophers even could envision would have to be restricted to a contact with the lower “divinity” of Intellect,

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255 Ibn Sīnā, Ishāřāt, IV, pp. 47-8, 86-103.
256 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 117.
257 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 550-61.
rather than God himself, given their epistemological and ontological systems. The Brethren, however, seem to go beyond this when they devote a short passage to a discussion of the vision (shāhada) that “friends of God” (awliyā’ Allāh) may attain of God even in this world. While normally visible only through His creation, once God’s chosen ones (asfiyā’uhu) are perfected in their knowledge, the veil is removed from their eyes and they can witness God with their own vision and know Him through their hearts.258

Baffioni believes this vision of God to represent the culmination of epistemological perfection for the Brethren, and that the “friends of God” here refer to the Brethren themselves.259 Alternatively the friends of God might be interpreted as the imams and dā’īs, with whom the Brethren sometimes equate them in other contexts. But as Marquet sees it, since the Brethren do not elaborate the nature of such vision any further, even here the divine vision must actually refer to the knowledge of the Intellect, rather than to knowledge of God’s essence, which is after all completely inscrutable.260

While knowledge of God’s essence, let alone complete assimilation to it, then lies beyond the reach of man, what can be reached is proximity (mujāwara) to God, given that Intellect as the first created or emanated existent is directly below God in the hierarchy of being. It is then as nearness to God that the ultimate state of the human soul is most commonly depicted by the Brethren, and occasionally by al-Kirmānī and Ibn Sīnā.261 But this divine intimacy is not a mystical state attainable in this life, but a state which the human soul in the best of cases may reach in the afterlife.262

4.4 Happiness and the afterlife

What sometimes makes the philosophical concept of happiness difficult to interpret, is that it is quite ambiguously used for both the bodily life and the afterlife. For all four philosophers it is clear that happiness is only truly consummated after the death of the body, once the perfected soul is completely liberated from the material existence to lead a purely spiritual life. Therefore, happiness becomes identified with salvation (najāt) in the afterlife, and theories of happiness turn into philosophical interpretations of life after death as described in revelation.

The philosophical portrayals of happiness in the afterlife are, however, still an integral part of a philosophical system, where the graphic depictions of Paradise and Hell as presented in the Quran are interpreted allegorically to refer to the Neoplatonic account of the soul’s return to the spiritual world. It is not always quite clear, however, what degree of happiness is attainable already during the bodily life. Since the precondition for the soul to attain salvation in the afterlife at all is for it to be perfected during its bodily existence, clearly it must attain some degree of that happiness already before its release from the material world.

259 Baffioni 1998.
261 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmi’a, p. 53; al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 117; Ibn Sīnā, Shīfā : Ilāhiyyāt, p. 348.
262 According to the Brethren, the soul can ascend to the spiritual world and proximity with God only after its separation from its “corporeal mold” in this world, while for al-Kirmānī the proximity is connected to the event of second resurrection. Ikhwān, Jāmi’a, pp. 309-10; al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 117.
Al-Fārābī states in the beginning of his *Attainment of Happiness* that both earthly happiness (*al-saʿāda al-dunyā*) in the first life and ultimate happiness (*al-saʿāda al-quṣwā*) in the afterlife are attained through four kinds of virtues, foremost among them the theoretical virtues bringing about theoretical perfection. But while ultimate happiness emerges as the focal point of a major part of his philosophical writing, earthly happiness is never really discussed after this.

Ibn Sīnā likewise briefly mentions worldly corporeal happiness (*al-saʿāda al-ʿājila al-badaniyya*), which may be attained by those of a balanced bodily constitution. Ultimate happiness, on the other hand, is a state of the soul explicitly connected to the afterlife, for which man must prepare himself in this life by attaining moral and intellectual perfection. While for both of them earthly happiness in this context is a positive state, as opposed to the false conceptions of material happiness, the relationship between happiness in this world and the next is not clear. However, it seems that the happiness attainable in this world is merely a lower degree of ultimate happiness. For al-Fārābī the soul upon its conjunction with the Active Intellect is apparently completely liberated from matter already in this life, and would hence seem to enjoy complete happiness. But it is hard to see how it could immerse in such an immaterial state except occasionally before it is separated from the body.

According to Ibn Sīnā, the highest kind of spiritual pleasure “. . . is not entirely non-existent even when the soul is in the body, for those who immerse themselves in the contemplation of divine majesty, and turn away from their bodily preoccupations, attain a great degree of that pleasure even in their bodies, so that it may possess them and distract them from all other things.” But whatever intellectual pleasure the soul might feel in its embodied state in the material world is only a weak reflection of the indescribable pleasures of the afterlife. Only after its liaisons with the body vanish once and for all, is the soul free to immerse in its intellectual pleasure completely.

Al-Kirmānī makes a similar distinction between worldly and eternal or ultimate happiness, both of which are attained through following the guidelines provided by the divinely appointed imam. The Brethren present their own epistles as the guide through which man may attain happiness in both lives. Worldly happiness (*al-

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264 Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, III, pp. 306-7. Since Ibn Sīnā was a distinguished practitioner and theoretician of medicine, he treated such bodily balance, that is, bodily health, extensively in his medical works, although it occupies no significant position within his ethical thought.
265 Ibn Sīnā, *Ishārāt*, III, pp. 306-7; *Aqsām*, pp. 104-5. Besides worldly bodily happiness, Ibn Sīnā (*Shifā*: *Ilāhiyyāt*, pp. 347-8) also briefly mentions other-worldly bodily happiness discussed in the prophecy of Muḥammad, which according to him can only be verified by belief and revelation, whereas ultimate happiness as a state of the soul is demonstrated by reason. Since Ibn Sīnā refutes bodily resurrection, such a statement is clearly only apologetic, or related to his theory of the imaginary perception of bodily happiness in the afterlife discussed below.
266 See, Davidson 1992, pp. 56, 70.
268 See also, Ibn Sīnā, *al-Mabdaʾ*, pp. 112-4.
saʿāda al-dunya,iyya) consists for each individual of his “staying in this world for as long as possible in the best possible state and the most perfect goal”, while the happiness of the hereafter (al-saʿāda al-ukhrawiyya) means that the “…soul will after its separation from the body eternally stay in the best state and the most perfect goal.”  While worldly happiness is not contradictory with happiness in the afterlife, nor is it a requirement for it. With respect to happiness in this life and the next, people are divided into four categories: those who are miserable in both lives, those happy in both lives, and the ones who are happy in one but not the other.

However, the philosophical outlook of the Brethren and al-Kirmānī is clearly more other-worldly in orientation than that of the Peripatetics, and worldly happiness does not arise as a major subject of discussion. Nevertheless, in the end these four philosophers are in agreement in both defining the ultimate kind of happiness as a state restricted to the afterlife, and in believing that happiness in this life is attained by the same means as that of the hereafter. Therefore the two are not contradictory, and after-worldly happiness does not require misery in this life. Hence, despite their other-worldly focus, none of these philosophers can be accused of complete renunciation of worldly life.

Although mixing an ethical discussion of happiness with a religious discussion of the afterlife may seem confusing from a modern perspective, it is philosophically argued and in line with the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic ideas of happiness. Definition of happiness as the most perfect state imaginable, implies not only that it consists of the most noble kind of action, contemplation of divine ideas, but also that it is the most permanent state, and therefore eternal. While the substance of the soul is immortal, in its embodied state it is drawn between the spheres of Intellect and the material world. As Ibn Sīnā states, there can be no comparison between the two: one eternal and changeless and the other ever-changing and corruptible. According to the Brethren, there is an inherent desire in the soul towards eternity (baqāʾ), and therefore the pull of Intellect towards itself is stronger than the pull of Nature. Happiness, perfection, and eternity are inherently bound to each other.

Here the question of happiness enters the major subject of the Quran and all prophetic revelations: the survival of man after death and the judgment of good and evil in the afterlife. Since bodily resurrection is refuted at the outset as a philosophically untenable doctrine, the philosophical account of the afterlife is necessarily incompatible with the Quranic, at least when interpreted literally. But still most Arabic philosophers want to preserve personal salvation for the soul, going beyond the impersonal union of souls in Neoplatonism, or standard Aristotelianism where at best the intellect or its part can survive the body.

While al-Fārābī seems to be slightly inconsistent in this matter, his account approaches most the idea of impersonal immortality. When the soul becomes incorporeal, all of its bodily faculties and accidents are lifted from it, which would seem to include everything that individualizes the soul, such as memory, imagination,
or the general bodily constitutions affecting the states of souls. Each time a perfected soul is separated from its body at death, it joins (ittāsala) others of its kind in an “incorporeal manner.” The more souls are united the more pleasure (iliidhādh) they will feel, since they will be contemplating (ta’qil) more perfect essences like themselves. Since the number of souls following each other this way is infinite, the pleasure they feel will also grow infinitely. It is then that the soul attains its supreme happiness.

Since the actualization of intellect is what enables the rational soul to dispense with its bodily functions, and hence to survive the death of its body, the non-actualized souls must be destroyed together with their bodies. This is in fact what al-Fārābī says will happen to the inhabitants of the ignorant city (al-madīna al-jāhilīyya), that is, the souls of imperfect intellect that still require matter for their subsistence. When their bodies die, they “perish and dissolve into nothingness, just as happens to animals, beasts, and snakes.” But the souls of those who have erred knowingly survive to suffer the consequences, since they have acquired the knowledge necessary to actualize their intellect. But as they have also acquired opposing dispositions (hay‘āt) to their souls through their attachment to sensual pleasures, once the senses are destroyed together with the body, they will suffer eternally growing pain from the contrary draw of these desires.

While this philosophical portrayal of hellfire was very popular with al-Fārābī’s successors, it seems to be in contradiction with his philosophical views. Since the afterlife is supposedly a purely intellectual state, there should be no possibility for the survival of physical desires. Therefore, Davidson believes al-Fārābī to be dissimulating against his potential critics, while in reality the only immortality al-Fārābī professes is that of the rational unindividuated soul.

While Ibn Sīnā partly draws from al-Fārābī on this subject, his views of the different states in the afterlife are both slightly more complex and slightly more confusing. Unlike al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā wants to preserve personal salvation for the whole soul with all its individual characteristics. For him intellectual perfection is not a condition of human immortality, but instead the human soul is immortal in its substance. Theoretical perfection or imperfection is therefore only the cause of the kind of state that the soul will enjoy during its afterlife, while all rational souls survive their bodies.

Initially Ibn Sīnā gives three kinds of states that the souls might expect to be subjected to in their afterlives. Souls perfected both intellectually and morally will obviously enjoy eternal and absolute pleasure after the death of their bodies. Those falling somewhat short of perfection especially in their intelligible knowledge attain some degree of that happiness, while the rest are subjected to torment. As in al-Fārābī, the pleasure and agony of the happy and tormented are augmented by the attachment of souls to others of their kind, when the souls perceive the essences of all those other

274 Al-Fārābī, Al-Madīna al-fādíla, pp. 262-6; al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, pp. 81-2. That is, since the world is of infinite duration, and al-Fārābī, unlike the Greek Neoplatonists, does not believe in reincarnation.
souls besides their own. The last class includes both intellectually and morally deficient souls.

Among the first there are those who fall in between complete ignorance and the minimum degree of intellectual perfection required for any kind of happiness, that is, those who are aware of their true perfection but have failed to attain it. After their bodily deaths the bodily activities distracting them from facing their true perfection no longer exist, and they suffer immense and eternal torment as a consequence. The completely ignorant, on the other hand, are freed from this pain, since they never came to know their real perfection in the first place. Hence, according to Ibn Sinā, “. . .foolishness is closer to salvation than deficient intelligence.”

As for the knowing but morally deficient souls, they are greatly harmed in the afterlife by their bodily desires due to the contrary nature of these desires to the soul’s intellectual perfection. But for Ibn Sinā, the damage they have done to their souls is merely accidental, and hence their torment is not eternal, but they are gradually purified to reach their proper happiness.

In contrast to al-Fārābī even the ignorant souls might attain some degree of happiness in the afterlife, that is, if they are virtuous and hold to religious beliefs that are correct even in some kind of symbolic manner. At their deaths they would then actually imagine experiencing the kind of sensual pleasures they have been promised, possibly by the intermediacy of a celestial body, since they no longer possess bodies of their own by which to imagine or feel. Ibn Sinā even allows the possibility that such new bodily connection might lead these souls in the end to be prepared for true non-bodily happiness. Similarly the immoral ignorant souls would imagine the sensual punishments promised to them in revelation.

But the language used in this context is very indecisive, and all of this is stated to be merely possible, rather than the certain philosophical truth. This theory would, however, first of all seem to contradict Ibn Sinā’s repeated proofs on the impossibility of reincarnation. Ibn Sinā’s uncertainty in this question is further emphasized by his statement in another context that at least some kind of ignorance leads to the complete destruction of the soul, which on the other hand contradicts his proofs on the indestructibility of human soul as a substance.

Therefore, as Davidson notes, Ibn Sinā’s rationalization of the Quranic account of the afterlife might once more merely be meant to appease charges against religious unorthodoxy. However, whether or not Ibn Sinā sincerely believes in his attempt to

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284 Ibn Sinā (Mabda’, pp. 114-5) is, however, careful to state that these souls would not be truly reincarnated in a new body, that is, they would not attach themselves to a celestial body as a soul governing that body, but would merely employ these bodies in some way in order to attain the needed imaginary perceptions.
286 Davidson 1992, pp. 111-2. Of course this was not what Muslim theologians meant by bodily resurrection, nor was al-Ghazālī satisfied with such “naturalistic” interpretation when he named denial of bodily resurrection as one of the three major unorthodox doctrines professed by the philosophers.
explain revelatory depictions about sensual rewards and punishments in the afterlife, it is the purely spiritual kind of happiness that for him represents true salvation.

While both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren employ more religious language to discuss the afterlife, ultimately their theories are quite similar to those of the Peripatetics, and probably influenced by al-Fārābī at least to some degree. Both of them, however, strongly reject such rationalists that refute the possibility of an afterlife altogether. Al-Kirmānī directs his attack specifically against Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and the “materialists” (dahriyya) who are lured to the error of denying the afterlife by their complete reliance on their intellects and demonstrations.287 For al-Kirmānī paradise (janna) is the eternal happiness that the virtuous soul enjoys in the spiritual world as a disembodied intellect. The pleasures enjoyed by those fortunate enough to attain this state are beyond description by words, and hence al-Kirmānī must resort to parables.288

In describing the more unfortunate kinds of afterlife al-Kirmānī uses Quranic terminology, but substantially they are rather similar to those of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. The hypocrites (munāfiqūn) are those who only dissimulate belief and virtue in order to gain prestige, but who in reality are immersed in the pursuit of worldly things. In doing this they darken their souls and remain dependent on their bodies so that once their bodies die they fall into the “abysses of punishment and darkness.”289 The immoral ones (fāsiqūn) have gained the knowledge, but still turn away from the truth to follow their natural desires. Thus, such a soul will attain two contrary forms (suwar) in its indivisible essence, one through knowledge “binding it to the high stars and separate Intellects” and another through bodily desires, which resembles the “form of animals and beasts that do not worship their Lord.” In their contrariety they cause “indescribable pain” in the soul. The lost ones (dāllūn) similarly turn away from the truth to follow false prophets or their own inclinations, and suffer torment in the hereafter as a consequence.290

As for those simply ignorant of true knowledge and happiness, al-Kirmānī does not appear to state their fate explicitly. He does say, however, that the soul can only attain eternity (baqāʾ) through the knowledge that turns its essence into an actualized intellect, because only then it is protected from the alterations (istiḥāla) of the material sphere. At this point it is no longer harmed by the destruction of its body, just as a fully developed bird is no longer harmed by the breaking of the shell of its egg.291 It would seem then that, as for al-Fārābī, for al-Kirmānī, the completely ignorant souls are destroyed altogether. On the other hand, he also states that those virtuous by nature will naturally revert to vices without external guidance,292 and thus without true knowledge the only eternity an unknowing soul could experience anyway would be a tormented one.

As al-Kirmānī’s Rest of the Intellect, the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity are also oriented towards the afterlife throughout. In fact, as stated before, both of these works present themselves as guidebooks towards attaining salvation. Therefore the epistles

287 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 509-11.
288 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 527-34.
289 “’ādat sālika fī maḥāwī al-‘iqāb wa-’l-zulumāt.” Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 534-6.
290 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 119-21, 536-7.
291 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 496-502.
292 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 497-8, 502.
are filled with descriptions of the afterlife, and the eternal bliss or torment to which the soul is subjected. The Brethren are also equally vehement in refuting such “ignorant philosophers” who would go as far as to deny the existence of afterlife. The purpose for which particular souls were placed in a body in the first place is for them to be perfected for their true existence in the afterlife. Paradoxically, it is only through bodily existence that particular souls can attain their eternal perfection, and to redeem the original sin of Adam that cast them into material existence.

As al-Kirmānī, the Brethren interpret paradise and hell allegorically, but for the Brethren paradise and hell are attached to their complex cosmological system, and the gradual reascent of the souls towards the spiritual world. Hell is composed of the seven concentric spheres of material world from the lowest depths of the center of earth, through the elements, up to the three kingdoms of minerals, plants, and animals, where man inhabits the highest level of hell. Paradise consists of eight degrees from the sphere of Moon, through the other planetary spheres, up till the outermost sphere.

Beyond this, the Brethren akin to al-Kirmānī also identify paradise with the ultimate happiness and eternal pleasures enjoyed by the virtuous soul in the afterlife, once it attains the highest level of Intellect. Hence, “true knowledge” of the bliss of paradise is for the particular soul to attain the degree of Universal Intellect: “. . . reinitiate its spiritual activity, leaving behind the activities of troubles and harshness once it departs the corporeal world, . . . [to enjoy] eternity in the paradise and proximity of the majestic and noble Merciful, ascend in degrees, and attain the most complete happiness.” For the Brethren, such souls are potential angels that become actual ones upon the death of their bodies. When bodily death overtakes them their souls are received by the angels, or the “spirits” of Venus and Mercury to be more precise, and they will enjoy “. . . such bliss and joy that no eye has seen and no ear has heard.”

As for the vicious souls that have not perfected themselves in either knowledge or morality, but have thrown themselves into the worldly pleasures instead, their fate is eternal torment. In contrast to potential angels, they are potential demons transformed into actual demons when their bodies perish. These are the two extremes that man may attain through his endeavours in this world, which determine the kind of afterlife that his soul will endure. While the angelic souls are released

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293 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 297-301.
294 Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, I (9), pp. 328-9; III (42), pp. 491-3; Jāmiʿa, pp. 308-10; Marquet 1973, pp. 210-2. The original sin of spiritual Adam (Ādam al-rūḥānī) was the desire to know God directly, without the intermediacy of Intellect, whereas terrestrial Adam reproduced the error of his archetype in the lower world.
297 Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 319-20. For the Brethren the soul’s salvation is a also personal one, for the soul retains its “spiritual accidents” (al-ʿaʿrād al-rūḥānīyya), such as movement, life, knowledge (ʿilm), and speech (mutq), while the “corporeal accidents” (al-ʿaʿrād al-jīsmānīyya) perish together with the body. See, Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 377-8.
through the world of spheres to the spiritual world, the demonic souls will remain in the sublunar world of generation and corruption residing in eternal misery.298

Their torment consists of the desire of sensual pleasures that have become their nature, but which they, once cut off from their bodies and lacking bodily organs, are no longer able to fulfil. On the other hand, they are equally incapable of attaining the intelligible pleasures of the other world. Such souls are left without the rewards of either world at their death, for they lose the worldly joys without gaining the immensely greater ones of hereafter.299 The otherworldly bliss and torment are further augmented by the contemplation of the now disembodied souls of their own essences, which were moulded by the kinds of actions they performed during their bodily lives. For the virtuous souls this essence is a “luminous and brilliant spiritual form” upon whose contemplation the soul is overwhelmed with joy, while the vicious souls have to face their “ugly and loathsome form” from which they have no escape.300

In order to make their polarized picture of angels and demons a little more subtle, the Brethren give a few exemptions from the punishment of eternal torment. First they state that the souls of children and the insane are saved by the intercession of their parents and the prophets.301 Also exempted are the souls of those who have correctly followed the exoteric aspect of religion without grasping its inner esoteric meanings concerning the spiritual reality. Such souls are said to retain their human form (šūra insāniyya) upon the death of their bodies, thus lying between the angelic form gained by the virtuous and the animal form of the non-virtuous.302

Although the Brethren do not say that these souls are then united with new bodies, all this would seem to imply the doctrine of transmigration, giving such souls another opportunity to purify themselves and attain salvation. Considering their Pythagorean-Platonic inclinations, such a doctrine would fit in perfectly within the Brethren’s philosophy.303 Unlike for al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, or al-Kirmānī, for the Brethren the particular souls are not only post-existent, but they also pre-exist their bodies, thus raising the question of the souls’ status before their union with the bodies.304

There are also many passages in the Epistles that give the impression of reincarnation, without stating it explicitly.305 While some scholars therefore believe that the Brethren profess the doctrine of transmigration, Netton among others denies

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299 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (43), p. 8; Jāmi’u, p. 512.
300 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, II (16), p. 50.
302 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (47), pp. 138-9.
303 Most early Arabic philosophers, including al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Kirmānī, emphatically refute the doctrine of transmigration despite its prevalence in Greek Neoplatonism. However, there are contrary examples, notably Abū Bakr al-Rāzī. Beyond the sphere of philosophy, transmigration was professed in the Islamic world especially among some “extremist” (ghulāt) Shī’i circles. Among the Ismāʿīlī philosophers al-Sijistānī was also accused of once supporting it.
304 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmi’u, p. 378.
305 Thus, for example, “when the particular soul descends and unites with the corporeal frames, it ascends from one state to another, until it reaches the outermost gate in the hell of the world of generation and corruption, which is the human form” (wa-lammā ʿhābatat al-nafs al-juz’iyya wa-qaranat bi-l-hayākal al-jismāniyya fa-taraqqat min hāl ilā hāl ḥattā balaghat ilā ākhir bāb fī jahannum ʿalam al-kawn wa-l-fasād wa-hiya al-sūra al-insāniyya). Ikhwān, Jāmi’u, p. 119.
This is supported by the fact that when the Brethren discuss the supporters of reincarnation (ahl al-tanāsukh), they do not appear to count themselves among them. But according to Marquet, the Brethren in these passages only refute the “Brahmani” kind of transmigration, while they profess another kind themselves.

In their view the sublunar world forms a continuous hierarchy of existents from the center of the earth through the minerals, plants, and animals up to man, where the highest of each class approaches to the lowest specimen of the higher class. The particular souls originally descend to the stage corresponding to their degree of “error” in this hierarchy. Now paradise also has the meaning of “highest degree” (al-martaba al-'ulyā), and hence each stage of existents in the sublunar world has its own paradise: the paradise of plant soul is the animal form, that of animal soul the human form, and that of human soul the angelic form.

Hence, it would seem that the Brethren believe in some kind of reincarnation of souls, where the souls gradually ascend from one degree to another, until they finally attain the human form, and are ready to be released to the world of spheres, provided they have attained a sufficient degree of perfection during their bodily sojourn.

A major difference for al-Kirmānī and the Brethren with respect to the Peripatetics concerning the afterlife is that for them the attainment of otherworldly happiness is related to a temporal eschatological event. For both of them the final judgment of souls takes place at the coming of the day of resurrection, in contrast to the Peripatetics for whom the liberation of souls from matter to their respective afterlives appears to take place perpetually in a temporally eternal universe.

For the Brethren this event of greater resurrection (al-qiyāma kubrā) represents the consummation of cosmological history. In analogy with the microcosmic lesser resurrection (al-qiyāma al-ṣughrā) occurring at the death of human body, it is then that Universal Soul is finally perfected in its reascent to the Intellect, and it can leave the body of the world, thus leading to the destruction of the material world. When the ascent of the Soul is brought to its perfection, evil disappears, and the world becomes good and happy in its totality.

The day of resurrection is further connected to the changing of the cycle of occultation (dawr al-satr) into the cycle of manifestation (dawr al-kashf) after the coming of the seventh and final leader (al-raʾīs al-sābiʿ), also called the ‘pure soul’ (al-nafs al-zakiyya) by the Brethren. It is then that Universal Soul passes the final judgment between the particular souls, and the totality of particular souls are gathered together in order to return to the Universal Soul to enjoy the most absolute kind of happiness. This is the occurrence of second creation (al-nashʿa al-thāniya/al-nashʿa al-ākhira/al-khalq al-thānī), when the creation returns a full swing back to its initial...
state of harmony. Since both evil and corporeality, which is the definition of hell for the Brethren, cease to exist, after the greater resurrection the imperfect souls apparently will disappear into nothingness.

The parallel in the eschatology of the Brethren of Purity with al-Kirmānī’s Ismaili eschatology is obvious up to the terminology used. The resurrection (qiyāma/ba‘th) follows the consummation of cycles at the coming of the leader of the seventh and final cycle (ṣāhib al-dawr al-sābi‘), that is, the qā‘im or the pure soul (al-nafs al-zakiyya), with whom all knowledge contained in the previous cycles will come into open both in its exoteric and esoteric form. Then as people will be illuminated by his knowledge, knowledge and happiness will prevail due to the great number of its possessors, while ignorance will nearly pass away completely.

Since al-Kirmānī vigorously denies transmigration, the souls dying before resurrection will have to wait for the completion of cycles in an “isthmus” (barzakh), knowing in their essence, however, whether they belong among the saved or lost ones. When the new creation (al-khalq al-jadīd/al-nash‘a al-ākhira) finally befalls the world, all souls from the beginning until end of time are gathered together, and are judged according to their merits. It is then that the holy spirit (rūḥ al-qudus) will flow from the qā‘im to the souls enabling them to pass to the spiritual sphere, and all virtuous souls will share the same form as if together forming one single soul. This is the final form of ultimate happiness that those saved to the eternal life will enjoy.

4.5 Happiness and practical perfection

In the preceding outline happiness appears to conform to the contemplative ideal, in which human perfection consists of the perfection of man’s theoretical intellect, through which the human soul is eventually transformed into a pure intellect unrestrained by corporeality. As stated above, this contemplative idea of happiness is in the end otherworldly in orientation, since it is only in the afterlife that the human rational soul becomes completely free to pursue its purely spiritual and intellectual existence.

For none of the four philosophers, however, is happiness in this world a matter of mere contemplation. In addition to theoretical perfection, happiness consists of the practical perfection of morality and virtue, and as we have seen, mere theoretical perfection without its practical counterpart does not lead the soul to happiness in the hereafter. But even so, morality essentially appears as a means for turning away from the sensible level of existence to a purely contemplative one, while ultimate happiness as the very final goal of existence is purely contemplative. Therefore, practical morality would appear as subservient to a higher perfection, rather than the highest goal itself. Since the questions of virtue and morality are connected to materiality and

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312 Ikhwān, Ḣāmi‘a, pp. 75, 197, 356, 400, 441, 464-6, 489. Hence, the very final form of ultimate happiness would seem to be an impersonal one after all, since the particular souls reunite with the Universal Soul and ultimately with the Intellect, as opposed to the happiness enjoyed during the soul’s “interim period” between lesser and greater resurrection.

313 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 507-9, 514-6, 519, 582-8.

314 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 538-40.
corporeality, and to the way that the human soul responds to them during its bodily existence, in an afterlife of pure intellects virtue no longer has much meaning.315

Nevertheless, in order to attain happiness, man must be perfected morally as well. Happiness as the perfection of the rational soul entails the perfection of both of its constituent parts, theoretical and practical. The highest good of the contemplative happiness corresponds to the perfection of theoretical reason, while moral perfection corresponds to the perfection of practical reason, since it is the nature of theoretical intellect to conceive the intelligible nature of reality, whereas practical intellect is concerned with the particular actions of the human world.316

Moreover, in the practice of philosophy the first may be equated with theoretical philosophy, which provides the intelligible knowledge needed for an ascent to contemplative happiness, and the second with practical philosophy, which provides the means for attainment of morality.317 But the goals of practical intellect and practical philosophy are subordinate to the highest theoretical goal, which is the final goal of human existence, as al-Fārābī states explicitly.318 Similarly for Ibn Sīnā the perfection of theoretical intellect is the ultimate human goal, while practical intellect should be subjugated to the service of the theoretical intellect and its perfection.319

But in the case of al-Fārābī in particular, not everyone agrees that he endorses a purely contemplative view of happiness ultimately oriented towards the afterlife. Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭufayl, two Andalusian philosophers succeeding al-Fārābī by two centuries, claim al-Fārābī in his lost commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* to have gone as far as to state that the soul has no afterlife, there is no existence besides sensory existence, and the only happiness man could ever have is political happiness (*al-saʿāda al-madaniyya*) as part of a human community.320

However, such a completely materialistic perception of happiness does not fit at all into the general picture of al-Fārābī’s philosophy, and can therefore only be regarded with scepticism due to a lack of further evidence. While in most of his works al-Fārābī on the contrary clearly supports a contemplative ideal of happiness, even in some of his existing works al-Fārābī does, however, give more emphasis to its practical side such as it appears in the worldly life, as when portraying the prophet, in whom both theoretical and practical perfection are culminated, as an embodiment of ultimate happiness.

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315 The question whether the Intellects of the higher world possess such human virtues as courage or justice is dealt with, for example, by al-Kirmānī (Rāḥa, pp. 571-2), who denies that such moral virtues could be attributed to the Intellects.
317 But since theoretical perfection ends up also containing knowledge related to practical philosophy, such as the true nature of happiness, the correspondence is not as clear-cut as this.
318 Al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsā al-madaniyya*, p. 73.
319 See, e.g., Ibn Sīnā, *Ḥāl al-nafs al-insānīyya*, p. 68. This seems to be the case even if at times Ibn Sīnā (*Mabdaʿ*, p. 110) gives a more dualistic definition of happiness as consisting of the soul “becoming an intelligible world with respect to the perfection of its proper essence, whereas its happiness with respect to the relationship that it has with the body consists of acquiring the dominating form” (*saʿādat al-nafs fi kamāl dhātīhā min al-jihā allātī takhussūshā huwa ṣayyūratāhā ʿālīman ʿaqliyyan wa-saʿādatāhā min jihāt al-ʿalāqā allātī baynahā wa-bayna al-badan an yakūūn luḥā al-hayʾa al-istiṭāʾyya*). Even here the soul’s governance of the body seems to be an instrumental good leading towards the absolute good of purely intelligible existence.
320 Galston 1990, pp. 59-60.
For this reason some have tended towards interpreting al-Fārābī’s view of happiness as involving both theoretical and practical perfection to an equal degree, or even to be of predominantly practical or political nature.321 But it would seem that even in the case of al-Fārābī as the most rationalistic of philosophers, the overwhelming evidence of his works suggests that he views happiness to be of a contemplative-theoretical nature. What is equally clear, however, is that al-Fārābī more than anyone else emphasizes the impossibility of an isolated theoretical perfection in this world, without the presence of its counterpart in practical perfection. On the one hand, cultivating virtue and morality is a prerequisite for attaining the ultimate happiness of theoretical perfection, and on the other, theoretical perfection that does not culminate in political action is useless. Therefore, even if in the end happiness consists of pure intellection of spiritual substances, in the worldly life the philosophical road to happiness is one where morality and knowledge are seamlessly bound to one another.

321 See, the discussion in Galston 1990, pp. 56-94 and Galston’s own argument for practical perfection as a constitutive part of happiness in Galston 1992.
5 Happiness and philosophy

5.1 Philosophical life

Since happiness for the philosophers is the highest good which man can attain, it is only natural that it should also be the final goal of the practice of philosophy. In principle, philosophy leads towards both the theoretical and moral perfection involved in the quest for happiness, since theoretical philosophy provides the knowledge required for intellectual perfection and practical philosophy the principles towards moral virtue. Therefore the idea of philosophy transcends that of a merely theoretical discipline with the objective of gathering knowledge of the world, to be also a spiritual path leading its practitioner towards happiness and salvation.

Of the works investigated in this study such spiritual dimension of philosophy is particularly evident in the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity and al-Kirmānī’s *Rest of the Intellect*, both of which present themselves as guides for one embarking on a spiritual road towards ultimate happiness. But it is also present in the Peripatetic philosophy of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. Viewed from the perspective of happiness as its end, philosophy emerges as a special way of life leading its practitioner towards the ultimate target of human existence.

While happiness is the perfection proper to a human being, unlike the lower irrational creatures of the sublunar world, man does not attain his perfection by nature, but only through his own free choice. He must both become aware of the true nature of happiness and make an active decision to pursue it.322 Once he has made the choice, he also must come to know the means by which he is able to progress towards happiness, and to implement those ways in his own life. All this together would seem to constitute the philosophical life – that is a way of life whose guiding lines are born as a result of philosophical reflection, as opposed to being merely arbitrary, and towards a goal that is considered to be the greatest possible good for man.

Since the highest goal is essentially contemplative, the philosophical way of life may be characterized first and foremost as a contemplative life, of which the acquisition of knowledge forms the primary element.323 But since happiness in the material world cannot be attained by contemplation alone, without simultaneous moral rectification of the soul, the philosophical life in the end consists of a dual pursuit of knowledge and virtue. The philosophical life appears then in contrast especially to a purely hedonistic life of chasing immediate sensual pleasures, or the ‘beastly life’ (*al-sīra al-bahiḍīyya*) of ignorance and vice, over which al-Fārābī’s Plato would prefer death.324

322 See, e.g., al-Fārābī, *al-Siyāsah al-madaniyya*, pp. 71-2. Men are in fact the only beings who can choose whether to pursue their proper perfection or not. Irrational creatures proceed towards their perfection by nature, whereas the angelic beings of the higher world are perfect to begin with.

323 According to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I.v., 1095b17-19), the three main ways of life (*bioi*) that man can pursue are a hedonistic life of enjoyment, a political life, and a contemplative life (*bios theorētikos*).

The idea of philosophy as a way of life is a commonplace for students of classical philosophy. Pierre Hadot is particularly famous for painting in his works a picture of late Antique philosophy as a special way of life.\(^{325}\) For Hadot all four of the major philosophical schools prevailing in the Hellenistic period — Aristotelianism, Platonism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism — portray an idea of philosophy as a spiritual progression towards an ideal state of wisdom, involving both rational contemplation of the world and spiritual exercises aimed at self-control. Philosophy as love of wisdom focuses on a vision of the world as seen by the intellect, and entails a way of living according to that wisdom, aiming to transform the whole being of the philosopher.

The practical aspect of philosophy involves not only ethics, which properly investigates the way man should live his life, but all parts of philosophy, even logic and physics. For Hadot, the final goal of such philosophy is not the theory and philosophical doctrines that it generates, but the soul’s spiritual progress that is attained through their contemplation.\(^{326}\) Even in Aristotelianism, the most ‘scientific’ of the four schools of philosophy, theoretical activity is portrayed as a life of contemplation, bringing about happiness and near-divine pleasure in the philosopher. Each philosophical tradition further portrays in its own terms the philosopher-sage as an almost unrealizable ideal of being, the perfect man that the student of philosophy should strive to emulate.

Hadot’s view of philosophy as a way of life has been explored surprisingly little with respect to the Arabic philosophical tradition, despite the fact that the Arabic philosophers quite clearly adopt this classical perception of philosophy.\(^{327}\) The idea of the philosophical life has been investigated from the perspective of single authors in a number of brief articles. Chittick notes the similarity of Hadot’s teachings of philosophy as a spiritual quest to the thought of “Bābā” Aḥḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī (d. 1214).\(^{328}\) Lewin briefly surveys the ideal of the philosophical life in Arabic philosophy from the perspective of the treatise on the ideal philosopher by the Baghdad Peripatetic Ibn Suwār (d. ca. 1017).\(^{329}\) Griffith explores the theme based on the ethical writings of another philosopher from the Baghdad Peripatetic school, al-Fārābī’s Christian pupil Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī (d. 974), concentrating mainly on the question of sexual abstinence.\(^{330}\)

For Hadot the philosopher living a life guided by wisdom appears as an anomaly in a society guided by conventional morality, resulting in a rupture between a philosophical and a common way of life, best exemplified in the life and fate of

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\(^{326}\) According to the Neoplatonist Porphyry (d. ca. 305 CE), hence, the essence of the kind of contemplation (\(\textit{the} \vot\textit{ria}\)) that brings happiness is not learning abstract doctrines, even true ones, but of ensuring that the teachings become “nature and life” within us. See, Hadot 1995, p. 100.

\(^{327}\) Vallat (2008) has also recently pondered in an on-line article the question of why Hadot’s ideas have not been applied to classical Arabic philosophy, suggesting the absence of lavish biographies of the philosophers akin to the Greek Neoplatonists as one explanation. His article does not, however, so much delineate what the philosophical life would consist of in Arabic philosophy, as it explains why the classical ideal became truncated in the Islamic context.

\(^{328}\) Chittick 2000.

\(^{329}\) Lewin 1955. The treatise, translated by Lewin from an unedited manuscript, is entitled \textit{Treatise on the Qualities of the Philosopher} (\textit{Maqāla fi šīfāt al-rajul al-faylasūf}).

\(^{330}\) Griffith 2006.
Socrates. Leo Strauss, a student of both Greek and Arabic philosophy, comes close to Hadot in his view of pre-modern philosophy as a special way of life of the elect, although for him the conflict between philosophy and society is much more central.331

Among the scholars of Islamic history, Hodgson in particular, although not a specialist on philosophy, has observed how the tradition of falsafa carries on the classical idea of philosophy as much more than a purely academic discipline. For him the philosophers form a relatively cohesive group of people unified by their practice of the philosophical and natural sciences. But even more than the practice of certain intellectual sciences, the word philosophy implies a philosophical approach to living, a rationally based life apparent both in the seeking of rational knowledge about the world and the ideal of governing oneself and others according to rational principles. As for the Greek philosophers, the true philosopher is an elusive ideal of a perfect man who fully realizes the philosophical ideal in his being.332

The one Arabic text in which philosophy is most clearly and explicitly portrayed as a way of life (sīra) oriented towards the greatest human good is a short treatise called Philosophical life (Kitāb al-sīra al-falsafiyya) by the early unorthodox philosopher Abū Bakr al-Ṭārumī (d. ca. 925).333 The starting point of al-Ṭārumī’s ethical treatise is apologetic in that al-Ṭārumī attempts to prove in it against his unnamed opponents that his own life has been a philosophical one, and that he therefore deserves the title of philosopher at least as much as any of his contemporaries. Al-Ṭārumī’s treatise depicts a view of philosophy that is composed as much of practice as of theory, consisting of the dual way of knowledge and virtue.

Philosophy is exemplified more than anything in the figure of Socrates, the imam of the philosophers, who embodies the philosophical ideal both in his quest for knowledge and in the ascetic practice of his life.334 Although al-Ṭārumī does not allege to have reached the level of this paradigm of philosophical life, he still claims to have lived in a way that embraces both sides that constitute philosophy: knowledge (‘ilm) and practice (‘amal). He points out to the innumerable treatises that he has written on all possible branches of the philosophical sciences to demonstrate that his level of knowledge is worthy of a philosopher.335 But al-Ṭārumī is even more passionate to prove that his way of life, governed by the principles of justice and moderate asceticism, is worthy of a philosopher.

Arabic philosophers in general adopt a view akin to al-Ṭārumī’s of philosophy as an enterprise of double nature consisting of both a theoretical and practical aspect. Like the Greek Aristotelians and Neoplatonists before them, Arabic philosophers employ various definitions of philosophy, many of them borrowed from among those favored

331 See, chapter 2.2 above.
333 Al-Ṭārumī, Kitāb al-sīra al-falsafiyya.
334 Al-Ṭārumī, however, argues against those whom he believes to exaggerate Socrates’ ascetic practices, and claims that any excesses that Socrates’ way of life might have embraced were caused by his youthful zeal, while at a more mature age he toned them down towards the ideal of moderation. In Arabic tradition the figure of Socrates often blends with the Cynic Diogenes, and is hence portrayed as the ideal of asceticism par excellence. For the Arabic Socrates, see Alon 1990.
335 Al-Ṭārumī was a popular object of criticism for his heterodox views to such Ismaili philosophers as Abū Ḥātim al-Ṭārumī and al-Kirmānī, among others. But he was also criticized by many philosophers, such as al-‘Āmirī and Maimonides, who did not hold his philosophical contributions in very high esteem.
in the late Greek Neoplatonic school of Alexandria in particular.\textsuperscript{336} Most of these definitions embody the view of philosophy as a practical discipline. Many of the Arabic definitions of philosophy moreover incorporate the idea of philosophy as a dual path of theory and practice, emphasizing the necessity of the theoretical knowledge acquired from the philosophical sciences being actualized in one’s actions.

Among the early philosophers al-Kindī, while initially defining philosophy theoretically as the “knowledge of the true natures of things according to human capacity”, states the goal of the philosopher to be to “reach the truth in his knowledge and act according to it in his actions.”\textsuperscript{337} Al-‘Āmīrī, a younger follower of al-Kindī, emphasizes the practical aspect of philosophy even more vehemently. Firstly he echoes al-Kindī in stating that man is endowed with the faculty of reason in order for him to both know the truth and act in accordance with the truth. He further argues against such philosophers and Ismailis whom he accuses of considering pre-eminence in knowledge to exempt them from virtuous actions, in particular the ones stipulated by religious law, that knowledge is only completed through action. Knowledge, far from being the final end in itself, is pursued for the sake of virtuous actions in the first place.\textsuperscript{338}

For al-Fārābī the practical nature of philosophy is particularly visible in the bulk of his writings, in which practical philosophy occupies a more central position than in any other Arabic philosopher. However, he also places more emphasis on the actualization of philosophical knowledge at the level of a political community, besides that of individual moral action. Al-Fārābī echoes al-Kindī’s double definition of philosophy as both true knowledge and true action in stating philosophy to consist of acquisition of theoretical knowledge (\textit{al-‘ulūm al-naẓariyya}) on the one hand, and good actions on the other.\textsuperscript{339} In his introduction to the study of philosophy he also states the final goal of philosophical learning to be two-fold: knowledge of the Creator as the culmination of theoretical knowledge and the good actions performed by the philosopher.\textsuperscript{340}

While the core of philosophy of course consists of acquisition of theoretical knowledge, or true intelligible knowledge about the world, al-Fārābī goes a long way to emphasize that abstract knowledge alone does not constitute true philosophy. As for al-Rāzī, only one who embodies philosophy in both theory and practice can truly

\textsuperscript{336} For the six standard Alexandrian definitions of philosophy, and their afterlife in Syriac and Arabic literature, see, Hein 1985, pp. 86-130.

\textsuperscript{337} “\textit{g}haraḍ al-faylasūf fī \textit{i}lmihi iṣṣābat al-ḥaqq wa-\textit{f}ī \textit{‘}amalihi al-\textit{‘}amal bi-\textit{l-}ḥaqq.” Al-Kindī, \textit{Kitāb al-Kindī ilā al-Mu‘taṣim bi-\textit{l-}llāh fī al-falsafa al-\textit{l-}lā, p. 9. Al-Kindī shows his familiarity with various further definitions of philosophy favored by the “ancients” in his \textit{Risālat al-Kindī fi ḥudūd al-ashyā’} wa-rūṣūmihā, pp. 172-4.

\textsuperscript{338} “Knowledge is the beginning of action and action is the completion of knowledge” (\textit{al-‘}ilm mabda’ \textit{l-}l-‘amal wa-\textit{l-}‘amal tamām al-\textit{l-}ilm). Al-‘Āmīrī, \textit{Kitāb al-\textit{l-}lām bi-manāqiḥ al-\textit{l-}islām}, pp. 77-8.

\textsuperscript{339} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Fuṣūl al-madāni}, p. 170 [= \textit{Fuṣūl muntaza’a}, p. 100]. “Philosophy, according to the first opinion and in reality is for man to acquire the theoretical sciences/knowledge, and for all of his actions to become harmonious with what is good according to the first [unexamined] common opinion and [what is good] in reality” (al-falsafa fī bādī al-ra’y fī al-ḥaqqa hiya an yahṣul li-\textit{l-}insān al-\textit{l-}ulūm al-naẓariyya wa-an tukīn af-\textit{d}uluha kulluha muwāfīqa li-mā huwa jamīl fī bādī al-ra’y al-mushitarak wa-fī al-ḥaqqa). Al-Fārābī does not consider the commonly held idea of good to be identical with what is good in reality, but one who acts contrary to the common opinion of good is less likely to perform truly good actions.

\textsuperscript{340} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Mā yanbaghī}, p. 13.
call oneself a philosopher. Therefore, someone who has acquired even the totality of theoretical knowledge, but who is not virtuous in his actions, is merely a false philosopher (al-faylasūf al-bahraj). This is because he has not yet come to realize the real goal for which philosophy is practiced in the first place, that is, true happiness, and hence pursues his own sensual desires or some other vain goals instead. Therefore, even if he is capable of acquiring theoretical knowledge, such knowledge will dwindle away from him by old age unattached as it is to any higher purpose.\(^{341}\) Given a choice between an immoral man who knows his Aristotle to perfection, and a virtuous man who is completely ignorant about Aristotle, al-Fārābī claims the second to be closer to being a philosopher.\(^{342}\)

But al-Fārābī goes further than al-Rāzī in extending the practical qualifications of a philosopher to his social function in a society. For al-Fārābī a philosopher who fails to impart his excellence to others, at least to the degree that is possible for him in the circumstances, is a useless philosopher (al-faylasūf al-bātil), despite all his superior knowledge and morality. Al-Fārābī’s perfect philosopher is one who possesses both complete theoretical and practical virtue, as well as the capability to convey as much as possible of his perfection to others by political means.\(^{343}\)

For al-Fārābī too then philosophy in the end comes to form a whole way of life, which consists of the pursuit of both theoretical knowledge and practical virtue, with contemplative happiness as its final goal. Philosophy forms a path by which one gradually ascends towards theoretical and moral perfection. In al-Fārābī’s prologue to philosophy the path of the philosophical initiate (al-sabīl allatī yaslukhū man arāda al-falsafa) is portrayed again as one in which theory and practice are intimately wedded. The philosophical way consists of aspiring for both knowledge (‘ilm) and practice (‘amal) until the philosopher reaches perfection in both.

But the two spheres of philosophy are not separate from each other, for the actions are based on knowledge. As for al-‘Āmirī, the philosophical venture towards virtuous action takes place through acquisition of knowledge, while knowledge is only truly completed in actions.\(^{344}\) These two together, theoretical knowledge of the world and a virtuous way of life (sīra fādila), are what al-Fārābī claims Plato to have found to be required for the attainment of happiness. After careful examination of all practical arts and theoretical sciences professed by people, al-Fārābī’s Plato discovers that it is only philosophy that provides the knowledge of both of those two requirements for happiness.\(^{345}\)

Hence, al-Fārābī’s perception of philosophy emerges as something much more than theoretical knowledge even of the most general kind. Just as for al-Fārābī the perfected philosopher represents the peak of the hierarchy of humankind, similarly true philosophy is situated at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge. Philosophy is the queen of all theoretical sciences and practical arts, to whose leadership all other forms of knowledge should be subjected. While other sciences and arts are perfectly valid in their pursuit of some partial goal of a theoretical or practical nature, philosophy as the

\(^{341}\) Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣil, pp. 191-4.

\(^{342}\) Al-Fārābī, Fuṣūl al-madānī, pp. 169-70 [= Fuṣūl muntaza‘a, p. 100].

\(^{343}\) Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣil, pp. 183-4, 187ff. However, the unfortunate circumstances where the surrounding society is not prepared to heed his instruction does not diminish his status as a philosopher.

\(^{344}\) “tamām al-‘ilm bi-‘l-‘amal.” Al-Fārābī, Mā yanbaghī, pp. 2, 13.

\(^{345}\) Al-Fārābī, Falsafat Aflūn.
absolute wisdom (al-ḥikma ’alā al-ḥiṣāq) is oriented towards the good (jamīl) itself, the good of both knowledge and action. Since the truly good things are gained through philosophy, according to al-Fārābī, philosophy necessarily must also be the way by which ultimate happiness is attained.346

Ibn Sinā shares the idea about philosophy as a discipline consisting of both knowledge and action, as well as the idea that the practice of philosophy will ultimately bring one happiness. Ibn Sinā gives a long and unique definition of philosophy (ḥikma) in his classification of the philosophical sciences, which perfectly represents the idea of philosophy as a practical discipline leading man towards his perfection in both theory and practice. According to Ibn Sinā, the essence of philosophy is “. . . a speculative discipline from which man attains actualization through the knowledge of all existence in his soul, and the knowledge of the actions he must take to ennoble his soul, in order for him to be perfected and become an intelligible world corresponding to the existing world, and to be prepared for ultimate happiness in the afterlife.”347

Ibn Sinā therefore defines the essential nature of philosophy explicitly through its ultimate purpose of conveying its practitioner towards the final goal of happiness, and in particular to prepare him for the ultimate bliss in the afterlife. Both the theoretical and practical knowledge that philosophy provides are seen as instrumental for the final goal of soul’s ascent. In the Healing Ibn Sinā defines both parts of philosophy through their functional role in the acquisition of happiness. Hence, theoretical philosophy includes the sciences that seek to perfect the theoretical faculty of the soul through actualizing the intellect by means of knowledge concerning the external reality, whereas practical philosophy seeks to perfect it through knowledge related to man’s actions. While philosophy then provides the knowledge about what brings about man’s final perfection, in its practical part such knowledge must also be actualized for it to become reality. Hence, for Ibn Sinā the objective of practical philosophy is not knowledge of the good, but action based on such knowledge, that is, the good itself.348

As for al-Fārābī then, ultimate happiness is gained through the combination of knowledge and action, which comprises the core of philosophical life. These together form the dual path of what Ibn Sinā in one of his treatises calls the theoretical and practical purification of the soul (al-tazkiyya al-‘ilmīyya ’amaliyya). The first of these consists of the practice of the theoretical philosophical sciences (al-‘ulūm al-ḥikmiyya al-naṣariyya), while the second is composed of both the practice of philosophical ethics and the adherence to religious observances, for which Ibn Sinā grants a larger

346 Al-Fārābī, Tuhšīl, pp. 181-3; Tuhbīh, pp. 20-1.
348 Ibn Sinā, Shīfā : Ilāhiyyāt, p. 2; Aqsām, p. 105. This may be compared with Miskawayh’s (d. 1030) statement in Degrees of Happiness (Tartīb al-sa‘ādāt) [cited and translated in Gutas 1983, p. 232]: “Whoever wishes to perfect himself as a human being . . ., let him acquire these two arts – I mean the theoretical and practical parts of philosophy; as a result, there will accrue to him the essential natures of things by means of the theoretical part, and good deeds by means of the practical part.”
role in the practice of the philosopher than the more rationalistically oriented al-
Fārābī.  

For both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā then philosophical knowledge in the end has an
ultimately Gnostic purpose: it is saving knowledge that leads man towards his
ultimate happiness, understood as salvation of the soul to eternal existence. This
Gnostic idea of philosophical knowledge is best epitomized in the contents of
al-Fārābī’s work by the title *Attainment of Happiness*, of which the first part rather
surprisingly deals with the parts of theoretical philosophy, or in Ibn Sīnā’s statement
that “all the sciences share in one benefit – namely, the attainment of the human
soul’s perfection in act, preparing it for the happiness in the hereafter.”  

There is one further definition of philosophy adopted from the Greek
Neoplatonists that rather well characterizes the transcendent ideal of Arabic
philosophy, when viewed as a comprehensive spiritual path towards human
perfection. Al-Kindī, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, and the Brethren of Purity all at one time or
another define philosophy as man’s divinization, or as “… becoming like god as
much as is possible for man.”  

The definition is derived from Plato’s *Theaetetus*, and
was particularly dear to Greek Neoplatonists, pertaining to the six standard
Alexandrian definitions of philosophy.  

Perceiving philosophy as *imitatio dei* can refer to both the theoretical and practical
aspects of philosophy, that is, grasping the totality of intelligible knowledge and thus
becoming like the semi-divine Intellects, or becoming god-like in one’s actions as a
result of moral perfection. While al-Kindī and al-Fārābī state the goal to be for man to
become like God in his *actions*, Ibn Sīnā expresses it in terms of both theoretical and
practical perfection. On the one hand, in transforming himself to an “intelligible
world” man imitates the First Principle in his knowledge, while on the other in
acquiring just actions he imitates God in his actions.  

The Brethren of Purity also understand the definition of philosophy as a
resemblance of God to refer to both its theoretical and practical part: “We mean by
resemblance resemblance in knowledge, actions, and emanation of goodness, for the
Creator is the most knowing of all savants, wisest of all sages, best in his actions, and
the most virtuous in goodness, and anyone who advances his degree in these things
becomes closer to God.”  

Such a view of philosophy goes back to both Aristotelian
and Platonic traditions, since for Aristotle it is the highest goal of man to live a life

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350 “‘inna al-’ulūm kulluhā tashtarīk fī manfa’a wāhida hiya: taḥṣīl kamāl al-nafs al-insāniyya bi-’l-fi’l
351 “al-tashabbuh bi-ilāh (or: bi-’l-ilāh/bi-af’al Allāh) bi-qadr mā fī tāqat al-insān.” Al-Kindī, *Risālat al-
Kindī fī ḫudūd al-ashyā’ wa-rustūmāh*, pp. 172-4; Al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-sīra al-falsāfiyya*, p. 108; al-
352 See, Hein 1985, pp. 99-100, 116. According to Plato (*Theaetetus*, 176b; *Republic*, X, 613B), the
highest virtue for man is to “become like god as much as is possible for man” (*hoson dunaton anthrōpō
homoiousthai theō*). The Brethren of Purity are particularly fond of this Platonic quotation, and they
refer to it frequently throughout the *Epistles*. For the treatment of the passage by the Brethren as both a
definition and Platonic quotation, see, Baffioni 1997, pp. 479ff.
354 “araḏnā bi-’l-tashabbuh al-tashabbuh fī al-’ulūm wa-’l-ṣanā’i’ wa-ifḍat al-khayr, wa-dhālīka anna
al-bārī, jallā thanā‘ uhu, a’lam al-‘ulamā’ wa-āḏkam al-ḥukamā’ wa-āṣna’ al-sunnā’ wa-aḏḏal al-ākhŷr,
290.
contemplating the divine things, which is the kind of life gods would presumably live, while the goal of philosophy for the Neoplatonists may be stated to be man’s divinization, in the sense of soul’s reunion with the spiritual reality.355

But as for the Greek Neoplatonists ascending in the scale of virtues,356 for the Arabic philosophers also man’s ascent is a progressive path towards divine perfection in both parts of philosophy, contemplation of theoretical knowledge and living a virtuous practice. Philosophy is a special way of life in both of its constitutive parts. Even the theoretical part of philosophy has the practical goal of lifting the soul above its mundane sensory reality, and transforming it into a pure spiritual substance for the afterlife. But in this life philosophy is manifested in practice also in the good actions of the philosopher.

5.2 Dual path of the Ismailis

For the Ismailis the practical-religious nature of philosophy is of course even more pronounced, since there is no question that Ismaili philosophers like al-Kirmānī would practice philosophy merely in order to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge. As De Smet points out, for al-Kirmānī philosophy is not a theoretical enterprise, but forms part of the worship of God, which is as indispensable for man’s salvation as is the practice of religious duties.357 Besides, philosophizing does not consist of the human intellect’s unlimited quest for the truth, since the ultimate theoretical truth of the world should at least in some way be founded on the esoteric truth mediated by the imam.

But since we have seen that the ultimate purpose of philosophy for the Arabic Peripatetic philosophers is also to reach ultimate happiness or salvation, the divergence between the Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers does not appear very significant in the end. For the Ismailis the way towards happiness also consists of a dual path of theory and practice, just as it does for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, even if their contents might be slightly different. And for Ismailis also the ultimate purpose of their works of philosophy is to provide the knowledge that is required for the ascent towards happiness.

For al-Kirmānī the dual way of spiritual ascent consists of the two religious observances required from everyone in order to gain happiness: worship of God by knowledge (al-‘ibāda al-‘ilmīyya) and worship by practice (al-‘ibāda al-‘amalīyya). Al-Kirmānī argues repeatedly for the indispensability of both knowledge and practice for the soul’s salvation. In this double observance the function of practical worship is to purify the soul in order for it to be prepared for its illumination through knowledge, whereas the theoretical observance provides the means for the gradual intellectual ascent.358

In comparison with the philosophers, the theoretical worship would then correspond to theoretical philosophy and practical worship to practical philosophy,

355 Hence, Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, X, 1177b30ff.): “If then the intellect is something divine in comparison with man, so is the life of the intellect divine in comparison with human life” (ei dē theion ho nous pros ton anthrōpon, kai ho kata touton bios theios pros ton anthrōpinon bion). See also, O’Meara 2003, pp. 3, 31-9.
356 See, O’Meara 2003, pp. 40ff.
357 De Smet 1995, p. 397.
358 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 104, 115-6.
which perform more or less the same functions in the soul’s ascent. But what sets al-Kirmānī fundamentally apart from the philosophers, is that for him it is not philosophy that brings about happiness, but religion. Both practice and knowledge are for him religious observances, the exoteric and esoteric worship (al-‘ibāda al-‘zāhirā/bātīna) required of the Ismailis in order to attain salvation. The source of knowledge about both observances lies in the religious history and hierarchy of mankind, rather than in philosophical speculation. While the practical observance has been brought to men by the prophets in the form of religious commandments, the esoteric knowledge is provided by imams through the rest of the Ismaili religious hierarchy.359

Hence, for al-Kirmānī there is no need for a practical branch of philosophy, through which man would discover by pure reason the specific moral precepts and actions required for the purification of the soul. What Ismaili philosophers like al-Kirmānī can provide in the field of morality, however, is the esoteric meaning behind specific religious practices, or a rational explanation of the function they serve in the soul’s ascent. The role of philosophy such as it is practiced by the Ismailis, or the ‘science’ of divine unity (‘ilm al-tawḥīd) as al-Kirmānī would rather call it, is identified with the esoteric observance, that is, the esoteric truth behind the exoteric level of religion. But philosophical knowledge is meant only for those who have already passed beyond exoteric knowledge and practice, and hence acquired the required purity of soul.

Based on this initial difference, that is, the philosophers’ reliance on the pure intellect and the Ismaili belief in the necessity of divine guidance, it is hardly surprising that al-Kirmānī is more than skeptical that the way of the philosophers would truly lead anyone towards happiness. Al-Kirmānī accuses the philosophers of only endorsing knowledge of the two required forms of worship, while rejecting the practice, and of believing that the soul could become virtuous merely by studying their books.360 Hence, al-Kirmānī dismisses Aristotelian ethics by questioning the benefit of knowing, for example, that the virtue of courage is a medium between cowardice and foolhardiness, without actually becoming courageous oneself.361

Given the Peripatetic insistence of philosophy consisting of both theory and practice, al-Kirmānī does not appear to be entirely right in his condemnation of philosophy. But the real core of al-Kirmānī’s rejection of the philosophic position is in fact that the philosophers reject the religious practice, and replace it with rationalistic philosophy. The basic error of the philosophers in the sphere of both practical and theoretical philosophy is that they discard both the religious ordinances and the esoteric truth brought by the prophets and imams, and instead rely on their own intellects, believing their speculations to be the truth. For al-Kirmānī, without the divinely revealed guidelines, the intellect will necessarily follow its natural

359 Al-Kirmānī, Rāha, p. 104.
360 Al-Kirmānī, Rāha, pp. 549, 589-90. Al-Kirmānī is equally dismissive of the polar opposite of only endorsing religious practice at the expense of esoteric knowledge.
361 Al-Kirmānī, Rāha, p. 590. This is, of course, precisely why both Aristotle and the Arabic Peripatetics emphasize that the goal of philosophical ethics is not to know what a virtue is, but to become virtuous.
inclinations and go astray. Therefore, the soul will not be able to ascend from sensory to angelic existence, and reach ultimate happiness.362

For the Brethren of Purity happiness is also attained through the dual way of knowledge (‘ilm) and practice (‘amal), which is the self-proclaimed purpose of their epistles: to act as a “ladder of salvation” (sullam al-najāt) for man through which he can, through knowledge and action, gain happiness in both this world and the next.363 Knowledge and action are equally important for the attainment of happiness and salvation, and for the student of philosophy they should be bound together. Knowledge is only of use to the philosopher, if it is accompanied by corresponding actions. On the other hand, action without knowledge is equally fruitless, from the perspective of ultimate happiness, as “God only accepts action from someone who knows.”364

On the question of philosophy and happiness, the Brethren seem to fall somewhere between the Peripatetics and al-Kirmānī. The Brethren, as the Peripatetics, essentially present philosophy as an instrument for ascending towards happiness, and hence their attitude towards the human intellect as a tool for gaining knowledge, and towards philosophy in general, is clearly more positive than al-Kirmānī’s.

In contrast to al-Kirmānī, the Brethren’s view of such ancient philosophers as Pythagoras, Plato, or Aristotle is highly reverent, although contemporary philosophers are mainly ignored or criticized anonymously. But the Brethren’s view of philosophy is very religious, and, as for al-Kirmānī, for them it is in the end a combination of both prophetic and philosophical knowledge that shows the true way towards happiness. Real saving knowledge is not grounded on the reflections of the unaided intellect alone, although true philosophy does seem to be harmonious with divine revelation.

Like other Arabic philosophers, the Brethren also offer various definitions of philosophy in their epistles, with obvious resemblance to the ones embraced by other philosophers within the Graeco-Arabic philosophical tradition. Many of them contain the idea of philosophy as consisting of both knowledge and action. In the beginning of their very first epistle on arithmetic, they state the beginning of philosophy to be “love of knowledge,”365 its middle “knowledge of the true natures of existents according to human capacity,” and its end “speech and action in accordance with the knowledge.”366 Hence, philosophy is understood to consist of a progression from an inclination towards knowledge, through actually acquiring the knowledge concerning the true nature of reality, to finally living it out in one’s actions. As for al-Fārābī, the true philosopher-sage (faylasūf/hakīm) is one who has gained perfection in both his knowledge and actions.367

362 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 582, 588-90.
363 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, pp. 17, 21.
365 The common definition of philosophy as love of wisdom/knowledge derives from the Greek etymology of the word, which was of course familiar to Arabic philosophers.
367 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, pp. 99, 475. As for Ibn Sīnā, absolute human perfection is incarnated in the figure of the prophet, whereas the philosophers follow him in the hierarchy of human perfection. See, Ikhwān, Rasā’îl, IV (47), pp. 124-5.
But in the more esoterically oriented Comprehensive Epistle in particular, the Brethren portray philosophy more than anything as a way towards ultimate happiness and salvation. Hence, philosophy is the universal science (al-‘ilm al-kullī) by which universal virtue (al-faḍilah al-kulliyah) is attained, or the “ladder of salvation.” Through philosophy the soul will “gain its happiness, through studying philosophy it will attain its perfection, through perfection it will gain its beauty, and through beauty it will be transferred to the abode of high virtues, angelic dispositions, lofty stations, and elevated degrees, and gain immortality, eternal power, and salvation from everlasting torment.”\textsuperscript{368} The benefit of the philosophical knowledge provided by the epistles themselves in the soul’s ascent towards ultimate happiness is stated innumerable times in even more eloquent terms.\textsuperscript{369}

But, despite their high opinion of the value of philosophy in general, like al-Kirmānī, the Brethren are highly critical of the misguided philosophers who reject the religious revelation. Hence, with respect to ultimate happiness and afterlife, while philosophers in general are aware of the spiritual reality beyond the sensory appearances, most of them are ignorant of the way by which the soul can ascend to the spiritual afterlife.\textsuperscript{370} For the Brethren the way towards ultimate happiness consists of belief in revelation together with the practice of philosophy, for the worst of people are those who have no religion at all to prevent them from fully indulging in worldly pleasures. As for al-Kirmānī, divine support (ta’yīd) is an essential component of the ascent towards happiness and salvation.

Therefore, for the Brethren the error of many, if not all, philosophers is to become infatuated with their intellects to the extent that they reject the prophetic revelation and do not feel bound by the religious law.\textsuperscript{371} The philosophers go astray because of their inability to grasp the deeper esoteric meanings behind the exoteric religious commandments. In the Brethren’s syncretistic vision, true philosophy, such as it was professed by the ancients and as it is presented in the epistles, is in perfect harmony with the prophetic message.\textsuperscript{372}

Again as for al-Kirmānī, for the Brethren exoteric and esoteric worship and knowledge are also intimately bound together, and both are necessary on the way towards ultimate happiness. The deeper meaning of religious law lies especially in the purification of the soul from its bodily dispositions, and while theoretically this would be possible for the most adept by themselves through the practice of philosophical ethics, the guidance provided by a divinely revealed law is indispensable.\textsuperscript{373} Exoteric religious knowledge and worship, identified with the corporeal and sensible level of


\textsuperscript{369} See, e.g., Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, IV (50), p. 250; Jāmi‘a, pp. 15ff.

\textsuperscript{370} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, I (9), p. 330; III (42), pp. 451, 521.

\textsuperscript{371} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, IV (46), pp. 63-4, 79; IV (47), pp. 137-8. The worst philosophical belief for the Brethren is pure materialism and denial of a spiritual afterlife, which is not something that most Peripatetic philosophers would have professed.

\textsuperscript{372} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, IV (48), p. 179. As the Brethren (Rasā‘īl, IV (45), pp. 41-3) themselves proclaim, their teaching embraces all doctrines and sciences, and they draw their knowledge from the works of the philosophers and prophetic revelations alike.

\textsuperscript{373} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, I (9), p. 335.
being, must precede delving into the deeper esoteric mysteries of the spiritual and intelligible nature. Only the spiritually pure and intellectually capable should continue their ascent towards the higher truths, however, while the majority must remain at the corporeal level of the exoteric religion.\(^{374}\)

While such people who only profess the exoteric religion (\(zāhir\) \(al\)-\(sharṭ\)\(a\)) live a virtuous life to the degree that their nature allows, for they are only blameworthy if in fact they are capable of the spiritual ascent but knowingly refuse it, they are like a body without a spirit (\(jism\) \(bi\)-\(ghayr\) \(rūḥ\)), confined to the material level of existence. But those who profess to the philosophical doctrines (\(al\)-\(ārā\)' \(al\)-\(falsafiyya\) and knowledge of the ultimate realities (\(al\)-\('ulūm\) \(al\)-\(haqīqiyya\)), without adhering to the exoteric religion, are equally mistaken about the true way to happiness, for they are like a spirit left without a body to protect them in the material world.\(^{375}\)

Hence, as for al-Kirmānī, the religious revelation and philosophical knowledge together come to compose the two aspects of exoteric and esoteric religion through which man will gain happiness and salvation. Together they form a seamless whole, for the esoteric truths of philosophy are contained potentially, as symbolic allusions, in the exoteric religious revelation.\(^{376}\) In one of their epistles the Brethren discuss these two aspects specifically as two separate forms of worship, in a way that bears at least superficial resemblance to the practical and theoretical worship of the Ismailis.

For the Brethren these two ways of worship are religious worship (\(al\)-\('ibāda\) \(al\)-\(sharṭ\)\(iyya\) \(al\)-\(nāmisīyya\)) and philosophical worship (\(al\)-\('ibāda\) \(al\)-\(falsafiyya\) \(al\)-\(ilāhiyya\)). The first is required of all people, and essentially consists of submitting to God’s will (\(islām\)) through following the orders and prohibitions specified in the religious law. The essence of the second is belief (\(īmān\)) and acknowledgement of divine unity (\(taqrīr\) \(bi\)-\(tawhīd\) \(Allāh\)). However, in contrast to al-Kirmānī, for the Brethren the exoteric and esoteric worship are not identical with the theoretical and practical parts of the way to happiness. Namely, esoteric worship also includes within it practices that go beyond those specified in the religious law, and which for the Brethren represent the esoteric variants of the exoteric regulations.

Hence, unlike for al-Kirmānī, for the Brethren there appears a special way of life of the philosophical elect into which are incorporated ordinances that are not required from the mass of believers. As the Brethren are careful to admonish, one must not

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\(^{374}\) See, e.g., Ikhwān, \(Rasā\)\(īl\), III (42), pp. 504-12; Jāmi‘\(a\), pp. 462, 474, 510. Like the philosophers, the Brethren identify several classes of people with respect to knowledge, for each of whom they offer their proper sciences and ways of worship. While philosophy and esoteric knowledge are for the elect only, for whom the highest state of being is contemplation (\(tafakkur\)), for the lowest group, including women, children, and ignorant men, their best state consists of a devout practice of the religious regulations.

\(^{375}\) Ikhwān, Jāmi‘\(a\), pp. 40, 288-9. Since the Brethren apparently believed in transmigration, the exoteric believers do seem to have the possibility of salvation in their next incarnation. While the completely immoral are lowered to the degree of animals after their separation from the body, exoteric believers remain at the human level, instead of rising to the angelic one. See, chapter 4.4 above and Ikhwān, \(Rasā\)\(īl\), IV (47), pp. 138-9.

\(^{376}\) See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmi‘\(a\), pp. 36-7. This totality of esoteric and esoteric knowledge and practice seems to be the “religion of philosophy” (\(dīn\) \(al\)-\(falsafā\)), which the Brethren (Jāmi‘\(a\), p. 61) passingly mention to consist of belief in divine unity, obedience to the religious law, justice, and attainment of good moral dispositions.
embark on philosophical worship before he has mastered the religious one, for submission must always go before belief.377

5.3 Initiation into philosophy

Both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy then constitute a complete path, composed of a theoretical and a practical part, with happiness as its ultimate aim. The main difference between the philosophical and Ismaili ways is that for Ismaili philosophy practical worship is from the outset identified with following the prophetic law, whereas in Peripatetic philosophy the practical part also is a subject for philosophical investigation. However, as we will see in the next chapter, even in Peripatetic philosophy religion in practice assumes a major role within the philosophical praxis. Nevertheless, the practical-religious orientation shared by both philosophical schools is further emphasized by the perception of philosophy as not only saving knowledge, but also a hidden system of knowledge that should not be freely divulged to everyone. While philosophy is the path to ultimate happiness and salvation of the soul, it is not meant for everyone, for only the ones who fulfill the prerequisites are allowed to join its cadres.

Ismailism is of course a clearly Gnostic sect in this sense of a closed grouping possessing secret saving knowledge. To become an Ismaili a formal process of initiation (balāgh) is required, including an oath of allegiance (mithāq/’ahd) and promise of secrecy on the esoteric doctrine. The actual philosophical knowledge follows as the culmination of the long process of instruction, and is divulged within the sessions of wisdom (majālis al-hikma) to the initiates having passed through the prior echelons of knowledge.378 Accordingly, al-Kirmānī’s major philosophical work is forceful in warning about the dangers of divulging its contents to the uninitiated.379

Peripatetic philosophy is not a religious sect in the sense of the Ismaili movement, although in the context of the rival creeds and doctrines of the intellectual scene of the period it does not always appear far from it.380 Like the Ismailis, the philosophers within the Peripatetic tradition share a set of essential doctrines and basic convictions. And as for the Ismailis, for the philosophers these doctrines are also ultimately related to man’s salvation to an afterlife, while the philosophical system provides an overall religious explanation of man and his purpose.

In the Islamic context teaching of philosophy was not institutionalized into formal schools, but took place through private individual instruction, or within the informal circles (majlis) centered around an established philosophical authority in private homes or at other premises.381 There was neither a formal process of initiation nor an oath of secrecy through which a disciple would be initiated into the philosophical

377 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (50), pp. 261ff.
378 See, e.g., Halm 1996b. In contrast, the instruction of the exoteric doctrine, such as Isma‘ili jurisprudence, was open to all in Fatimid Egypt.
379 See, e.g., al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 105.
380 Thus, a vizier invites Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī as the "head spokesman of the philosophical sect" (ra’s mutakallimī al-firqa al-falāṣfīyya) to a debate with the theologians present in his gathering (majālis). Kraemer 1992, p. 181.
381 See, Kraemer 1992, pp. 56-60, 103ff. for a portrayal of the practices of the philosophical schools in Buyid Baghdad, particularly those formed around Ibn ‘Adī and Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī.
way. But still the same ideal of concealment of knowledge from the undeserving appears prominent in the works of the philosophers.

Ibn Sīnā is as adamant as al-Kirmānī against spreading his work indiscriminately: “If you divulge or waste this knowledge, let God be the judge between us.” The philosophers of the Arabic tradition quite consciously related such practices of occultation of knowledge to the ancient masters, including Plato and Aristotle in particular.

Hence, the first step on the philosophical path to happiness is to be accepted among the fortunate few who are qualified to tread on it. But exactly what are the qualities that are required of a student of philosophy? For the Ismailis the answer is obviously that philosophy should only be divulged freely to the advanced Ismaili students who have reached the stage of highest esoteric knowledge – the grade to which philosophy pertains within the Ismaili curriculum. Despite the restrictions on spreading knowledge, in a sense the Ismaili community is less elitist than that of the philosophers. The “call” (da‘wa) to truth is not restricted to an intellectual elite, although the process of conversion is also not one of mass proselytizing. Especially in the delicate situation outside the Fatimid territories, the Ismaili missionary (dā‘ī) should carefully seek a prospective convert, and gradually lead him towards the truth through subtle persuasion. After the formal initiation, the dā‘ī should provide the student knowledge according to his capabilities, although he should be entitled to the whole truth eventually.

In the case of Ismaili philosophy then, it should be revealed only to those further advanced within the grades of practical and theoretical worship, who have reached a sufficient rank in both morality and knowledge. Al-Kirmānī, himself a dā‘ī and a host of sessions of wisdom, specifically warns of divulging his work to “worldly men” (abnā‘ al-dunyā) and those denying the divine guidance of the imams.

For Ibn Sīnā the requirements of a philosophical pupil are similarly both intellectual and moral. In a prologue to the physical and metaphysical part of Remarks and Admonitions he insists on guarding the work from those who do not fulfill the prerequisites of a philosopher. In an epilogue he sets forwards what these requirements are precisely: “Protect it from the ignorant and vulgar, those not endowed with bright intelligence, experience, and habit, those whose inclinations lie

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382 “fa-in adha’ta hādhā al-‘ilm, aw aḍa’tahu, fa-’llāh baynī wa-baynaka.” Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, p. 162.
383 See, chapter 2.2 above. Hence, according to Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995/8), himself closely associated with the Baghdad Peripatetics: “In the ancient times wisdom was forbidden from all except those to whom it pertained and who were known to be naturally disposed towards receiving it. The philosophers used to inspect the youths desiring to gain wisdom and philosophy, and if they found him rightly disposed then they would adopt him and pass him the wisdom, otherwise they would not do this” (kānāt al-hikma fī al-qādīm mamnū‘ minā illā kullā mā kāna min ahlihā, wa-man ‘ulimā annahu yataqabbala huwa tab‘, wā-kānāt al-jalāsi‘a tanzūr fī mawālid man yūrīd al-hikma wa-‘l-falsafa, fa-in ‘ulimat mināhā anna sāhib al-mawālid fī mawālidhi huṣūl dhālikahu lahu istahkhdamūhu, wa-nawālidhu al-hikma, wa-illā fa-lā). Ibn al-Nadīm, Fihrist, p. 332.
384 Halm 1997, pp. 66-7; Corbin 1972, p. 18. For an early portrayal of the process of conversion, see, al-Yaman, Kitāb al-‘ālim wa-‘l-ghulām. Still, al-Kirmānī (Rāḥa, p. 501) resorts to the Fārābian idea of instructing the truth in images approximating the intelligible truth (mithālātuhā allātī tuḥkikhā) in accordance with the intellectual capabilities of each student, which would imply that not all Ismailis are capable of reaching the final esoteric-intelligible truth.
385 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 121.
with the rabble, and from the heretics and riffraff among the philosophers.” Ibn Sinā proceeds to delineate the qualities of a suitable philosophical pupil: “. . . someone whom you trust to be of pure heart and a straight way of life, who abstains from the insinuations of Satan, and directs his gaze towards the truth with good will and sincerity.”

Finally, he gives instructions for the initiation of a prospective student into the philosophical path: “Then answer his questions gradually in parts and pieces, detecting from your previous answer what to say next, pledge him through an inviolable oath to God to follow the path you have presented to him, finding solace in you.” In sum, Ibn Sinā’s depiction of finding and instructing a student of philosophy does not appear very far from the activities of an Ismaili dā’ī gradually initiating a suitable candidate into the tenets of the Ismaili creed.

Al-Fārābī gives more detailed instructions on the prerequisites of a student of philosophy, drawing directly from the Republic of Plato. It is such prerequisites that a student should fulfill in order to avoid the fate of becoming a “false philosopher”, which is what happens to those who go about studying philosophy without being “prepared for it” (muwaṭṭā’ nahwahā). Not all of the prerequisites are necessarily inborn qualities, as some presumably arise in the student through the “Platonic” education of the philosopher.

Nevertheless, the student of philosophy should also be naturally disposed (lahu isti’dād bi-´l-fiṭra) towards the theoretical sciences. This refers first of all to inborn intellectual capabilities, such as good understanding (fahm), conception (tašawwur), and memory (hufāẓ). But equally it includes other character traits of a moral nature, such as patience, sincerity, lack of greed, piety, resolution, and virtue. At least in terms of the intellectual requirements, for al-Fārābī there is a safeguard built within philosophy itself that prevents the unqualified from attaining it. Namely, in his prolegomena al-Fārābī states Aristotle to have deliberately employed obscure language (ighmād) to ensure that the student’s nature is suitable for the study of philosophy, and hence to restrict philosophical knowledge only to those entitled to it by nature.

Whether the Brethren of Purity are a group of Ismaili devotees or of religiously oriented philosophers, the manner in which they approach the question of recruitment of pupils certainly resembles that of a religious sect. The Epistles are filled with forceful warnings against divulging their contents to the unqualified: “You o’ faithful

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386 “fā-ṣunhu ‘an al-jāḥilīn, wa-´l-mubtadhālīn, wa-man lam yurzaq al-fītna al-waqqāda, wa-´l-durba wa-´l-`āda, wa-kāna ṣagḥāhu ma’a al-ghāgha aw kāna min malāḥidāt hā’ulā’ al-falāṣīfā, wa-min hamaqīhīn.” Ibn Sinā, Ishrārāt, IV, p. 162. The prologue and epilogue are translated in Gutas 1988, pp. 55–6, although I have chosen not to follow Gutas’ translation which attempts to preserve something of the original rhymed prose. As a minor note, Gutas translates malāḥida as sycophants, whereas I am inclined to interpret it as a reference to the philosophers denying the soul’s afterlife, or the “western” Peripatetic philosophers who were an object of Ibn Sinā’s polemics.


389 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, pp. 191-3; Plato, The Republic, VI, 485Bff.

390 Al-Fārābī, Ma yanbaghī, p. 14.
and compassionate brother who have gained this great and noble knowledge, be resolute, trustworthy, and sparing with it, and don’t be like those demonic brethren who squander it!"³⁹¹ The Brethren of Purity present themselves as a society of righteous individuals entrusted by God with mystical saving knowledge which they can only reveal to those possessing the necessary qualities: “We do not conceal our mysteries from people for fear of kings possessing earthly power or due to caution against the wrath of the multitudes, but in order to guard what has been gifted to us by God.”³⁹² For the Brethren the required prerequisites of a pupil are intellectual as well as moral, although the Brethren tend to emphasize moral purity as the primary requirement for joining their society of pure brothers.³⁹³

The Brethren also give detailed instructions for the recruitment of a new member. Certainly reminiscent of the operations of an Ismaili dāʿī, anyone wishing to adopt a new brother should proceed cautiously in this task. He should carefully investigate his history and character, and interrogate him about his beliefs, in order to determine whether he is suitable to become his pupil, just as the “worldly people” do for the purposes of a marriage contract or purchase of land. Moreover, the recruiter should be careful to probe into the prospective pupil’s inner qualities, and not be deluded by deceptive appearances, and he should prefer youths with a yearning for knowledge and the hereafter.³⁹⁴ As for the Ismailis, entering the brotherhood involves more formal procedures of initiation, such as a sacred oath (ʻahd/īmān) taken by the initiate. As an initiation rite, the Brethren recommend as a procedure for testing the pupil’s character a custom supposedly practiced by the ancient philosophers, which consists of 40 days of fasting and 40 nights of standing on guard.³⁹⁵

The society of the Brethren of Purity themselves is further portrayed as a closed group of virtuous individuals recruiting and instructing new initiates towards the path for salvation. This community is said to arrange sessions every 12 days, in which the teachers train their disciples on the path of wisdom as fathers admonish their sons: “Appear to them in your garments, beautiful appearance, and great prestige, just as the Universal Soul emerges to the particular souls, for they are like children to you.”³⁹⁶

As for Ibn Sīnā, the pupils are then gradually guided through the echelons of philosophical and religious knowledge, each according to his particular capabilities: “Read them from your wisdom, caution them with your admonitions, in accordance with their position and capabilities, and instigate them towards seeking of knowledge as their highest concern.”³⁹⁷ In the sessions of the Brethren of Purity, the Epistles

³⁹² “‘innā lā naktum asrārānā ‘an al-nās khawfān min saṭrat al-mulūk dhawī al-salṭāna al-ardīyya, wa-lā ḥadhārān min shaghāb jumhūr al-‘awāmm, wa-lākīn šiyātātan li-mawāhib Allāh ‘azza wa-jallā lanā.” Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, IV (48), p. 166. In another passage (Jāmi‘ a, p. 23) the knowledge in their possession is said to have passed through history from ancestor to offspring, certainly reminiscent of the Shi‘i notion of esoteric knowledge passing through the ‘Alid line of the Prophet’s family.
³⁹³ See, e.g., Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, IV (50), pp. 251-3.
³⁹⁴ Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, IV (45), pp. 43-52.
³⁹⁵ Ikhwān, Jāmi‘ a, pp. 365-6.
³⁹⁷ “fa-utli ‘alayhim min ḥikmatikā, wa-‘izhum bi-tadhkīrikā, ḥasabamā yaḥtamīl makānuhumīn, wa-yattasi’ lahum inkānuhum, …wa-l-ḥathth ‘alā ṭalab al-‘ilm an takūn akthar ināyatuhum.” Ibid.
themselves act as the ultimate guide in the instruction of disciples towards their theoretical and practical perfection: “Read them these epistles from the first to the last, epistle by epistle, and chapter by chapter, for in them there is the clearest sign for them.”

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398 “wa-utli ‘alayhim hādhihi al-rasā’il min awwalihi ilā ākhirihā, risāla risāla, wa-maqāla maqāla, wa-baynahā lahum bi-awḍaḥ al-dalāla.” Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, p. 539.
6 Practical purification

6.1 Beginning of purification

In the fourth chapter we saw Arabic philosophers to be in essential agreement about the true nature of human happiness as contemplative bliss, so that attainment of happiness for the soul consists of its ascent to a spiritual-intellectual level of existence. Hence, their view of happiness reflects the Neoplatonic background of both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy discussed in the second and third chapters. In the fifth chapter we saw further that for both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy the way towards ultimate happiness consists equally of attainment of theoretical knowledge and moral virtue, which together form man’s progression towards a dual perfection.

It is now time to examine more closely the two parts of which the philosophical path to happiness is composed, knowledge (‘ilm) and practice (‘amal). As it is the practical part from which the student of philosophy should start his spiritual progression, it is the proper next step for this study also. Since Arabic philosophers in general agreed on that philosophy consists as much of action as of knowledge, what is the precise nature of such philosophical praxis for them? Moreover, what is the relationship of that practice with theoretical knowledge, since, on the one hand, moral virtue seems to be required before or simultaneously with the study of philosophy, while on the other, at least for the Peripatetics, moral purification is based on philosophical knowledge? But first of all, where is the need for the philosophical practice in the first place, when the contemplative ideal of happiness shared by Arabic philosophers in general would rather seem to encourage the philosopher to withdraw from the activities of everyday life to a purely contemplative existence?

For Neoplatonism, man’s final end consists of the soul’s rediscovery of its true spiritual nature. All Arabic philosophers are Platonists in their view of man, in the sense that for them the real human substance, or the thing people refer to with the word ‘I’, is soul rather than body, or even the union of soul and body. The soul’s attachment to a body during its worldly life is only accidental in nature, for its real nature is not the bodily and sensible existence it experiences in this world, but a spiritual and intellectual one. While the soul remains a separate substance even in its embodied state, its bodily entanglements will easily cause it to become oblivious to its

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400 Ibn Suwār in his depiction of the ideal philosopher states the philosopher’s goal as “directing the soul towards return to its essence” (yaqūd al-nafs ilā al-rujū‘ ilā dhāti‘āhā). Lewin 1955, p. 278.
401 The very first treatise of Plotinus’ Enneads (I.i.), What is the living being and what is man? (Peri tou ti to zoon kai tis ho anthrōpos), argues for the identity of the true man with the rational soul, in contrast to Aristotle, for whom only the hylomorphic composition of soul and body could properly be called man, let alone the Stoics or Epicureans who define soul in purely physical terms. Ibn Sinā echoes the Plotinian view in his proofs for the identity of ‘I’ with the soul, as well as his demonstrations for the substantiality and immateriality of the soul repeated in innumerable works. See, e.g., Ibn Sinā, Risāla fī ma‘rifat al-nafs al-nāṣīqa, pp. 183ff.
true spiritual essence. It is in this Platonic sense that Arabic philosophers interpret the Delphic maxim of “Know thyself!”, that is, as man’s quest to rediscover his true essence as a spiritual soul.

In order for this rediscovery to take place man must cleanse his soul from its bodily entanglements, which are identified as the reason for the soul’s neglect of its real nature. For the philosophers in the Neoplatonic vein, the concept of purity (zakā'/safā'/tahāra/etc.) then emerges as an essential one, up to the point that the Brethren of Purity derive their name from it, as it is through regaining its original purity that the soul can reclaim its spiritual nature. Man’s ascent to happiness through philosophy hence consists of a purification (tazkiya/tasfiya/tahdhib/etc.) of the soul, whereby the soul is gradually liberated from the material world to a spiritual level of existence.

It is through both knowledge and practice that the soul can regain its purity, but in Neoplatonism it is especially the practical part that begins the soul’s detachment from the material world. Even before the student starts his ascent in the steps of philosophical knowledge, he should strive to form his character in a way that gradually detaches him from his bodily needs and the sensible world.

In Greek Neoplatonism purification of the soul (katharsis) progressed through stages of civic (politikai arētai), purificatory (kathartikai), and theoretical virtues (theōrētikai), where each grade would represent a further step away from the soul’s attachment to the body, and towards the ideal contemplative state of being. These three stages of spiritual progress would at least partially overlap a tripartite classification of philosophy into ethics, physics, and metaphysics. In such a scheme the starting point of philosophical ascent would then consist of pre-philosophical ethics, that is, a kind of initial purification of the soul by means of ethical practices.

Despite the fact that Arabic philosophy in general embraces the idea of philosophy as the soul’s ascent through both knowledge and practice, Arabic philosophers did not adopt the formal Neoplatonic ordering of the ladder of virtues. But to what degree is the purification of the soul through practice nevertheless understood as the first step of philosophical ascent that precedes the learning of theoretical knowledge? In Arabic Peripatetic philosophy the relationship between practice and theory does not always

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402 The Neoplatonic theme of the particular souls’ oblivion of themselves after their descent is favored especially by the Brethren, who in many ways are the most Plotinian of the four philosophers. As al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Kirmānī deny the soul’s pre-existence, the soul cannot ‘forget’ a state of purity it never had, even though it can still be oblivious to its true nature. See, e.g., Ilkhwān, Jámi‘a, pp. 486ff.; Ibn Sīnā, Shifā‘: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 352.

403 The Greek exhortation gnōthi seauton translates in Arabic into i‘rif nafsaka, meaning both “know thyself” and “know thy soul.” For those Arabic philosophers that employed the maxim, such as Ibn Sīnā, its meaning is precisely for man to come to know the true nature of his soul as its real essence. Ibn Sīnā in fact mainly uses the maxim as an inspirational introduction into his concise treatises on the soul. For the Brethren of Purity, who are also fond of the maxim, it seems to have a deeper epistemological meaning, since the idea of knowledge of the self is connected to the microcosm-macrocosm analogy. See, Altman 1969a; Ibn Sīnā, Maqāla fī al-nafs, pp. 147-8; Risāla fī ma‘rifat al-nafs al-nātiqa, p. 182.

404 In one of his treatises Ibn Sīnā (Risāla fī al-kalām ‘alā al-nafs al-nātiqā, p. 196) calls the theoretical part of philosophy “purification by knowledge” (tazkiya bi-l‘ilm) and the practical part “purification by action” (tazkiya bi-l‘ımaal).

405 O’Meara 2003, pp. 8-10, 40-9; Hadot 1995, p. 137. See also, Plotinus, Enneads, I.2. for his discussion of the stages of virtue, which were further systemized by Porphyry and the later Neoplatonists.
seem to be as clear-cut, for at least in their ethical treatises Arabic philosophers usually do not state at which stage of the philosophical studies the practice of virtue should be introduced. Moreover, in contrast to the tripartite Greek Neoplatonic classification of philosophical sciences mentioned above, in their philosophical compendiums al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā place ethics at the end of the philosophical curriculum, rather than at the beginning. When al-Fārābī insists that true philosophical knowledge must culminate in moral virtue, he seems to imply that virtuous practice follows from, rather than precedes, philosophical knowledge. Still at times al-Fārābī does insist on purification of the soul even before initiation into philosophy. Ibn Sīnā does not appear to specify any precise order in which the practical and theoretical part of the ascent should take place, but they are generally presented more as simultaneous, rather than an ethical practice preceding the theory.

The necessity of practical purification before initiation to theoretical knowledge is supported with various reasons. First of all, it is necessary because of the assumption of the contrariety of the two spheres of being: the sensible-material and spiritual-intelligible. The goal of the philosophical ascent is for the human soul to rise from the material to the spiritual world. From the perspective of the human soul these two worlds represent two contrary directions, and when the soul faces one, it turns away from the other. The role of moral purification is then to gradually turn the soul’s attention upwards from the material-sensible level of existence towards the spiritual-intelligible realm, through eliminating the bodily connections of the soul that draw it down to the material world. The more fully the soul is liberated from its bodily attachments, the more strongly it becomes attached to the spiritual world.

To this is related an epistemological basis for the necessity of practical purification as the first step of philosophy. It is the body and its activities that distract the human soul from devoting itself completely to intellection, and force it to be occupied with the sensible and material things. As Ibn Sīnā states the matter, man inherits a weakness from its immersion in matter towards conceiving (tašawwur) the intelligible forms that are inherent in nature. Hence, the soul must be cured of this material state for it to become fully attentive towards the intelligibles. The more the soul is purified, the more it becomes like the Intellects of the higher world that are completely free from matter, and the more attached it becomes to their world. As a result its facility to receive intelligible emanations from the Intellect is enhanced. In al-Fārābī’s quotation of Plato: “Only the pure can approach the pure.”

Besides the epistemological foundation, the purpose of practical purification is even more importantly to consolidate the right kind of desire (shahwa/shawq) in the human soul. Practical moral purification helps man to direct his desire away from the worldly things towards which the soul is inclined by its bodily nature, towards the spiritual and intelligible things that the soul in reality desires in its essence. It is

406 Ibn Sīnā, Mabda’, p. 98.
407 “man lam yakun naqīyyan zakiyyan fa-lā yadnū min naqī zakī.” See, al-Fārābī, Mū yanbūghī, p. 11; Ibn Sīnā, Ḥal al-nafs al-insāniyya, p. 94; Risāla fī al-kalām ‘alā al-nafs al-nāṭīqa, p. 197-8; al-Kirmānī, Rāha, p. 100. Compare this to Olympiodorus’ (d. 570) argument for the necessity of pre-philosophical purification: “For just as those whose eyes have been in the dark cannot look towards the sun, so a person weighed down by passions of the soul cannot take hold of these studies.” Olympiodorus, Prolegomena [quoted in: Sorabji 2004, p. 324].
difficult for the soul to recognize its real object of desire while it is immersed in its bodily state, unless the soul is cleansed from its bodily appetites. This is the reason that al-Fārābī gives in his prolegomena for the necessity of purification of the soul, to rectify the moral dispositions (īslāh al-akhlāq) of the soul, so that it learns to desire the truly good spiritual and intelligible things, instead of the material ones.408

Similarly the Brethren of Purity consider a philosophical disciple ready to receive intellectual knowledge only when he has renounced his desire for worldly life.409 For al-Kirmānī, once man subjugates his bodily faculties through practical purification, he will only desire the spiritual and religious things.410 It is therefore the subjugation of those bodily appetites that cause man to desire the wrong things that forms the core of the philosophical praxis.411

For all these reasons, both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity are adamant in their insistence that the soul must be purified before the pupil is to be initiated into any kind of philosophical knowledge. However, when for the Brethren, as for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, the concept of purity is attached to both knowledge and practice, al-Kirmānī explicitly identifies purification (tahdhīb/taḥthīr) of the soul with practical morality. He is also the only one who clearly delineates practical purification of the soul as a preliminary stage that must necessarily precede acquisition of theoretical philosophical knowledge.

For al-Kirmānī the attainment of practical virtue must come first, because the soul in its initial state of being is not prepared to receive intelligible knowledge, attached as it is to the sphere of the sensible and worldly things. Since the two spheres of existence, material-sensible and spiritual-intelligible, are antithetical to each other, the nature of the soul must first be molded by actions. Only then will it become correspondent to the nature of the immaterial Intellects, to the company of whom it is preparing to ascend in its quest for ultimate happiness.

For al-Kirmānī therefore the shaping of practical morality is the first stage in the ascent of an Ismaili initiate towards the spiritual world. In al-Kirmānī’s analogy, this practical purification works for the soul of the novice as fire works for a lump of gold on its way towards being transformed to a precious ornament: it must first be melted and refined of its impurities before it is ready to receive the crafting that brings about its greatest perfection.412

Although the Brethren of Purity are not equally explicit that practical moral education must precede any philosophical learning, they share the assumptions behind al-Kirmānī’s requirement. The Brethren emphasize throughout their epistles the opposing natures of the worldly (dunyā) and corporeal as opposed to other-worldly

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408 Al-Fārābī, Mā yanbaghī, pp. 11-2, 15.
409 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (50), pp. 251-2.
410 Al-Kirmānī, Rāha, pp. 115-6.
411 However, desires are not only based on moral dispositions, but also on beliefs, and therefore possessing correct beliefs is equally important in order for man to desire the right things. Hence, the Brethren of Purity require correct beliefs from a suitable discipline of philosophy, such as belief in the afterlife in particular. For the same reason Ibn Sīnā appears to lean on logic as the first step of philosophy, since only knowledge of demonstration can make the soul desire intelligible things. The molding of correct beliefs engendering the right kind of desire pertains to the sphere of religious education.
412 Al-Kirmānī, Rāha, pp. 99-100, 115, 119-20, 501-2. Al-Kirmānī also speaks of practical worship as the matter with respect to the theoretical worship as form.
(ākhira) and spiritual spheres of being. Since they are of contrary natures, it is impossible for man to pursue the goods of both worlds simultaneously, but he must choose one over the other. The soul’s ascent through knowledge towards its spiritual nature must therefore be accompanied by the cleansing of the bodily accidents that draw its attention towards the lower world.413

Hence, like al-Kirmānī, the Brethren come to emphasize that purity of the soul must be required from a student before he can be introduced into the deeper esoteric-philosophical truths behind the exoteric religion. Philosophers should first seek to train the souls of their pupils, before they open the doors of wisdom to them.414 Once purified, the students of philosophy are already tuned towards the higher sphere of spiritual and intelligible being, when they start their philosophical education. A pure soul, unstained by bad actions, dispositions, and opinions, is like a mirror that reflects the spiritual forms transcending the sensible world, which remain hidden from an impure soul.415

In the case of al-Fārābī, there are few places in his writings where he appears to presuppose purification of the soul as a pre-requisite for philosophical learning. In his introduction to Aristotelian philosophy al-Fārābī repeats the discussion concerning the proper starting point of philosophy that was routinely presented in the Alexandrian works of this genre.416 Al-Fārābī’s introduction gives alternative opinions of various Greek schools of philosophy about the correct initiation to philosophy as either geometry, logic, or ethics. While ethics was often considered the best point of departure to philosophy among late Greek Neoplatonists, since philosophical ethics is taught by means of logical arguments, logic or geometry were often proposed instead. But even then, logic was preceded by the pre-philosophical cultivation of morality, while a philosophical study of ethics would follow upon the study of logic.417

This is also the conclusion of al-Fārābī’s treatise: even before one begins to study the philosophical sciences, the moral dispositions of the desiring soul should be rectified, not only through theoretical knowledge, but also in practice (bi-‘l-af’āl). It is only then that one may begin the shaping of the rational soul through study of the demonstrative sciences. Besides this, in the context of the philosophical education of the princes, al-Fārābī requires a prior training of the soul of the “Platonic kind” before the future king is introduced to the theoretical sciences.

Anyone who sets out to study the speculative disciplines should fulfill certain prior requirements without which his theoretical studies are of no avail to him in his quest to become a true philosopher. These requirements include both sufficient intellectual capacities, such as good understanding and memory, but also moral qualities, such as

413 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, I (9), pp. 328-9, 375, 387.
414 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (43), pp. 10-3.
415 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (43), pp. 6-8.
416 Al-Fārābī, Ma‘yanbaghī, pp. 12-3. As Gutas (1985b) emphasizes, al-Fārābī’s prolegomena is a rather faithful adaptation of the Alexandrian introductions to Aristotle’s philosophy, reproducing nine of the ten points usually covered in such treatises.
417 Gutas 1985b, pp. 116-7; Sorabji 2004, pp. 319, 322-3; Westerink 1962, p. xxvi. Hence, Simplicius (d. ca. 560) (translated in Sorabji 2004, p. 323) suggests: “Perhaps, then, there is every need of an ethical pre-catechism, but not supplied through Aristotle’s Ethics, but through habituation without texts, and through non-technical exhortations, both written and unwritten, to straighten our character, and after that the logical and demonstrative method. After those, we shall be able to take in scientifically the scientific discussions of character and research into reality.”
love of justice, disregard for bodily appetites, and general virtue. In any case, al-Fārābī’s pupil, Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī, does predispose “study of books on morals and deportment” before “schooling himself in the true science,” thus supporting the view that it was a general conception of philosophy within the Baghdad Peripatetic school.

While Ibn Sinā does not state consistently that one should be morally purified before learning theoretical philosophy, he also insists, for example, in Remarks and Admonitions, that the knowledge contained in the work should only be divulged to those who are both intellectually and morally entitled to receive it.

While moral purification may be required before learning philosophy, it is also clear that to some degree, especially for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, practical perfection comes as a consequence or culmination of theoretical perfection. In some contexts al-Fārābī even seems to assume correct theoretical knowledge as the necessary prerequisite for one to even desire the acquisition of happiness in the first place.

In Virtuous City, al-Fārābī assumes that only after one gains knowledge about the nature of happiness through his theoretical intellect, may he set it as his aim and pursue it. It is only after one learns theoretically what happiness is, that man starts to desire it within his appetitive faculty. This is similar to Ibn Sinā’s position that the soul can only develop a desire (shawq) towards its intellectual perfection, after it has been introduced to the demonstrative sciences, and discovered the existence of intelligible things.

Al-Fārābī, however, appears to go even further in requiring one to learn all of the demonstrative sciences, before he gains the proper desire towards intellectual happiness. In another work he emphasizes the necessity of theoretical knowledge to virtuous practice: man can only truly practice virtue, once he knows of what virtue consists, and is capable of distinguishing between real and false virtue. Moreover, al-Fārābī places this knowledge about happiness and virtue as the very last within the stages of philosophical knowledge. It is only after man has gained the complete knowledge contained within theoretical philosophy, through which he is already supposed to have gained his theoretical perfection, that he “progresses to the practical part, and he may begin to act the way he is supposed to act.”

This would implement the idea of “action as the perfection of knowledge” to the fullest, since the student of philosophy is supposed to first gain complete theoretical knowledge about the world, before he is to implement that knowledge in the practice of his own life. But, if happiness is attained through philosophy, as al-Fārābī believes, but one only starts to desire happiness as an intellectual perfection after finishing one’s studies on theoretical philosophy, how does one ever gain the impetus for learning philosophy in the first place? The way to resolve this dilemma,
and the apparent conflict in al-Fārābī of moral purification as both preceding and following theoretical philosophy, would seem to lie in the inclusion of a political dimension to the philosophical quest for happiness. But first, it is necessary to see what al-Fārābī and others mean by moral virtue and its practice.

6.2 Theory of virtue

Once it has been established that in Arabic philosophy moral purification is indispensable for the learning of theoretical sciences, whether before, concurrently, or even as the culmination of theoretical knowledge, the question arises about the precise nature of this philosophical praxis. For Peripatetic philosophers, the theory on which the practice of philosophical life is based is to be found in classical virtue ethics. The Brethren of Purity also employ virtue ethics to a degree, although their ethics on the whole tends to be more normative than analytical in style, and even al-Kirmānī makes some use of it.

Virtue ethics, such as it was professed by both Aristotelians and Platonists, investigates the practice of good human life through the concept of virtue (aretē/faqīla), which could be defined as an optimal character trait of man with respect to a certain sphere of action, which man should seek to acquire for himself. The ethical goal of becoming virtuous, that is, attaining good character traits, goes beyond merely performing virtuous actions and conducting life in the right way. Rather the goal is that the whole way of one’s being is transformed through the praiseworthy psychological qualities that become entrenched in one’s nature, after which the good actions follow naturally. For a virtuous man good actions are all that he desires to do, as opposed to someone who performs them through self-restraint or compulsion against one’s real desires. The goal of Peripatetic ethics is then for man to mold his character traits (khulq, pl. akhlāq) into virtues so that he will only desire to perform virtuous actions.

The question that instantly arises is how ethical terms such as virtue and good (khayr) are to be determined. As we have seen in the fourth chapter, for the Arabic philosophers happiness as ultimate perfection is the absolute good in relation to man, since it is the only human good sought only for its own sake, without any instrumental purpose. Secondary human good is anything that serves man in his final purpose of

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425 Al-Fārābī (Fuṣūl, p. 112) differentiates between a virtuous and self-restrained man, in that while the first gains pleasure from performing good actions, since the goodness is deep-rooted in his nature, the latter performs them against his real desires. For the virtuous to perform good actions can never be painful or odious, since to be virtuous means that one feels pleasure when performing good and pain when performing bad actions.

426 Hence, ethics in Arabic is the “science of character traits” (‘ilm al-akhlāq), in analogy with the derivation of the Greek word from ἕθος, meaning character or disposition. The word refers to a certain disposition or aptitude (malaka/hay‘/tahayyu‘) of man, from which actions corresponding to that disposition proceed with facility. Interestingly, the Brethren define khulq as a “certain disposition in each bodily organ” (tahayyu‘ mā fi kull ‘udw min a‘lā‘ al-jasad), from which the soul is able to manifest (izhār) the corresponding action, whereas for the rest it is defined in purely psychical terms. See, the definitions of al-Fārābī, Tanbih, p. 6, Ibn Sinā, Shīfā’: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 354, and Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, I (9), p. 305.

427 While happiness is defined as the absolute human good, absolute Good for Arabic philosophers is God. Aristotle states in Nicomachean Ethics, the work that al-Fārābī and others are following here, that absolute Good is not relevant for ethics, since it is transcendent and unattainable. As for Arabic philosophers, for Aristotle also the greatest practical good (to prakton agathon) is happiness.
reaching the absolute human good. Therefore good actions (afʿāl jamīla) are determined purely by their instrumental value in reaching ultimate happiness. Consequently, virtues are the psychological dispositions that lead man to perform good actions. Respectively, evil (sharr), bad actions (afʿāl qabiḥa), and vices (radhāʾil) are whatever hinder man from attaining happiness. While becoming virtuous should then be the guideline for man in his practical life, it is not the final end, but an instrument for attaining the final end.

The theory behind the actual task of discovering what the individual virtues are is for the Peripatetics further based on the classical Aristotelian idea of virtue as a mediate disposition (hayʿat al-tawassut) between two extreme character qualities. Each virtuous character quality lies between an excessive (ziyāda) and defective (nuqṣān) trait of character, both of which are vices. The lists of specific virtues, and their respective excesses and defects, which al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā provide in this context, are hardly a result of independent reflection, but are drawn rather routinely from the commonplace lists of virtues within the Aristotelian tradition. In fact, they seem to be meant more as an illustration of the general principle than as an exhaustive program for self-improvement, and hence are not given much further analysis beyond a short definition. Al-Fārābī, for example, recites such virtues as courage (shajāʿa), as a mean between foolhardiness and cowardice, generosity (sakhāʾ) between lavishness and stinginess, or wittiness (zār) between buffoonery and heavy-mindedness, along with many others. A more exhaustive list of virtues, however, would not even be well-placed within an ethical theory with universal pretensions, which is what al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā seek to accomplish.

As al-Fārābī points out, there is no absolute measure (ʿiyār) for the virtues as mean dispositions, but their determination always varies with respect to time and place. Moreover, the medium of moral qualities is never meant to be understood as an arithmetical one that could be precisely calculated as the exact middle position between the two extremes. Ethics is not a precise science in the sense of the theoretical sciences, but a practical one. It works rather as a medicine of the soul, where the psychic diseases, that is, the bad moral dispositions, of each individual are treated towards the mediate state according to each individual case, just as a doctor

(eudaimonia), which is therefore the goal of human action. But, for the Arabic philosophers, who in the end incline from their affiliation to Aristotle towards a Neoplatonic ethics, the metaphysical and practical good are related, even if for Arabic Peripatetic philosophers also the absolute Good is not the subject of ethics, but of metaphysics. When man ascends towards the practical good of ultimate happiness, he will also approach the absolute Good to the degree that is possible for a human being, as in the definition of philosophy as approximation to God discussed in the previous chapter. For human evil, on the other hand, there is no absolute counterpart, since evil is merely deficiency of goodness without independent existence. See, Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Lvi-vii; al-Fārābī, al-Madīna al-fādila, p. 206; al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, p. 72; Fūsūl, p. 151; Ibn Sīnā, Shīfāʾ: Ilāhiyyāt, pp. 340-7, 350; Mabdaʾ, p. 10; Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 48-50, 58-60, 210.

428 Al-Fārābī, al-Madīna al-fādila, p. 206; al-Fārābī, al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, pp. 72-4; Ilṣāʿ, pp. 102-3; Tāhsīl, pp. 141-2; Fūsūl, p. 103.

429 Al-Fārābī, Tamīḥ, pp. 11-2; Fūsūl, pp. 114-5; Ibn Sīnā, Fī ʿilm al-akhlāq, pp. 115ff.; Shīfāʾ: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 354. All of the virtues in al-Fārābī’s list are drawn from Aristotle’s corresponding list in the book II.vii of Nicomachean Ethics. Al-Fārābī, however, reproduces none of Aristotle’s detailed analysis of the individual virtues in books III.vii.
attempts to treat the body towards a state of balance taking into account the particular circumstances of the patient.\textsuperscript{430}

On a more general level transcending the specifics of individual virtues, the virtues may be categorized into distinct groups, and Arabic philosophers adopt several of such classifications. First of all, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, the Brethren of Purity, and even al-Kirmānī, for whom Aristotelian virtue ethics otherwise plays no major role, adopt Aristotle’s division of moral (\textit{ēthikai/\textit{khu\'liyya}) and intellectual (\textit{dianoê\textit{tikai/\textit{nu\'tiyya}) virtues.\textsuperscript{431} Al-Fārābī further follows Aristotle’s sub-division of intellectual virtues into the virtues of theoretical and practical intellect, where the theoretical intellectual virtues are concerned with knowledge and the practical with deliberation.\textsuperscript{432}

Of the resulting classification, only the moral virtues and practical intellectual virtues are relevant for the task of practical purification, whereas the theoretical virtues are gained through theoretical knowledge. Although al-Kirmānī is the only one who explicitly subordinates the moral to the intellectual virtues, the first acting as matter to the second, for all of them moral virtues are clearly subordinate to the intellectual ones, because the former pertain to the lower irrational part of man, whereas the latter belong to the rational part. Acquisition of both of them is obviously essential for man’s quest for happiness, but it is in the theoretical virtues that the human soul’s real intelligible nature is ultimately realized.

Despite leaning heavily on Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Arabic Peripatetic ethics is far from orthodox Aristotelianism. Its ultimate ethical views are clearly of a Neoplatonic nature, and it is also influenced by Platonic ethics transmitted into Arabic philosophy by Galen (d. ca. 200) in particular.\textsuperscript{433} Unlike al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā in his discussion of virtue relies on the Platonic account of man’s tripartite nature, which is much more central for his ethical system than the binary division of virtues into moral and intellectual.\textsuperscript{434}

In this account each of the soul’s three principal parts is assigned its proper virtue, so that the three resulting cardinal virtues correspond to a balanced state of that particular part. Hence, the resulting virtues are temperance (\textit{\'iffā}) as the medium of the appetitive (\textit{shahwā\textit{niiyya}), courage (\textit{\textit{shajā\textit{a}) of the irascible (\textit{gha\textit{\textit{dabiyya}), and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{430} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Tanbih}, pp. 10-13. The imprecise nature of ethical science is emphasized by Aristotle in \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, I.iii, 1094b13ff.
\item \textsuperscript{432} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Fuṣūl}, pp. 124ff. To be precise, the intellectual virtues of Ibn Sīnā and al-Kirmānī correspond only to the virtues of theoretical intellect in the classification of Aristotle and al-Fārābī.
\item \textsuperscript{433} Ibn Sīnā claims the authoritative source for ethical science to be Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics (kitāb A\textit{ristīṭā\text{"{a}llīs fī al-akhlāq), while al-Fārābī wrote a commentary on the work. The Neoplatonist Porphyry’s commentary of this work, which is no longer extant in any language, was apparently also translated into Arabic, and probably played a role in its filtering towards Neoplatonism. Of Galen both epitomes of Platonic dialogues and original ethical treatises were translated into Arabic, conveying especially ethical ideas based on the tripartite division of the soul and the related cardinal virtues into Arabic philosophy. Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Aqṣām}, p. 107; Mattock 1972; Fakhry 1991, pp. 63-6.
\item \textsuperscript{434} See, Plato, \textit{Republic}, IV, 435e-444e; IX, 580d-581a.
\end{itemize}
practical wisdom (ḥikma) of the rational (nātiqa) part. The three cardinal virtues together amount to the virtue of justice ('adāla), which is then identified with the composite of practical virtue.\(^{435}\) Within the Aristotelian division all the cardinal virtues fall within what Ibn Sīnā calls practical virtues, and Aristotle moral virtues, whereas theoretical virtues equate to theoretical wisdom (al-hikma al-naẓariyya), which Ibn Sīnā, however, treats as a thing apart from, rather than as one of, the cardinal virtues.\(^{436}\)

The three main virtues are each concerned with a specific activity of the soul, or the three “motivating powers” (da‘āwā) as Ibn Sīnā sometimes calls them. Temperance is a balanced state in relation to basic bodily appetites, mainly the desire for food, drink, and sex. Courage is a balanced state of emotions in general, which includes fear, anger, envy, and similar passions, whereas practical wisdom is related to the rational regulation of man’s actions.\(^{437}\)

Ibn Sīnā’s account of virtue, unlike the one presented by al-Fārābī, is not so much concerned with the individual virtues, but with a holistic virtuous state, which one gains through the three cardinal virtues. The goal is, according to Ibn Sīnā, to gain a mediate disposition that exists simultaneously in the rational (al-quwwa al-nātiqa) and lower animal faculties (al-quwā al-hayawāniyya), so that all of the distinct human activities are also in balance in relation to each other. What this means in practice is that reason as man’s highest part must govern the lower faculties. Practical virtue consists of the rational soul acquiring itself a dominant disposition (hay’at al-isti‘lā’) with respect to the lower faculties, whereas the lower faculties acquire a submissive disposition (hay’at al-idh‘ān) with respect to reason.\(^{438}\) Thus, the system of three cardinal virtues means that man must acquire the virtuous mediate state through which the desires and emotions of his lower psychical faculties are governed according to rational principles, rather than being driven by his desires and emotions.

In fact, the meaning of moral virtue for all Arabic philosophers, whether Peripatetic or Ismaili, lies precisely in this acquisition of the psychical disposition in which bodily desires and emotions are subjugated to rational principles.\(^{439}\) The difference between al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā is that al-Fārābī does not really distinguish between bodily desires and emotions, but instead speaks of seeking a rationally determined mediate position within the “accidents of the soul” (‘awārid al-nafs),

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\(^{435}\) While justice in this Platonic ethical context then refers to man’s conduct in relation to himself only, its meaning is widened within the political and metaphysical contexts.

\(^{436}\) Ibn Sīnā, Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 378; Risāla fi ma‘rifat al-nafs al-nātiqa, p. 190. Ibn Sīnā, unlike al-Fārābī or even al-Kirmānī, usually does not discuss theoretical knowledge as a virtue, possibly because virtues are moderate states, whereas there is no excess in theoretical knowledge, for Peripatetic philosophers at least. The complete existence, and happiness, is for Ibn Sīnā the one in which the practical virtues are combined with theoretical knowledge. But even above this, the human hierarchy is culminated in the one in whom to practical virtue and theoretical wisdom is superimposed special prophetic properties (al-khawāṣ al-nabawiyya), which transcend common human virtue.


\(^{438}\) Ibn Sīnā, Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 354; Ishārāt, pp. 79-80. In Remarks and Admonitions Ibn Sīnā uses more Quranically inspired, as opposed to technical philosophical, terminology, calling the rational part the tranquil soul (al-nafs al-muṭma‘ina) and the irrational part the commanding soul (al-nafs al-ammāra), to express the same idea of subjection of the lower psychical faculties to reason.

\(^{439}\) This applies even to al-Kirmānī, for even if he does not believe that man could govern his psychological states into moral virtues relying only on his reason, the prophetic regulations that govern them are rationally determined, since the origin of prophecy lies in the Intellect.
which include both appetites (shahwa) and passions (infīʿāl). But in fact the distinction plays no major role for Ibn Sīnā either in the end, for in reality he does not treat desires and emotions separately, but both are to be subjugated to reason equally.

Like Ibn Sīnā, the Brethren of Purity also at times discuss virtue based on the Platonic tripartition, with the identical conclusion that it is for the rational soul to subject the lower faculties. In comparison, while al-Kirmānī does not care to analyze the concept of virtue analytically the way Peripatetic ethics does, he still seems to view the moral virtues of the natural soul (al-nafs al-ṭabiʿiyya) in very similar terms as moderate states in relation to bodily desires in particular. Moral virtue means essentially subjugation of body and its faculties to religious principles, which for him are the earthly embodiment of reason.

All four would then generally agree that practical virtue consists first and foremost of cultivating such psychical dispositions within oneself through which reason subjects bodily desires and other bodily states to its control. All would also agree that man’s bodily and spiritual nature are somehow contrary to each other, and that his bodily temperament will easily lead him astray, if he does not consciously subject it to serve his spiritual needs. To lead a life of virtue, man must therefore make a choice to follow his reason, rather than his appetites.

Since practical virtue for Arabic philosophers, as for the Greek for that matter, has to do with the way man governs his bodily desires and emotions, the question arises about the attitude that Arabic ethics adopts towards the passions. Namely, while the Peripatetic ethics that most Arabic philosophers adopt cultivates the ideal of metriopatheia, that is, of moderation with respect to desires and emotions, at the same time they seem to profess an ideal of apathet resulting from a material-sensible to a spiritual-intelligible level of existence. Despite their discussion of moral virtue as a moderate state in the Aristotelian sense, both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers repeatedly promulgate the ideal of completely purging the bodily states.

Hence, Ibn Sīnā declares that the goal of virtue as a mediate psychical disposition is to lead the soul away from the bodily states, which are “harmful to the soul’s essence,” and “distract it from seeking its intellectual perfection,” towards an ideal of non-affection of the rational soul by the lower faculties. Similarly for al-Fārābī, al-Kirmānī, and the Brethren of Purity the goal of virtue is to liberate the soul from its bodily attachments.

The two ideals seem to be contradictory, however, since with respect to bodily pleasures, for example, the virtue of temperance is defined as a moderate state

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440 See, e.g., al-Fārābī, Tanbīh, p. 4.
441 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 156-7, 415ff. In fact the Brethren collate the Aristotelian and Platonic division of soul in their terminology, speaking of desiring plant soul (al-nafs al-nabāṭīyya al-shahwāniyya), irascible animal soul (al-nafs al-hayawāniyya al-ghadābiyya), and rational soul.
442 See, e.g., al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 115-6, 571-3. Despite al-Kirmānī’s low esteem of analytical ethics, faint traces of the indirect influence of Greek ethical thinking can be found in the specific moral virtues he chooses to mention, as they happen to be the canonic ones of courage, justice, etc. See also, al-Kirmānī’s criticism of Aristotelian ethics discussed in chapter five, which shows that his choice to dismiss it is conscious.
between gluttony (sharah) and insensitivity to pleasure (‘adam al-hiss bi-‘l-ladhdha), not purging of bodily desires from oneself altogether. In Greek Neoplatonism this apparent contradiction was solved by identifying the virtues of metriopatheia with the lowest stage of political virtue, which were to be followed by the purificatory virtues identified with apatheia. The moderate notion of virtue is then only the first step, designed to tone down excesses of desire and passion, whereas the further goal is complete elimination of bodily states.

There are no such grades for the Arabic Neoplatonists, however, for they have no intermediate stage between moral and theoretical virtues. However, despite their Neoplatonic tendencies, the notions of Arabic philosophers with respect to bodily desires and emotions are not wholly negative in tone, for bodily states are not evil in themselves, but only when they interfere with attaining higher intellectual states. In the end the tension between metriopatheia and apatheia translates into the question of the degree of ascetic requirements involved in the philosophical life; we will see later towards which end the Arabic philosophers incline in their practical ideal of a virtuous life.

In *Attainment of Happiness* al-Fārābī makes one more classification of virtues into theoretical (naẓariyya), deliberative (jīriyya), and moral (khulqiyya) virtues, which he together with practical arts (al-ṣinā‘āt al-‘amaliyya) declares to be the four elements required for the attainment of happiness. This tripartite classification is in fact not a novel one, since it merely divides the intellectual virtues of the twofold distinction into virtues of theoretical and practical intellect. However, more than in his other works al-Fārābī makes each kind of virtue subservient to the following one. Hence, deliberative virtue requires moral virtue as its basis, whereas deliberative virtue must be subordinate to theoretical virtue. Al-Fārābī’s three grades of virtue are not temporal, however. Rather practical deliberation must be based on moral virtue, in order to be directed towards happiness, whereas deliberation must be based on theoretical reason in order to apply its universal knowledge to particular circumstances. While other philosophers do not distinguish it as a specific class of virtue, deliberation is a key feature for other philosophers as well in the practical purification of the soul.

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446 Dillon 1983; Sorabji 2004, pp. 337ff. Dillon assumes that Plotinus’ grades of virtue, which were elaborated by later Neoplatonists to more complicated schemes, is a solution for a contradiction in Plato. While *The Republic* contains the four cardinal virtues based on the three parts of the soul, which instigate towards moderation and rational control of the lower parts by reason, *Phaedo* rather views virtue as elimination of all bodily states. Hence, Plotinus adopts the cardinal virtues as the first stage of civic and the purging as the second stage of purificatory virtues.
448 Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl*, p. 119. *Attainment of Happiness* is above all a political treatise, and it refers more than anything else to the role of these four things in a political context. Hence, the practical arts as complementing the three grades of virtue are required in the political community as a whole, not by each individual.
449 Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl*, pp. 154-5, 159-60.
6.3 Governance of the soul

Since ethics is even at best an inaccurate science dealing with the particular and changing human things, rather than the universal and intelligible ones, it cannot provide universal rules for the attainment of practical virtue. Instead it can complement the theory of moral virtue with a discussion of the practical intellect, which is the tool by which the particular actions leading to virtue can be discovered. It is this function of the practical intellect that al-Fārābī means by his deliberative virtue.

Deliberative faculty (al-quwwa al-fikriyya/rawiyya) is that activity of the practical intellect by which man deliberates on the particular things of the human world, as opposed to the intellection of universal intelligibles, which is the operation of theoretical intellect. Through deliberation man discovers the means to attain an end, which are always conditioned by the particular circumstances. Deliberation can of course be used towards both good and bad purposes, and it only becomes a virtue when it is used as a means to gain the greatest end, ultimate happiness. It is for this reason that al-Fārābī states that man must have moral virtue in order to gain deliberative virtue, for only a virtuous man willingly employs his practical reason towards virtuous ends. For al-Fārābī moral virtue and practical deliberation together form complete human virtue (al-faṣīla al-insāniyya).

It is then the practical intellect and its faculties that for the Peripatetics play a key role in the actual task of subjugating the lower faculties. Man is at least in theory able to govern himself to virtue, if he only possesses sound deliberative powers and a strong enough resolve to act in accordance with his deliberation. Not all men are capable of reaching virtue relying only on their reason, but, at least for al-Fārābī, such men that have both good enough deliberative capabilities and strong resolve, are sufficiently independent-minded to attain virtue through philosophical self-governance. Such people possess practical wisdom (taʿaqqul/ḥikma), which is in essence a good faculty of deliberation directed towards virtuous ends. It is a capability that one learns more from experience than from theory, and that enables one to discover the correct actions that favor one’s quest towards happiness.

In contrast, while both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity share the general Aristotelian psychological theory with the Peripatetics, including the one concerning practical intellect and its faculties, practical deliberation does not play a major role in their theory of how actions leading to moral virtue are discovered. While for both of them deliberation (rawiyya) is a faculty of the practical intellect by which man distinguishes right from wrong, their discussion on the actuality of attaining moral

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450 See, al-Fārābī, Iḥsāʾ, p. 104.
451 Al-Fārābī, Takṣīl, pp. 149ff.
452 Al-Fārābī, Tanbīh, pp. 4-7.
453 Al-Fārābī (Tanbīh, p. 17) calls such men “free by merit” (al-ḥurr bi-istiʿāl). In contrast the bestial man (al-insān al-bahīmī) possesses neither good deliberation nor strong resolve, natural slave (al-ʿabd bi-ʿl-ḥāl) lacks the resolve, whereas one who has resolve without deliberation may act like a free man, provided that someone else does the deliberating for him.
454 Al-Fārābī, Fīṣīl, pp. 128-30; Ibn Sīnā, Mabdaʾ, p. 96. There is no agreement in terminology for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā with respect to practical wisdom. The Aristotelian term ἀρχήν, prudence or practical wisdom, is rendered by Ibn Sīnā as al-ḥikma (al-ʿamaliyya), which for al-Fārābī refers more to the perfection of the theoretical intellect. Al-Fārābī’s term taʿaqqul means for Ibn Sīnā theoretical intellection, rather than practical wisdom.
virtue is more focused on the religious ordinances, than employment of practical reason.\textsuperscript{455}

Both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers essentially agree that the soul must be governed (\textit{tadbīr/siyāsa}) to virtue, and that this virtue consists of the lower bodily functions being subjugated to the control of the rational soul.\textsuperscript{456} The disagreement concerns the nature of this governance, so that al-Kirmānī mostly identifies it with following of religious ordinances, whereas Peripatetics in the context of individual ethics perceive it as an operation of practical reason, and the Brethren fall somewhere in the middle.

Nevertheless, all also share the assumption that man is by nature neither good nor evil, that is, that virtue is not an inborn characteristic, although people naturally do have a greater or lesser tendency towards virtue.\textsuperscript{457} Although Arabic philosophy does present a transcendent ideal of complete moral and intellectual perfection as conducive to happiness, few, if any, men are in fact capable of attaining that perfection.

The Brethren of Purity convey this idea in the absolute universal man (\textit{al-insān al-mu'tlaq al-kullī}), of whom the prophets and imams seem to be individuations, who is completely disposed to all virtuous dispositions and actions. While this absolute man is present in the partial men (\textit{al-insān al-juz'ī}), they can only realize part of his perfection in accordance with their natural dispositions.\textsuperscript{458} Al-Fārābī presents a similar idea in saying that not all perfections can be found in a single man, but they are rather distributed collectively in the society.\textsuperscript{459}

Since the reason for bad moral dispositions for the Arabic philosophers lies in learned bad habits (\textit{'āda}), the key to the governance of the soul is its re-habituation (\textit{i'tiyād}) or exercise (\textit{riyāda}), through which it is gradually molded towards virtuous dispositions.\textsuperscript{460} While for al-Kirmānī the precise contents of such spiritual exercises are conveyed wholly in the prophetic law, for Peripatetics a capable man may exercise himself into virtue by following his intellect. This seems to be the case in part also for the Brethren of Purity, who distinguish self-governance (\textit{siyāsa al-dhā'īyya}) as one of the five kinds of governance steering man towards virtue, besides three levels of political governance, and that of the household.\textsuperscript{461}

Governance of the soul is based on the idea that constant repetition of any actions is gradually transformed into stable habits or dispositions of the soul. Therefore, in order to become virtuous, as virtues also are habits of the soul, it should be sufficient

\textsuperscript{455} For the functions of practical intellect in al-Kirmānī and the Brethren, see, De Smet, pp. 353-4; Divald 1972.

\textsuperscript{456} For governance of the soul in al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity, see, e.g., al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 100, 499; Ikhwān, Rasā'īl, IV (9), pp. 258ff.


\textsuperscript{458} Ikhwān, Rasā'īl, I (9), p. 306. The fact that the absolute man is said to be God’s deputy on earth (\textit{khalīfat Allāh fi ardīhī}) from the creation of Adam until resurrection would seem very similar to the Ismaïli doctrine of the continuous presence of the imams as the reincarnation of the Intellect.

\textsuperscript{459} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Kitāb al-milla}, p. 53.


\textsuperscript{461} See, e.g., Baffioni 2004, p. 338.
for one to repeatedly perform virtuous actions, so that they in the end become rooted in one’s nature as virtuous dispositions.

Al-Fārābī goes furthest to give more detailed instructions about the ways by which a rational individual may govern himself to virtue. First man should practice self-reflection in order to find out which moral dispositions he currently possesses. This he can find out by considering which actions appear as most pleasant and easy, since it is the actions that correspond to man’s moral disposition that are the easiest for him to perform. Then, he should evaluate whether the disposition in question is excessive, defective, or a virtuous mediate disposition. If it is either excessive or defective, he should repeatedly perform actions pertaining to the opposite disposition, until the disposition is gradually tilted towards the virtuous medium.\footnote{Al-Fārābī, \textit{Tambū́h}, pp. 8-15.}\footnote{Al-Fārābī, \textit{Fuṣūl}, p. 108.}

Moral virtue is for Peripatetic philosophers then like any skill or craft, such as the skill of writing often mentioned as an analogy by al-Fārābī, which one learns through practice and repetition. As in virtue, people may naturally be more talented with respect to a certain skill and learn it with more ease, but it is still possible for anyone to acquire it through practice.\footnote{Ikhwān, \textit{Rasā‘ıl}, I (9), p. 310; IV (50), pp. 258-9.} A similar idea of governance of the soul through habituation and repetition is also presented by Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity, but with a less individualistic focus. Also, rather than discussing the governance as a pursuit of individual mediate dispositions along Aristotelian lines, both of them rather emphasize it as habituation of the soul towards conquering the body and its states.\footnote{Ikhwān, \textit{Rasā‘ıl}, I (9), p. 310; IV (50), pp. 258-9.}

In the end, however, for all Arabic philosophers, even for al-Fārābī, despite his emphasis on the rational self-governance of an enlightened individual, moral purity is not primarily acquired by each individual in isolation through his own efforts. Rather, as we will see later, the precepts leading towards such purity are transmitted in a society through moral education, which in the Islamic context is materialized in the form of religious law.

6.4 The practice of virtue

The discussion of practical virtue and purification of the soul, focused around the Aristotelian ideas of mediate psychical dispositions and domination of practical intellect over bodily faculties, has so far remained on a rather theoretical level. Next we must see how the idea of practical virtue is represented in Arabic philosophy beyond the Platonic-Aristotelian theory. How is the theory of virtue transformed into practical life, and in what kind of ideal of human life does it culminate? Beyond the analytical ethical theory, Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity in particular also offer ethical ideas of a more normative kind, which present some glimpses of what the ideal of philosophical life could consist. Such accounts should also give us an idea about towards which end, Aristotelian \textit{metriopatheia} or Neoplatonic \textit{apatheia}, their ethical theories tilt with respect to regulation of desires and emotions.

As we have seen, for all Arabic philosophers the primary purpose of practical virtue is the Neoplatonic one of enabling the soul’s ascent from the material-sensible level of existence towards a spiritual-intelligible one. In practice this would seem to be a call towards renouncement of the worldly material things in favor of a higher
spiritual existence. After all, it would seem that only by cutting off his material attachments altogether, can man become liberated to pursue a completely spiritual existence. The question of the practice of virtue then revolves to a great degree around the degree of asceticism that Arabic philosophical ethics encompasses. For all Arabic philosophers the question is in particular about the bodily desires for food, drink, and sex, and to what degree man is allowed to indulge in the pleasures they give.

Clearly the ideal of philosophical life is ascetic to some degree, since it encompasses the notion of elevating oneself from these bodily pleasures towards a desire for spiritual things. But does this mean that an initiate of philosophy is to discard worldly pleasures and attachments altogether, and that the attitude of Arabic philosophy is wholly negative towards them? Furthermore, if the goal of practical virtue is the liberation of the soul from worldly things, does that practical virtue involve any social virtues, or does it condone an apathetic ideal towards the cultivation of human relations?

In the end all of Arabic philosophical ethics seems to encourage a practice of moderate ascesis with respect to worldly desires, but without severing worldly attachments completely. There are, however, differences of degree in the asceticism portrayed by the philosophers. There is no particularly ascetic flavor in al-Fārābī’s rationalistic ethics, despite the fact that for him also the ultimate ethical end is for the soul to be detached from materiality. The Aristotelian idea of virtue that he employs more consistently than most Arabic philosophers clearly calls towards moderation, rather than ascesis, with respect to worldly things.

Al-Kirmānī’s position is also rather lenient. There does not seem to be any need to go beyond the requirements of religious law in practice of ascesis, and even the prophets and imams as the perfect human embodiment of virtue are described as lacking excessive desires for bodily pleasures, rather than being completely purged of them. Also, man is advised to take care of the body for as long his soul stays in the material world.465

Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity, in contrast, present a more vocal call for ascetic practices, although the kind of ascesis they have in mind is not an extreme form of self-mortification of the body. In case of Ibn Sīnā, as we have seen, his theoretical position is one in which desires and emotions of the two lower parts of the soul are subjugated to the rational soul. However, the ideal of temperance as the moderation of appetitive soul does not seem to require asceticism in relation to bodily desires, but only avoidance of excessive indulgence in them.

In Remarks and Admonitions Ibn Sīnā presents in a descriptive manner some of the practical virtues that the ‘Gnostic’ (‘ārif) attains, once he has progressed further on the spiritual road of the philosopher, and hence attained some proximity to the Active Intellect. The attitude of such men seems to be rather ambivalent in relation to worldly goods. According to Ibn Sīnā, the Gnostics differ from each other with respect to worldly and external things, and the worldly preferences of an individual Gnostic may even vary during his life-time. For one it may make no difference whether he lives an ascetic (qashaf) or luxurious (tāraf) life, while another may be more disposed towards the former. Rejection of worldly things occurs in particular

465 Al-Kirmānī, Rāba, pp. 495, 546, 572-3.
when the philosopher becomes so involved with his spiritual-intelligible occupations that he comes to despise everything else but the Truth.

The philosopher-mystic may, however, be inclined towards ornaments and beautiful things, because he by nature loves beauty, which as the most perfect representative of its genus best represents divinity within the material objects. In sum, for Ibn Sīnā, moral virtue as incorporated to the philosopher’s life involves no harshly ascetic demands, although worldly goods appear trivial for someone who has tasted the spiritual pleasures.

However, Ibn Sīnā is here describing the attributes of a person who has already progressed far within the practical and intellectual virtues, for whom a relative indifference towards worldly things flows naturally from the higher spiritual state that he has attained. It would seem that the initial states of practical purification would require more drastically ascetic measures, if one is to attain the indifference and detachment of a more highly evolved sage in the first place. This is in fact what Ibn Sīnā says earlier in Remarks and Admonitions. The practice of asceticism (zuhd) forms a part of the spiritual exercise (riyāḍa) of the soul by which the philosopher aspires to subjugate his bodily desires and passions. Through turning away from the worldly things by ascetic practices, the aspiring philosopher is able to liberate himself from everything that distracts him from his spiritual occupations, and devote himself wholly towards the spiritual sphere of being.

The ascesis that Ibn Sīnā advocates is of a rather mild variant, however. Man is allowed to satisfy his bodily needs to the degree that they are beneficial for the preservation of bodily health, and as long as they are not harmful to his higher spiritual aspirations. Individual pleasures seem to be subordinated to the rule that they must be rationally determined, rather than enslaving their seeker to their power. An example is wine-drinking, which Ibn Sīnā famously admits to be a habit of his in his autobiography. It is allowed to a moderate degree, when it serves a medical or psychical benefit, but not when the purpose is the pleasure itself that one gains from drinking wine. It is precisely such beneficial function that Ibn Sīnā ascribes to wine in his memoirs: it enhances intellectual keenness and physical stamina in the long hours of his theoretical studies. When the harm caused is greater than the medical benefit gained, as happens in the case opium, it is to be avoided.

The Epistles of the Brethren Purity are characterized by a similar apathetic ideal in relation to material, worldly things, but of a slightly higher degree than in Ibn Sīnā’s philosophy. The Brethren contrast time after time after time love for this world (dunyā) and its pleasures, which is for them the greatest cause for evil between people, with love for the spiritual after-life (ākhira).

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466 Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, pp. 107-8.
467 Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, pp. 57-60, 78-80.
468 Ibn Sīnā, Sīra, p. 30; Gutas 1988, pp. 184-7; Fakhry 1991, p. 87. Gutas emphasizes the functional role that Ibn Sīnā gives to wine-drinking in the autobiography, as a pharmacological method enhancing the epistemological process, rather than as a haphazard sign of his hedonism. Medically, Ibn Sīnā believes that wine helps to balance the temperament and reduce black bile, and thus to predispose the philosopher towards receiving intellectual emanations.
469 Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fī al-‘ishq, p. 14. According to his student-biographer (Sīra, pp. 84-6), Ibn Sīnā had first-hand experience of the harmful effects of opium, when one of his students put some into his medicine in order to drug him.
In the Brethren’s analysis, all bodily desires (shahawât) are in the end caused by a desire for eternity (shahwat al-baqâ‘) and revulsion of extinction (karâhiyat al-fânâ‘) that is entrenched in the nature of all created beings. The answer to this inherent desire for eternity is plainly not to cling to transient, worldly things, which man will eventually lose anyway, but to adopt instead a desire for eternal, spiritual things. While even bodily desires are not evil in themselves, as they are necessary for one’s survival, they are reproachable if they exceed the limit of satisfying one’s needs. Consequently, for the Brethren abandonment of the worldly (zuhd fî al-dunyâ) and desire for the other-worldly (raghba fî al-âkhira) are the basis from which all moral virtues develop.\(^{470}\)

Given the Brethren’s attitude towards indulging in worldly pleasures, it is not surprising that they view ascetic practices as conducive towards attainment of moral virtue. The virtuous nature of ascetics (zâhid) is greatly praised by the Brethren, for they represent the highest degree of men with respect to renunciation of worldly things.\(^{471}\)

With their characteristic tendency towards the concrete, the Brethren of Purity elevate light eating (qillat al-akl) in particular as a primal form of such asceticism. The practice of eating lightly, and avoidance of fullness (shiba‘) and over-eating, has for them direct consequences both for one’s practical morality and intellectual preparedness. Overt indulgence in culinary pleasures leads to such moral, social and intellectual vices as loss of clarity (bahâ‘), neglect of the Lord, abandonment of knowledge, contempt of the poor, and heaviness of the soul (thiqal al-nafs), for it increases one’s love towards the world, and decreases fear and recollection of death.\(^{472}\)

The same principle applies to all bodily desires, such as sexual desires, in that man is allowed to satisfy his needs, but not to submerge in them beyond that. For the Brethren practical purification of the soul consists of a struggle against the “demons” of human nature, that is, the lower bodily faculties of the soul. This is the greater jihâd of man, as the Brethren also call it in religious terminology.\(^{473}\)

As for Ibn Sinâ, for the Brethren also ascesis must not be extreme, however, but should be practiced in moderation. The objective is such abstinence as will not harm one’s bodily health, although the Brethren do counsel employment of deliberate hunger at appropriate times as a method for enhancing one’s spiritual condition and reaching a balanced temperament.\(^{474}\) Although the Brethren greatly revere the ascetics as the cream of humanity, they do not expect such practices from everyone, but show some compassion towards the defects of human nature.

\(^{470}\) Ikhwân, Rasâ‘îl, I (9), pp. 316-7, 354-7; III (42), p. 522; IV (46), pp. 81-2; Jâmi‘a, p. 22. Hence, “knowledge of God is the most noble of sciences, while renunciation of the worldly is the head of action” (ma‘rifat Allâh ajall al-ulûm wa-l-zuhd fî al-dunyâ ra‘îl al-a‘mâl).

\(^{471}\) The Brethren also attribute ascetic qualities in particular to the “friends of God” (awliyâ‘ Allâh), a group that might refer either to the Brethren themselves, or to Ismaili dâ‘îs and imams – or both, depending on one’s interpretation of the identity of the Brethren. See, the list of the characteristics of the awliyâ‘ provided in Baffioni 1993-1997.

\(^{472}\) Ikhwân, Rasâ‘îl, I (9), pp. 357-9.

\(^{473}\) Ikhwân, Rasâ‘îl, I (9), pp. 366-7; Jâmi‘a, pp. 75, 421-3.

\(^{474}\) Ikhwân, Rasâ‘îl, IV (50), pp. 254-5.
For the Brethren the primary practices of practical purification are determined in the religious law, and to attain salvation it is sufficient to follow the ‘middle course’ (iqtisād) with respect to religious regulations. People are different, and each should perform the kind of purificatory actions that suit his particular degree of humanity, allowing himself as much of the worldly things as is suitable for his nature. The ascetics who renounce worldly pleasures altogether represent the highest degree of men who help guide the less virtuous towards other-worldly happiness.⁴⁷⁵

Despite their relative moderation, the list of virtues that, according to the Brethren, characterizes a true believer (mu’min)⁴⁷⁶ reflects the Neoplatonic attitude of apatheia with respect to worldly attachments, which is clearly evident in the Brethren’s ethical thought. The virtues that the Brethren choose to advocate, however, also show the more religious and Islamic foundation of their ethics, as they have nothing to do with the commonplace lists of Aristotelian or Platonic origin employed in Peripatetic ethics.

These virtues include such moral qualities as reliance on God (tawakkul), patience (sabr), and contentment with one’s fate (al-raḍā’ bi-‘l-qadā‘), which correspond well both to the Neoplatonic impassionate attitude towards worldly events, as well as to a Sufi-kind of piety. They require from the true believer a rather Stoic attitude in face of adversities and changes of worldly fortune. With their emphasis on the role of religious law as the primary ethical foundation, the Brethren also elevate obedience (tā‘a) towards the divine law as a key virtue of the believer. The Brethren further illustrate this attitude of resignation to one’s fate and obedience of the law with the exemplary behavior of both philosophical and religious figures of the past, who best embodied these virtues in their lives, such as the humble way in which Socrates, Jesus, and Imam Ḥusayn resigned themselves to an unjust death, or in which Prophet Muḥammad accepted the demise of his companions in the battle of Uḥud.⁴⁷⁷

Although the Platonic cardinal virtues, which the Brethren also employ, spring from completely different ethical traditions, ultimately they are related. As for Ibn Sīnā, it is the liberation from the passions and desires of the lower psychical faculties, which is the ultimate purpose of Platonic virtues, that brings about a Stoic attitude of resigned acceptance of temporal events. Once man has attained such degree of moral virtue that he is no longer passionately attached to worldly things, their removal also causes no anxiety in him.

As for the social virtues of the philosopher on the way towards moral perfection, they seem to come naturally after attainment of dispassionate attitude towards material world. Even though for Arabic philosophers the highest ideal of human life is to be submerged to a spiritual sphere of being, and hence to be detached from the ephemeral worldly things, for neither the Peripatetic philosophers nor the Brethren of Purity is the morally perfected philosopher one who withdraws from human community to isolated contemplation. As we have seen, al-Fārābī’s ideal philosopher

⁴⁷⁵ Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, pp. 507-8.
⁴⁷⁶ Belief (imān) is a key concept in the Epistles, as it is besides knowledge the highest virtue for the Brethren. Hence, ‘believer’ in the Epistles means more than merely a Muslim. It would seem that believer refers to a person who pertains to the same elect group as the Brethren of Purity themselves, but whether this means some form of Ismailism depends on the interpretation of the Brethren’s doctrinal affiliation.
⁴⁷⁷ Ikhwān, Rasā’il, IV (46), pp. 68-82.
is one who brings his philosophical knowledge into perfection through conveying it to others. Despite the fact that there is a contradiction between contemplative and political life, most philosophers at some point offered their services to the rulers of their time, as in the case of Ibn Sīnā who famously depicts his migrations from one court to another in his autobiography.\textsuperscript{478}

At the outset, it seems that the ideal of virtue embodied in Arabic virtue ethics is completely inward-oriented. In Ibn Sīnā’s analysis of practical virtue, based on the four Platonic cardinal virtues, as a rationally governed state of psychical balance between each part of the soul, man’s virtuous nature appears to bear no relation to the way he acts towards other beings. Justice as the complex of the three cardinal virtues is also defined as an internal psychical state, rather than as something defining interactions between people. It seems, however, that the goodness of the virtuous man somehow radiates naturally into man’s behavior towards his fellow-men, just as goodness radiates from the First Cause downwards to the natural world. Hence, in the end, the apparently inwardly oriented ideal of practical virtue in Arabic philosophy also has its social dimension.

Hence, Ibn Sīnā’s philosopher-mystic is presented as a perfect embodiment of social virtue as well in Remarks and Admonitions. However, the virtuous nature of the philosopher in relation to other human beings emerges from his relative indifference to the things of this world, rather than a passionate attachment to them. The philosopher-gnostic is friendly and smiling, because he enjoys the supreme spiritual pleasures, and he treats all people as equals, because they appear as equals to him with respect to the Truth he has witnessed. He is forgiving and lacks resentment because he is incapable of being hurt by other human beings, while his mind is devoted to the spiritual truth. He is generous because he does not desire the futile material things. He is not aroused to anger by the moral imperfection of others, but is rather gentle and merciful towards his moral inferiors, because he perceives the higher mysteries of God regarding the unfolding of destiny.\textsuperscript{479}

While Ibn Sīnā’s morally perfect philosopher then is an epitome of magnanimity in his relations with his fellow men, in the end behind all that is revealed a rather Stoic attitude of apatheia. He is devoid of all petty character traits, because he is liberated from the passions and desires that attachment to worldly things evokes in most men.

\textsuperscript{478} Not all philosophers, however, shared Ibn Sīnā’s attitude towards worldly power – other philosophers, according to the biographical sources, were more grudging in surrendering their services to the rulers. In ‘eulogy’ to their Buyid patron Ādud al-Dawla, al-Sijistānī and his followers implicitly contrast the corruptive effects of the deceased king’s immersion in seeking of worldly delights and power with their apparently voluntary choice of contemplative over political life, despite their own rather intimate associations with the courtly circles. The Baghdad Peripatetic Ibn Suwār reflects a similar ambivalence, as he cautiously recommends the philosopher to avoid political commitments (āl-umūr al-madaniyya), but still views life under the tutelage of a ruler (sā‘īs al-madinā) to be the most fortunate condition for a philosopher – agriculture being the best alternative profession in absence of a benevolent sponsor, as it similarly provides the philosopher with relative independence. Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Addī in a similar vein describes the ideal ruler as one supporting from their own funds scholars seeking knowledge and refinement. Apparently the ideal of a philosopher would then consist of one who pursues a contemplative life under royal sponsorship without surrendering to the corrupting effects of political life. Kraemer 1992, pp. 148-50; Lewin 1955, pp. 269-70, 277-8; Griffith 2006, p. 302.

For the Brethren, it is in particular the ascetics that are characterized by an endless list of magnanimous social qualities, such as generosity, nobility, benevolence, altruism, gentleness, modesty, mercifulness, and tolerance.\footnote{Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, I (9), p. 360.} Again these virtues appear to follow causally from purification of the soul from material attachments, rather than require special practice. However, unlike in Ibn Sīnā and most Arabic philosophers, there are also some tendencies in the thought of the Brethren of Purity that reflect ideals of solitary contemplation. This is the case despite the fact that for the Brethren attainment of happiness and moral virtue also occurs in the context of a social community. The \emph{Epistles} namely state that the best state of affairs for one seeking purity of soul would be solitude (\textit{waḥda/infirād}), although it is not required, because it does not suit everyone, and in any case procreation is necessary for the survival of the species.

For the Brethren of Purity, the best social context to seek salvation and moral purity is their own community of pure believers, although whether it actually existed or is merely a fictional entity is not clear. In some passages the Brethren instigate the philosophical initiates to leave their families and spend their wealth in favor of this community of true believers, devoting themselves completely to spiritual occupations.\footnote{Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, IV (50), p. 259; Jāmiʿa, pp. 538-9.} This would seem to represent an ideal of a more rigorous kind of social asceticism than what was commonplace within Arabic philosophy.

### 6.5 Love and death

There are two philosophical themes that rather well exemplify the practical ideal of Arabic philosophy with respect to worldly life, and the kind of Stoic attitude that the morally perfected philosopher should adopt in it. These are the themes of love, on the one hand, and fear of death, on the other. Since love and death are the two major existential forces in life, the attitude that Arabic philosophers show towards them reveals a great deal about their ideal of human life. Both of these themes had been treated extensively by Greek philosophers, and Arabic philosophers were clearly influenced by these classical discussions of love and death. Both Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity devote a special treatise to the subject of passionate love (\textit{īshq}).\footnote{Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, III (37), pp. 269-86; Jāmiʿa, pp. 413-28; Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Risāla fī al-īshq}. The “summary” of the Brethren’s 37. epistle on love in the \textit{Comprehensive Epistle} is almost as long as the original epistle, only reorganized to focus on its “esoteric” meaning and with slightly different content.} Both of them ultimately interpret love in Neoplatonic terms in the context of the soul’s ascent towards its perfection, where spiritual love is elevated far above mundane corporeal love. In this context love is the Neoplatonic counterforce of emanation by which beings strive to re-ascending to their source.

According to Ibn Sīnā, into all created beings there is rooted an inherent love towards their perfection and towards the good, which manifests itself as a desire towards the object of love when it is absent, and to be unified with it when it is present. Similarly, for the Brethren of Purity, love is an intense desire for a union (\textit{ittiḥād}) with the beloved.\footnote{Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Risāla fī al-īshq}, pp. 3-4; Ikhwān, \textit{Rasāʾīl}, III (37), p. 273.} For both of them the most worthy object of love is of course the Creator, since it is the absolute Good that has brought them into being.
Love is then the metaphysical power that manifests itself as much in the rotation of spheres, as in the aspiration of men towards their proper perfection.484

While the former idea depicts love as a universal cosmological force working in the universe, both Ibn Sinā and the Brethren of Purity also analyze the workings of love at the human level. The basis of this analysis is for both the tripartite soul, which, as we have seen, also forms the basis of their analytical views of human virtue. In this analysis distinct faculties of the soul possess different objects of love towards which their desire guides them, so that, according to the Brethren of Purity, the love of the appetitive soul is directed towards food, drink, and sex, that of the irascible towards power (riyāsa) and domination, and that of the rational soul for knowledge and attainment of moral virtues.

Ibn Sinā’s analysis is similar, but slightly more complex in that he gives specific objects of love for a variety of sub-faculties within the three parts of the soul.485 As is evident from this analysis, there is nothing inherently bad in any of the different forms of love, or rather forms of desire, because all form part of human nature. However, love of the rational soul appears as its highest form, whereas lower forms of love are reproachable when they are excessive, or when they are in conflict with rational love.

Both Ibn Sinā and the Brethren of Purity contrast corporeal love with the spiritual, although corporeal love is in itself also natural, and therefore not bad. Both also relate corporeal love to love of external beauty, which is a positive disposition that characterizes the most virtuous souls in particular. That is because the human soul has a natural inclination towards well-ordered and balanced forms, whether musical melodies or human bodies, since they are what best represent the intelligible in the sensible world. Outer beauty therefore reflects inner beauty, as the most beautiful corporeal forms are also most balanced in their material composition, and therefore closest to the simplicity and balance of their intelligible models.

Hence, for the Brethren this desire towards external beauty is part of the inherent desire of the soul towards an ascent from the deficient towards more perfect things, whereas according to Ibn Sinā even the noblest philosophers are usually not devoid of love of the beautiful human form.486 For the Brethren, the love for a specific individual is in addition determined by the mutual compatibility of the bodily temperaments of the lover and the beloved, or the astrological constellations under which they were formed. Bodily constitutions are also largely responsible for determining the individual inclinations of people, such as their dispositions towards heterosexual or homosexual love, both of which the Brethren explain by kind of naturalistic causes.487

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486 Ibn Sinā, Risāla fī al-‘ishq, pp. 14-6; Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, III (37), p. 276; Jāmi‘a, p. 414. Since balanced corporeal composition also implies good inborn moral dispositions, the beautiful also tend to be virtuous. Hence, Ibn Sinā includes the science of physiognomy (‘ilm al-firāsā), in which character traits are deduced from physical appearance, among the applied forms of physics. Ibn Sinā attempts to solve the consequent problem of the existence of the ugly but virtuous by stating that such individuals either gained their virtuous dispositions after the completion of their bodily constitution (istiḥkām al-tarkīb), or through strong habituation. For similar views of Plotinus on the sensible beauty as an inspiration for the soul’s ascent, see, Miles 1999, p. 64 and Hadot 1993, pp. 48-63.
487 Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, III (37), pp. 276-8; Jāmi‘a, pp. 417-8. Hence, the love of man for woman is explained by the need for procreation, for which reason it exists naturally in most animals. For the love
Despite its naturalness, love of the corporeal kind is in the end something to be transcended for a philosopher desiring to rise from the material to the spiritual level of existence. Fulfillment of purely corporeal love is in the end impossible anyway, since love is defined as an intense desire to be unified with its object, but two corporeal beings can never merge to each other completely. Besides, such love is, even in the best case, only temporary, since bliss is inevitably followed by sorrow and anxiety following its loss. This is the kind of love that, according to the Brethren, was called love sickness by the ancients, since it extinguishes the rational soul under its passions, and wears down the lover.\textsuperscript{488} Even in its love of external beauty, the soul should therefore arise from the corporeal forms towards the intelligible forms behind them.

According to Ibn Sīnā, the true love for the human soul is rational love (al-‘ishq al-nuṣṭāṭ), which can never flourish completely free until the animal faculties are repressed. Even the inherent nobility of love of beauty does not in itself justify corporeal love, when it occurs for the wrong reasons. The consummation of corporeal love is for Ibn Sīnā praiseworthy only in the cases where it is legitimated by rational reasons, such as procreation within matrimony, while forms where the only objective is pleasure, such as promiscuity or homosexuality, are reproachable.\textsuperscript{489}

For the Brethren, the ultimate purpose of love is to elevate souls from the corporeal degree towards the spiritual sphere of being. Hence, when someone who has progressed further within the intellectual and moral virtues witnesses a beautiful artifact (māsnū‘) or person (shākh), he will no longer merely desire to look at it and seek proximity with it, as common people do. Instead he will see beyond the corporeal object of desire to the Creator of its beauty, desiring to reach His proximity by emulating Him in his actions. For the Brethren of Purity, true virtuous love (al-‘ishq al-fāḍil) of the human soul is then a desire towards proximity with the First Cause.\textsuperscript{490}

While Arabic philosophy elevates intellectual over corporeal love in the context of the ideal of contemplative life, both the Brethren of Purity and Ibn Sīnā treat sexual desires as something natural to a human being – even the philosopher. While the contemplative life might at first view appear as contradictory with the pursuit of sexual desires, Arabic philosophers in general do not opt for complete abstinence as part of the philosophical life. Rather, Ibn Sīnā, in this as in other questions, promotes

\textsuperscript{488} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, III (37), pp. 270, 273, 281, 283; Jāmi‘a, p. 417. It was not only Platonists who criticized passionate love among the ancients, but also, for example, Epicureans despite all their anti-Platonism in other respects. As materialists Epicureans did not believe in spiritual love either, but like the Brethren, they believed passionate love to cause anxiety because of the contradiction between the desire to be completely unified with the beloved and the impossibility of ever realizing it completely. See, Nussbaum 1994, pp. 140ff.

\textsuperscript{489} Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fī al-‘ishq, pp. 15, 17.

\textsuperscript{490} Ikhwān, Rasā‘īl, III (37), pp. 281-5; Jāmi‘a, p. 428.
the Aristotelian mean where sexuality is restricted to marriage aiming for procreation, while extramarital and homosexual relations are banned explicitly. The Brethren of Purity, however, do elevate celibacy (tafarrud) as the ideal state for a philosopher, while admitting its unsuitability for most people.\(^{491}\)

That the question of celibacy as part of the philosophical life was a subject of debate among the philosophers is shown by a treatise by Yahyā Ibn ‘Adī.\(^{492}\) While stating that philosophers in general disagree on the question of abstinence, Ibn ‘Adī goes on to defend the practice against its philosophical adversaries. Moreover, he relates it explicitly to the philosophical life. In response to philosophical arguments condemning celibacy as antithetical to virtue, Ibn ‘Adī argues that abstinence, on the contrary, is virtuous for the philosopher insofar as it enables him to concentrate exclusively on contemplative life and pursuit of happiness, and eliminates the sizeable distractions that family life and child bearing present to the attainment of knowledge.\(^{493}\)

Ibn ‘Adī’s defense is, however, in the end related to a religious debate between Christians and Muslims on monastic practices which he seeks to defend by philosophical arguments. Ibn ‘Adī’s apologetic tone, moreover, reveals the scant appreciation that Muslim philosophers in tenth-century Baghdad showed towards celibacy as part of philosophical life. In the end, then, perceptions about philosophical life seem to be conditioned by religious views about virtue, as the views of both Christian and Muslim philosophers on this particular question are consonant with the general views of their religious community.\(^{494}\)

If abandonment of corporeal love will free the soul from the sorrow and anxiety that attachment to the transient things of material world causes, Arabic philosophy promises to do the same in the face of the greatest cause of anxiety in life, fear of death. The idea of philosophy as preparation for death, which entered among the definitions of philosophy favored in late Greek Neoplatonic schools, was another classical theme of philosophical ethics that was adopted by many Arabic philosophers.\(^{495}\)

For Arabic philosophers, philosophy shows that there is no rational reason to fear death, because upon death the perfected soul will enter a greater kind of spiritual life. Fear of death is based on false beliefs and excessive attachment to the material world, of which philosophical knowledge about the true nature of soul and its afterlife, as well as moral virtue and purging of soul from worldly attachments, will liberate man.

Hence, as Ibn Sīnā explains in his short treatise *Dispelling the Anxiety of Death* (*Risāla fī dafʿ al-ghamm min al-mawt*), fear of death is caused by false beliefs about

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\(^{492}\) Griffith 2006.

\(^{493}\) Griffith 2006, pp. 312ff.

\(^{494}\) Ibn ‘Adī in fact recognizes at the outset that his adversaries would regard his position as a distinctly Christian claim (*daʾwat al-naṣārāʾ*), even though he employs exclusively philosophical arguments to support it. Griffith 2006, p. 332.

\(^{495}\) Plato’s idea of philosophy as training for death in *Phaedo*, 64A is adopted, for example, in the late Greek Neoplatonist Ammonius’ introductory treatise as one of the definitions of philosophy. In the 9th century al-Kindī and Qustā Ibn Lūqā echo the Greek Neoplatonists by offering “preoccupation with death” (*al-ʾināyaʾ/ithimām bi-l-mawt*) as one of many definitions of philosophy. See, Westerink 1962, p. xxvii; al-Kindī, *Risālat al-Kindī fī ḥudūd al-ashyāʾ wa-rusūmihā*, p. 172; Ibn Lūqā, *Min kalām Qustā Ibn Lūqā*, p. 106.
its true nature, such as the materialistic assumption that the soul will perish together with the body, belief that death will cause great pain, or fear of a punishment in the afterlife. Fear of death may also simply spring from uncertainty about man’s fate after death, or the sorrow of having to leave behind family, wealth, and earthly pleasures. All these fears are caused by ignorance, and are hence cured by correct knowledge about the soul.

Once man realizes that death will release the soul to its true spiritual existence, there is no reason to fear any of these events. Then man will grasp the transient nature of earthly pleasures, and the infinite regression to which chasing them drives him, and he will no longer be sad to leave them behind. Fear of death causing pain is also irrational, since sensation only belongs to embodied beings. Finally, to cure himself of the fear of punishment in afterlife, man only needs to purify his bad actions. Hence, in the philosopher-gnostic advanced in his theoretical and moral perfection the virtue of courage is manifested in his complete liberation from the irrational fear of death.

Similarly, for al-Fārābī only the ignorant and immoral have reason to fear death, while those who have acquired the moral and intellectual virtues during their worldly life will know that no evil will come upon them at the death of their bodies.

For the Brethren of Purity also it is false beliefs and absorption in worldly life that cause anxiety of death. A man who believes that life has no exterior purpose besides enjoyment of worldly goods, cannot truly enjoy his life, because he is constantly conscious of his imminent death, which he fears will steal everything from him. Thus, when man contemplates his old age, the decay of his youthful body, and its eventual decomposition and transformation into dust, he is afflicted by confusion and anxiety. But this fear is cured by the wisdom about the true nature of bodily and spiritual life and death.

True life for man is the life of his soul, which is an intelligible and spiritual life that will continue eternally for the soul that has used its worldly life to perfect itself. Only ignorance of its own substance and absorption in worldly pleasures can bring death to the soul. Bodily death is therefore liberation, rather than cause for anxiety, for the virtuous soul, for it only means that the human soul ceases to employ a body for its existence, and makes the transition to the life according to its own essence. Consequently, for Arabic philosophers liberation from the fear of mortality also follows from a general detached attitude towards worldly things.

496 Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fi dafʿ al-ghamm min al-mawt. While Ibn Sīnā and other Arabic philosophers see belief in soul’s destructibility as a cause of anxiety, Greek schools of philosophy also provided an alternative materialistic cure for the fear of death. Epicureans, with their minimalistic definition of happiness as freedom from bodily pain and psychological anxiety, proclaimed it to be irrational because death as the cessation of being liberated one from both. Instead, religious beliefs on reward and punishment in the afterlife are the cause of irrational anxiety, as with their false hopes of eternity they prevent man from enjoying his finite existence. Interestingly, the early Arabic philosopher Abū Bakr al-Rāzī provides both the Platonic spiritual and Epicurean materialistic cure for the fear of mortality, among which one can apparently pick one or the other according to one’s beliefs. See, Nussbaum 1994, pp. 113, 192ff.; Fakhry 1991, pp. 75-6.
497 Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, p. 106.
498 Al-Fārābī, Fuṣūl, pp. 153-5.
There is then no reason to fear death when worldly life is understood as a transitional period in which the human soul prepares itself for a purely spiritual existence. Both the Brethren of Purity and al-Kirmānī employ the metaphor of the material world as the womb of the soul to illustrate this idea. The embryo grows and develops in the protection of its mother’s womb, in darkness devoid of sensation, until its bodily perfection is actualized to a degree that is prepared to enter the outside world, and to be overwhelmed by its sensations. Equally, the soul in this world should gradually grow towards its intellectual and moral perfection so that it will be prepared at the death of its body to enter the spiritual world, to be filled with cognition of eternal things.\(^{500}\)

In sum, Arabic philosophy promises to liberate man from the anxiety caused by death, but he must pay a price for that freedom. The student of philosophy should adopt an impassionate attitude towards worldly affairs, that is, to subjugate his passions and desires, and realize their limited value in contrast to the other-worldly bliss that the soul will attain in the afterlife. After this, physical death may appear even as desirable, although actual suicide is never condoned by any Arabic philosopher, but rather man is encouraged to make use of the time he is allotted for self-improvement. But in a metaphorical sense, according to the idea adopted by al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Kirmānī from Greek Platonism, man must die a voluntary death in this life, understood as “killing” the desiring and passionate souls, in order to live a life according to the soul’s own essence in the afterlife. This idea is crystallized in the maxim: “Die a voluntary death, so that you may live according to your nature.”\(^{501}\)

6.6 Philosophical lives

The practice of virtue and adoption of a moderately apathetic attitude towards worldly events then appear as the guiding lines of the philosophical life. The tension between the Aristotelian *metriopatheia* and Neoplatonic *apatheia* remains somewhat unresolved within this ethical ideal, however, although Arabic philosophers in general appear to have a tendency to opt for moderation, as opposed to complete eradication of emotions and desires. It is then interesting to see how this ideal of the philosophical life is reflected in the lives of the Peripatetic philosophers themselves, as depicted in the biographies of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. While both biographies offer rather scant and schematized information about their subjects, in contrast to the more lavish biographies of such Greek Neoplatonic philosophers as Plotinus and Proclus, they still offer some idea about how the practice of virtue was perceived as part of the life of the philosopher. Moreover, the two biographies sketch rather distinct pictures of the

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\(^{500}\) Ikhwān, *Rasā’il*, I (9), pp. 328-9, 342-3; III (42), pp. 491-2; Jāmi’a, pp. 253, 309; al-Kirmānī, *Rāha*, pp. 480, 508-9, 540, 546-7. The Brethren make the point even clearer by adding a number of other analogies. With academic circles might resonate in particular the comparison of the soul in the material world to a student in the library (*sabī fi al-maktaba*), who after completing his studies is prepared to enter the outside world.

\(^{501}\) “mut bi-’l-irāda talyā’i bi-’l-ṭabi’a.” Ibn Sīnā, *Risāla fi daf’,* p. 52; al-Fārābī, *al-Madīna al-faḍīla*, p. 320; al-Kirmānī, *Rāba*, p. 503. The maxim is repeated by both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, the latter attributing it to Plato. It is interesting that not only the two Peripatetics, but even al-Kirmānī, adopt the idea of voluntary and natural death and life in almost identical terms, because it shows how all three ultimately depend on the same Greek tradition in this theme. For the same idea in late Greek Neoplatonism, see, e.g., Westerink 1962, p. xxvii.
philosophical life, and the relation between the philosopher’s contemplative and worldly needs in it.\textsuperscript{502}

The image of al-Fārābī’s life as painted in the biography of Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a (d. 1269) befits rather well the classical ideal of a philosopher. Al-Fārābī is said to have been a judge (qāḍī) in his youth (fi ‘awwal amrihi), but then to have devoted himself completely to the pursuit of knowledge, at the expense of all other interests. After this he excelled in the theoretical life, becoming a “perfect philosopher” (faylasūf kāmil) who “brought the philosophical sciences to perfection,” “excelled in mathematical sciences.” and “was proficient in medicine,” although he did not practice it actively.

As a motif shared with Ibn Sīnā’s autobiography, al-Fārābī’s life illustrates the priorities of the contemplative life where the pursuit of wisdom precedes any more mundane concerns. When employed in his youth as a guard of a garden in Damascus, al-Fārābī was constantly occupied with wisdom, reflection (naẓar), and inspection of the opinions of the ancients, sometimes at the expense of his health, as he stayed awake at night occupied with reading and writing by the light of a candle.\textsuperscript{503}

To this complete devotion to pursuit of knowledge, are added the virtuous character traits and ascetic tendencies through which the biographer portrays al-Fārābī, and which he links explicitly to al-Fārābī’s adoption of the ancient concept of philosophy as a way of life: “He was of pure soul, strong intellect, and turned away from the worldly things, being content with what fulfilled his needs, thus leading the way of life of the ancient philosophers.”\textsuperscript{504}

Like most philosophers of the period, as al-Fārābī’s intellectual fame spread further, he also eventually earned a royal sponsor, and entered the court of the Ḥamdānīd ruler Sayf al-Dawla (d. 967). Despite the relative comfort of living that such an arrangement afforded him, however, al-Fārābī apparently did not enter into the functions of power, nor did he abandon the lifestyle of relative independence and asceticism: “It is said that he only received from all that Sayf al-Dawla bestowed him four silver dirhams daily which he spent on the necessities of living. He was not concerned with outer appearance, housing, or profit, and it is said that he used to nourish himself exclusively with the water of the hearts of Aries and spiritual wine.”\textsuperscript{505} That is to say, he abstained from both meat and wine, thus joining the line of philosophers in the classical tradition that practiced vegetarianism as part of philosophical asceticism.\textsuperscript{506}

\textsuperscript{502} For the biographies of al-Fārābī in the Arabic biographical tradition, see Ramón Guerrero 2003 and Vallat 2004, pp. 11ff. As the focus here is on the perceptions of the philosophical life in Islamic tradition, the historical accuracy of these biographies is not particularly important.

\textsuperscript{503} Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a, ‘Uyūn, p. 557.

\textsuperscript{504} “wa-kānā…zakiyy al-nafs, qawiyy al-dhakā’, mutajannib ‘an al-dunyā, muqtani’ minhā bi-mā yaqūm bi-awadihi, yasīr strat al-falāsifa al-mutaqaddīmīn.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{505} “wa-yudhkar annahu lam yakun yatanāwāl min Sayf al-Dawla min jumlat mā yun’im bihi ‘alayhi siwā arba’at darāhim fudha fi al-yawm yuhrajahu fīnā yahājhu min darūrī ‘ayshīhi. wa-lam yakun mu’taniyān bi-hay’ā wa-lā manzil wa-lā maksab. wa-yudhkar annahu kāna yatagadhāh bi-mā qulūb al-jumlān ma’a al-khamr al-rayhānī faqṭ.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{506} See, Vallat (2008, p. 1 and 2004, p. 23, note 4) for understanding “water of the hearts of Aries” and “spiritual wine” as abstention from meat and wine, as opposed to, for example, Ramón Guerrero (2003, p. 232) who translates it as “nourishment with lambs’ internals and fruit juices.” The idea of vegetarianism as part of the philosophical way of life is natural in the context of Greek Platonism, as in the treatises composed by Plutarch and Porphyry in philosophical defense of vegetarianism. Within the Arabic philosophical tradition the theme of animal ethics was not equally prevalent – but neither was it
The story of Ibn Sīnā’s life, as told in his brief autobiography and biography of his pupil, portrays a slightly different image of a philosopher’s life. Like so many philosophers and scholars of his time, Ibn Sīnā wandered throughout his life from one court to another in search of learning and royal sponsorship. The topos of a philosopher holding his distance with respect to the worldly leaders certainly does not apply to Ibn Sīnā. He liberally provided his distinguished medical and philosophical knowledge to worldly authorities, frequented various royal courts, and established close relations with a number of rulers, famously accepting an appointment as the vizier of the Buyid amīr Shams al-Dawla (d. 1021).

Nor does his way of life appear as particularly ascetic, based on the scant information provided in the biography. Ibn Sīnā apparently received ample income from the ruler he served at each time, and was not particularly reluctant to participate in the pleasures of the courtly life. Nor did he renounce wine or meat for the sake of a contemplative life, but famously enjoyed a glass of wine to enhance his studies on a regular basis. His pupil, moreover, reports on one occasion on which they participated in a drinking party (majlis al-shirāb) with singers in the court of Shams al-Dawla, and also enjoyed wine as part of their philosophical sessions.

An image of a bon vivant of moderate proportions also appears from his attitude towards other worldly pleasures. His pupil notes his rather considerable sexual virility: “The master was vigorous in all his faculties, the sexual faculty being the most vigorous and dominant of his appetitive faculties, and he exercised it often.” It was to this and other excessive habits that his pupil attributes his being afflicted by the colic that eventually led to his demise.

While the philosopher emerging from Ibn Sīnā’s biography is not one who refuses the worldly delights for the sake of higher gains, the portrayal does at least reach almost hagiographical heights in extolling Ibn Sīnā’s theoretical virtue. Ibn Sīnā himself famously shows little modesty in depicting his prodigious intellectual capabilities, epitomized in his announcement of a complete grasp of all of the philosophical sciences by the age of 18, and his pupil continues in the same vein.

completely non-existent. Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and the Brethren of Purity both endorse ethical treatment of animals without opting for vegetarianism, although al-Rāzī is conscious that many of the ancient philosophers did so. In contrast, the protagonist of Ibn Ṭufayl’s philosophical fable does adopt a vegetarian regimen as part of the philosophical life. A clear and explicit ethical defense of vegetarianism is to be found in the Syrian poet al-Ma’arrī (d. 1057) who defends his lifestyle of veganism against the accusations of the contemporary Ismaili dā’ī and philosopher al-Shirāzī. See, al-Rāzī, Kitāb al-sīra al-falsafiyā, pp. 103ff; Ikhwān, Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn; Ibn Ṭufayl, Ḥaṭīb Ibn Yaḍḥān; Margoliouth 1902.


508 It is interesting to contrast the way Ibn Sīnā’s life is portrayed by himself and his pupil, to the way that the almost hagiographical biographies of Proclus and Plotinus present their teachers as embodiments of all virtue, or even with that of al-Fārābī.


510 Ibid, pp. 86-8. But as Gutas (1988, pp. 160-76) observes, Ibn Sīnā’s intention is, however, not so much to glorify his intellectual abilities, but to highlight the role of intuition within the epistemological process in his particular case.
Moreover, in at least one aspect Ibn Sīnā’s biography does coincide with that of al-Fārābī in its depiction of an ideal philosopher. For Ibn Sīnā the contemplative life is also one in which the pursuit of wisdom supersedes all other needs. During his youth he devotes both day and night to study and learning, while in later life he is obliged to teach at night due to his daytime profession as a vizier, and throughout his later itinerant life he vigorously seeks knowledge from the libraries of the lands he visits.513

It does not then appear necessary for Ibn Sīnā to renounce worldly pleasures altogether in order to devote himself to a life of contemplation, for Aristotelian moderation is sufficient for that purpose. But although Ibn Sīnā, in contrast to al-Fārābī, is not a model of asceticism akin to the Socrates of Arabic tradition, in expression of religious piety he prevails over his predecessor. As often noted, Ibn Sīnā states at the course of his studies to have often visited mosques to pray for divine inspiration – a method which he reports to have been rather successful.514 Hence, the ideal of philosophical life in Arabic philosophy is closely intertwined with the practices of the religious community in which the philosophers partake.

### 6.7 Religious purification

So far we have seen what practical purity consists of in Arabic philosophy, both at the theoretical level of virtue ethics, and in its practical manifestation in the philosopher’s life. We still have not seen very much, however, of how the process of purification actually proceeds, beyond general ideas of moral self-reflection and governance of the soul. Since Arabic philosophy, like Greek Neoplatonism, appears as a spiritual road involving gradual detachment from the sensible-material level of existence, does it offer any concrete practices or spiritual exercises by which the moral part of that progression could take place?

In the end it appears that in Arabic Neoplatonism the religious regulations as a whole are understood in the context of this purificatory practice, and it is primarily religious law that provides the concrete means for moral purification. In addition, there are, however, isolated ideas within Arabic philosophy for non-religious purificatory practices. However, unlike in the Greek and Roman worlds, where purificatory practices were formed and actually employed within the philosophical schools, in the Islamic world philosophy was not institutionalized in the same way. Hence, the philosophical practices probably represent more theory than lived reality.

Despite the fact that practical virtue and purification is in this study discussed mainly from the perspective of an individual, Arabic philosophers in fact do not believe that either happiness or moral perfection could be attained in isolation. Rather men must strive towards their perfection as part of a larger community, which ideally should be organized in a way that all of its parts together contribute according to their capabilities to acquisition of happiness.515

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514 Ibid, pp. 28, 78.
515 For the impossibility of man attaining happiness in isolation, or living a satisfactory existence of any kind for that matter, see al-Fārābī, *al-Madinah al-fādilah*, p. 228; *al-Siyāsah al-madaniyyah*, p. 69; *Tahsil*, p. 139; Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ: Ilāhiyyūt*, p. 364; *Ishārāt*, IV, p. 60; Ikhwān, *Rasāʾil*, I (2), p. 100. The Andalusian philosophers Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭufayl, writing a century and a half later, famously opt for the solitary contemplation of the philosopher, or even a group of philosophers, in the case where the surrounding society is not virtuous. Al-Fārābī, however, discusses the attainment of happiness solely in
Such ideal society is investigated in political philosophy, which for al-Fārābī and his followers is focused around the concept of virtuous city (al-madīna al-fādīla). For al-Kirmānī the ideal society is the imamate, which for him is already realized in the Fatimid caliphate of his time, centered on the figure of imam in Cairo. The Brethren of Purity are highly enigmatic in their political discussions, but their epistles clearly attach soul’s ascent to messianic expectations of a just political society, whether of an Ismaili imamate or something else remains a controversial question. Superimposed on their emphasis on the necessity of both prophetic and temporal rulership as guiding men towards happiness, the Brethren also construe their own version of the Fārābian utopia of “virtuous city” (al-madīna al-fādīla).516

In sum, while the traditional notion that Greek Neoplatonism is inherently apolitical is no longer tenable, Arabic Neoplatonists clearly attach a much greater political dimension to the soul’s ascent to happiness than their Greek predecessors.517 For Arabic philosophers the basic political unit, however, is not so much the city (polis/madīna), despite the fact that Fārābian political philosophy following classical models employs the term, but religion (milla/dīn).518 Religion is the concept around which the larger society is organized in order for the society as a whole to pursue happiness.

Hence, the political dimension of Arabic Neoplatonism is also what sets the idea of soul’s ascent within the Islamic context, and joins the question of purification to the perennial question about the relationship between philosophy and religion. In some sense the theme of religion as the means towards purification of the soul is the most original part of Arabic philosophical theory about the soul’s ascent, or the sphere where Arabic Neoplatonism deviates most from its Greek predecessors.

While political philosophy and the ideal political societies go beyond the scope of this study, what is relevant here is the function of religion in the context of the soul’s ascent. For all Arabic philosophers religion serves an important function in the moral context of his ideal virtuous society. Since moral education occurs primarily in a political context, it is not clear whether for al-Fārābī or Ibn Sīnā either it is possible to attain happiness in an immoral society, since the pre-philosophical education in such a society would cultivate vices instead of virtues. The Brethren of Purity, in contrast, discuss their own “secret society” of virtuous individuals as a vehicle for precisely this purpose of practical purification, as it guides its members towards virtue even when the surrounding society is evil.

516 For a comparison of the “virtuous cities” of al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity, see Abouzeid 1987. For the Brethren’s views on religious and worldly rulership, see Baffioni 2004, 2006, and 2008c. Baffioni highlights in particular the often ambiguous manner in which the Brethren deal with the distinction between prophetic and kingly governance. In theory, the first represents otherworldly and the second worldly governance, and hence the two would appear in contrast to each other. Still, the Brethren emphasize the principle of the complementary nature of religion and kingship, epitomized in the saying “religion and kingship are twins” (dīn wa-mulk ikhwān taw’amān), often appearing to identify the functions of kingship with those of the imam.

517 For a refutation of the traditional idea that Neoplatonism is Plato without politics, see O’Meara 2003.

518 For this view, see Mahdi 2001a, p. 97. To reflect the more universal context of Islamic political philosophy, al-Fārābī (al-Madīna al-fādīla, p. 228) in fact does speak of three categories of “perfect associations” (al-ījtimāʿāt al-kāmilāt): small association of the inhabitants of a city, middle association of a nation (umma), and great association of the inhabitants of all societies of the inhabited world (ījtimāʿ al-jamāʿāt kullihā fi al-maʿār).
puriﬁcation of the soul, as it is the religious law-givers or prophets,\textsuperscript{519} who determine the actual ways by which the soul is puriﬁed from bad dispositions. Hence, in the philosophical theory religion is seamlessly connected to the context of the soul’s ascent, and religion is understood to be in essential harmony with Neoplatonic philosophy.

All Arabic philosophers understand the ultimate function of religious regulations to be precisely in their puriﬁcatory purpose. For al-Kirmānī, and to a lesser degree for the Brethren of Purity, the practice of religious devotions is in practice equal with moral puriﬁcation. While al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā discuss rational self-governance and the practice of virtue in terms of individualistic ethics, in the end the actual practices are determined in a political context by the law-giver. It is not, however, immediately clear how the Aristotelian-Platonic ethical theory and religious regulations are compatible with each other. What then is the role of religious practices in moral puriﬁcation, and what function do Arabic philosophers understand them to serve within the Neoplatonic ascent? Moreover, how is religious puriﬁcation related to philosophical puriﬁcation?

In al-Fārābī’s deﬁnition of the term, religion (milla) consists of two parts, one theoretical and the other practical, thus reﬂecting the two parts of philosophy. The theoretical part of religion consists of religious beliefs, whereas the practical part consists of the actions required from the citizens, that is, of religious law (sharī‘a/nāmūs). For al-Fārābī both parts are subordinate to philosophy. Religious beliefs represent in dialectical form the demonstrative truth of theoretical philosophy, whereas the particular actions of practical religion should be based on the universal knowledge of practical philosophy.\textsuperscript{520} It is only this practical part of religion that is relevant for the subject of this chapter, whereas the theoretical part pertains to the theoretical ascent of the soul discussed in the next chapter.

While Ibn Sīnā, and even less so the Ismaili philosophers, do not adopt an equally rationalistic interpretation of the relation between philosophy and religion, in which philosophy is primary and religion is derived from it for political purposes, all of them interpret religion similarly as consisting of beliefs and actions, each of which is related to one part of the philosophical ascent.\textsuperscript{521} It is the practical part of religion that forms the core of puriﬁcatory practice, as through it the philosophical initiate ascends at least the ﬁrst ladders of moral virtue and separation from the sensible level of existence. Hence, the Brethren of Purity announce explicitly that the purpose of religious law is to purify the soul (tahdhiḥ al-nafs) and elevate it from the material to the spiritual world, and Ibn Sīnā deﬁnes religion as puriﬁcation of the soul (tasfīyat al-nafs) from the impurities caused by its immersion in nature, and states its purpose as turning the soul away from “worldly accidents” (al-a‘rād al-dunyawiyya).\textsuperscript{522}

To employ a metaphor commonly applied in Arabic philosophy, religious law then functions for the soul sort of as medicine does for the body. The shift from classical

\textsuperscript{519} The terminology employed in Arabic political philosophy again reﬂects its dual Greek-Islamic background. The commonly used abstract term law-giver (wādī‘ al-sharā‘ī‘) is a direct translation of Greek nomothètēs, which in Arabic philosophy is identiﬁed with the prophet as a founder of religion.

\textsuperscript{520} Al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-milla, pp. 46-7; Ihsā‘, p. 107.

\textsuperscript{521} See, al-Kirmānī, Rāhīta, pp. 104, 495, 500; Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, III (42), p. 452.

\textsuperscript{522} Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, III (29), p. 34; Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fī māhiyyat al-ṣalāt, p. 34. See also, Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fī al-kalām ‘alā al-nafs, p. 197.
individual ethics to an Islamic religious context can in a sense be perceived in the employment of this metaphor in Greek and Arabic philosophy. The analogy of philosophy as medicine for the soul was commonly cultivated in Greek philosophy, and Arabic philosophers also adopted it to refer to the therapeutic function of philosophy, but possibly to an even larger extent to that of prophecy. All four philosophers discussed in this study employ the metaphor at least in some sense, but their different emphasis on the role of religion and philosophy in the “healing of the soul” might be reflected by the way in which they use it.

While Ibn Sinā’s adoption of Healing (Shifāʾ) as the title of his major philosophical compendium would seem to reflect the classical metaphor of philosophy as medicine, al-Fārābī uses the analogy in the context of both individual ethics and the political philosophy of the virtuous city. For the Brethren of Purity and al-Kirmānī it is, however, prophets and imams who are doctors of the soul, and it is religion which works like a drug curing the diseases of the soul. The metaphor refers to both the theoretical and practical aspects of religion, as religious beliefs cure souls from their false doctrines, whereas religious law heals them from bad dispositions. The metaphor also illustrates rather accurately the particular nature of religious practice in the purificatory process. Just as the doctors apply medicine to their patients according to their particular circumstances and the specific diseases from which they are suffering, similarly the prophets legislate for different nations and distinct classes of people the precise psychical remedies that are most suitable for their particular condition.523

Moreover, for all Arabic philosophers the harmony between the religious law and the philosophical ascent is ensured by the way they perceive the relationship between philosophy and religion. This is realized in particular through their theories of prophecy in which philosophical and religious knowledge share the same epistemological foundation, and prophecy is interpreted in a rather naturalistic fashion in order for it to fit within the philosophical framework. The origin of both philosophical and religious knowledge lies ultimately in the Intellect, and hence there is no possibility for a discrepancy to exist between them.

For al-Fārābī, as we have seen, religious knowledge is derivative of philosophy anyway, and the particular religious laws are derived from philosophical principles. Religious law is legislated by the philosopher-prophet, who merely employs his philosophical knowledge of the universal kind to particular circumstances, or alternatively receives the particular laws directly as an emanation from the Active Intellect.524 Therefore religious law in fact is nothing more than a practical application of philosophical ethical knowledge. This is at least how things should work in theory in the virtuous religion (al-milla al-fāḍila), in which religions perfectly mirror true philosophy for particular nations. Whether the actual religions of this world, or Islam in particular, fully implement this principle for al-Fārābī is another question.


While Ibn Sīnā does not reduce prophecy to philosophy in the same way, the origin of prophecy and religious law for him also lies in the Active Intellect, which is also the source of philosophical knowledge. Both the Brethren of Purity and al-Kirmānī view the legislator-prophets as embodiments of the Intellect in the material world, and hence religious regulations are rationally founded, even if they have not been devised by philosophers.525

While both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy then perceive religious law primarily as a means of moral purification directly connected to the higher purpose of philosophical ascent, this is not the only meaning that political philosophy gives to religion. Religion is meant for all people, not just aspiring philosophers, and its purpose in the context of Arabic political philosophy is also the political governance of all the distinct classes of people. Of these only a small minority, according to the highly elitist view of man prevalent in Arabic philosophy, are capable of approaching the awe-inspiring goals of theoretical and practical perfection.

All Arabic philosophers assume the religion of the commoners and philosophers to be distinct as comes to the theoretical part of the religion, in that common people believe in the literal truth of religious revelation only, whereas the philosophically inclined reach the philosophical truth behind that exterior. Is there similar distinction in the practical part as to the religion practiced by distinct classes of people, or are the religious duties the same for both philosophers and commoners? And moreover, is purification by means of religious observances in itself sufficient for philosophical purification, or should the philosophical initiate go beyond what is required by religious law?

While none of the Arabic philosophers go as far as to liberate philosophers from following the religious law, they do assume its meaning to be different for philosophers and for laymen. In al-Fārābī’s philosophical utopia of the virtuous city people strive together towards happiness through both theoretical knowledge and practical actions. While some of them are common to all inhabitants, others are specific to each class within the city.526 The Brethren of Purity distinguish an exoteric and esoteric aspect in religious law, of which the common people (‘āmma) are only familiar with the exoteric shell, while the intellectually advanced (khāṣṣa) also know its inner mysteries.527 Ibn Sīnā similarly assumes the philosopher-gnostic to perceive the meaning of religious devotions (‘ibāda) differently from most people. For non-philosophers religious practices are just obligatory external ways of conduct (muʿāmala), whereas for the philosopher they gain a higher meaning as part of the soul’s training (riyāda) to practical virtue.528

Al-Kirmānī, however, seems to differ from the rest in this respect, as for him religious obligations rather represent the exoteric level of worship required from all people equally, whereas the esoteric worship consists entirely of knowledge. Apparently for him also, however, the true purpose of these obligations would unfold for an Ismaili initiate in a deeper sense, once he has submerged into esoteric knowledge.

527 Ikhwān, Rasā‘il, I (9), p. 328.
528 Ibn Sīnā, Ishārāt, IV, p. 59.
How is it then that religious obligations function as part of the soul’s purification? Arabic philosophy integrates the religious devotions firmly into the theory of virtue discussed above, so that the purpose of religious practices is seen as a subjugation of desires and passions, and liberation of the higher soul from its material attachments. Hence, for the Brethren the purpose of religious duties is to fight man’s bodily nature by restraining the fulfillment of its sensual desires. When the religious duties are contemplated rationally, it is seen that many of them involve mildly ascetic requirements, as in the case of fasting or prohibition of alcohol, that urge man to rise from the sensible pleasures towards spiritual existence.529

According to al-Kirmānī, religious obligations function as landmarks for the soul lost in the sea of matter so that it may liberate itself from its corporeal attachments. All the religious practices specified in the religious law have for him a higher purpose that connects them to attainment of moral virtue. From among these, al-Kirmānī specifically elevates nine forms of practical devotion, for each of which he sets aside a specific moral virtue that it promotes in man, so that, for example, the creed of faith (shahāda) fosters sincerity (ṣidq), alms-giving (zakāt) generosity (sakhā’), fasting (ṣawm) temperance (‘iffā), and jihād courage (shaj‘a).530

Ibn Sinā similarly directly relates religious practices to his theory of moral virtue as part of the soul’s ascent. The primary function of religious practices is therefore to develop mediate dispositions of the soul, and to subjugate man’s bodily functions to the rational faculty. Hence, many of the religious practices involve precisely formulated actions that turn the soul away from the body towards its own essence, and prevent man from wholly following his bodily nature. Especially useful in this context, according to Ibn Sinā, are tiring activities that wear down the body and the lower faculties, and thereby overcome the bodily desires that arise from them, as in the case of the bodily movements that form part of Islamic prayer ritual. When the soul with help of such bodily movements is frequently forced to turn towards its own essence, it will no longer be equally affected by its bodily states.531

Besides their functions related to moral virtue, religious practices also have the important spiritual task of constantly reminding the worshiper of God and the afterlife, and hence turning his attention towards the spiritual sphere of existence. For the advanced philosopher-Gnostic such forms of worship are merged with his contemplative activity, as he turns his mind towards the higher world in order to reflect on God and the spiritual beings.532

The way in which Ibn Sinā understands the religious rituals as part of philosophical purification is further illustrated by his small treatise on prayer.533 In this treatise Ibn Sinā defines prayer as imitation (tashābbuh) of the celestial bodies and worship of the absolute Truth. But he distinguishes two levels in the Islamic ritualized prayer, each of which is adapted to a specific class of people, or perhaps alternately people in differing stages of their moral and theoretical ascent. The first

530 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 104, 123, 499; De Smet 1995, p. 357.
531 Ibn Sinā, Shīfā’: ʿIlāhiyyāt, p. 369; Ishrārāt, IV, p. 59.
532 Ibn Sinā, Shīfā’: ʿIlāhiyyāt, p. 367; Ishrārāt, IV, pp. 64-7.
533 Ibn Sinā, Risāla fī māhiyyat al-ṣalāt. See also, Ibn Sinā, Shīfā’: ʿIlāhiyyāt, pp. 367-8. Ibn Sinā apparently did not consider this short treatise as one of his major philosophical accomplishments, since he says he devised it in “less than half an hour.”
exoteric level of prayer is related to bodily and preparatory (riyādī) governance of the soul, where the ritualized recitations and bodily movements are designed in harmonious proportions to reflect the intelligible order of the world. It is only a corporeal trace of the higher intelligible prayer, but through it the worshipper may be elevated towards a longing for the Active Intellect and reception of its intelligible emanations.

But for those who have already liberated themselves from the material and bodily attachments, the true form of worship is the esoteric prayer of an intelligible kind. Such prayer no longer has anything to do with bodily movements, but it is a form of intelligible contemplation where the purified rational soul reflects the pure ideas and spiritual entities of the higher world. Ibn Sinā sees prayer then as serving two distinct functions for two different kinds of people. In its bodily variety it forms part of the initial moral purification of the soul, whereas in its intelligible form it is a sort of contemplative exercise for the philosophically and spiritually advanced.

The esoteric prayer also has the purely epistemological function of preparing the soul to receive intelligible emanations from the Active Intellect. In his autobiography Ibn Sinā describes how prayer in his own life was seamlessly incorporated into the philosophical practice: “And because of those problems which used to baffle me, not being able to solve the middle term of the syllogism, I used to visit the mosque frequently and worship, praying humbly to the All-Creating until He opened the mystery of it to me and made the difficult seem easy.”534

In al-Fārābī’s virtuous religion, prayer also constitutes an important part of the practical actions required from the citizens in order for them to strive towards happiness. Unlike Ibn Sinā, al-Fārābī is, however, not speaking in concrete terms about the actual prayer ritual practiced in Islam, but of abstract and undetermined measures and utterances by which virtuous citizens should praise God and the spiritual beings.535 The particular instances of this universal idea remain for al-Fārābī to be determined by each prophet-legislator according to the requirements of time and place.

Al-Fārābī, however, devised himself a little philosophical prayer (duʿāʾ) that is nothing like the standard Islamic prayers, and which might have been designed to inspire a philosophical initiate towards the practical-theoretical ascent.536 Al-Fārābī’s

534 wa-alladhī kunt ataḥayyārī fīhi min al-masāʾil wa-lā azfar fīhi bi-ʾl-ḥadd al-awsāt fī al-qiyās ataraddad bi-sabab dhālika ilā al-jāmiʿ wa-ṣallī wa-abtahī ilā mubdī ilā-kull ḫattaḥ yaftaḥ îf al-munghalīq minhu wa-yusahhil al-mutaʾassir.” Ibn Sinā, Sūra, p. 28 [Gohlman’s translation]. Gutas (1988, pp. 181-3) once again emphasizes that Ibn Sinā’s reference to frequent praying in the autobiography is to be understood in the context of the epistemological process, as part of his theory of intuition (ḥads), rather than as a self-laudatory reference to his piety. It is true that in this particular context Ibn Sinā relates prayer to syllogistic reasoning in its role of enhancing the emanation of the middle term from the Active Intellect. But to interpret prayer in general as being only an epistemological method for Ibn Sinā would be wrong, as it clearly has a wider spiritual meaning for him.

535 Al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-milla, p. 46.

536 Al-Fārābī, Duʿāʾ ʿazīm. The prayer is transmitted by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi’a. Despite the fact that it is not listed among al-Fārābī’s writings in any early bibliography, Mahdi (2001b, pp. 32-3), as its editor, has no doubts about its authenticity, but suggests it was omitted by medieval bibliographers because it is not an actual philosophical treatise. The prayer, however, contains a particularly interesting line: “make me one of the brethren of purity, possessors of loyalty, and dwellers of heaven” (ijʿālnî min ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ wa-ṣḥāb al-wafāʾ wa-sawkān al-samāʾ). The resemblance with the self-designation of the
Magnificent Prayer (al-duʿāʾ al-ʿazīm) is clearly at least not meant for the common populace, since it resorts to heavily philosophical language, whereas in al-Fārābī’s political philosophy philosophical concepts should be conveyed for common people in symbolic sense imagery. Hence, the prayer is interesting already due to the rationalistic spirit and complete lack of mysticism that it embodies, whereas Ibn Sīnā, in contrast, would in similar circumstances have resorted to more emotively powerful Quranic or mystical language.

Al-Fārābī, then, begins his prayer by addressing it to God as the “Necessary Existent” (wājib al-wujūd) and “Cause of causes” (ʾillat al-ʿilal). The main core of the prayer is devoted to an invocation for support in the philosophical ascent, in both its theoretical and practical aspects. Thus, al-Fārābī asks God to “save me from the world of misery and destruction,” “grant me emanation of the Active Intellect,” and “purify my soul by the lights of wisdom” from the “mud of matter.” With respect to practical purification, al-Fārābī furthermore begs for “deliverance from the captivity of the four elements,” support in “severing the blameworthy attachments between me and the earthly bodies,” and fortitude against the “dominion of transient sensual desires.”

As for Ibn Sīnā, for the Brethren of Purity also, religious practices have besides the function of subjugating passions and desires, the important task of raising man’s awareness from the mundane things towards the spiritual world. Religious rituals in their exoteric meaning are often corporeal reflections of a higher spiritual reality, as for the Brethren the exoteric aspect of religious law is based on the hierarchy of corporeal creation, whereas the esoteric aspect is bound to its spiritual hierarchy.

In their syncretistic vision of religions the Brethren are not speaking only of Islamic law, however, but of religious rituals universally. Hence, all religious houses of prayer, whether temples, mosques, churches, or synagogues, reflect the same symbolic idea. That the believers, according to the Brethren of Purity, are ordered to enter places of worship as purified and well-dressed, giving up many of those things that would be allowed at their homes, carries an allegorical meaning. Through this habit the worshippers come to understand that the same applies to entering the ultimate temple of the afterlife, to which the soul can enter only after purifying itself from the stains of matter and dressing itself with moral virtue.
6.8 Philosophical purification

For Arabic philosophers practical purification of the soul then takes place primarily through the practice of religious law. But is this alone sufficient for the kind of practical purification that is necessary for the attainment of moral perfection and liberation from passions and desires? It appears that only al-Kirmanī assumes moral purification and practice of religious law as virtually identical, and does not perceive the need for any supplementary forms of purificatory practice. As we have seen, for Arabic philosophers even the religious forms of worship often assume a different meaning for philosophers and common people, so that for the philosophers they become fully integrated into the purposes of the philosophical ascent. But even beyond this, while no Arabic philosopher declares religious law to be inadequate for the philosopher, it seems that the philosopher, unlike the common people, must proceed beyond the religious practice in order to be completely purified.

In Remarks and Admonitions Ibn Sinā briefly discusses the spiritual training (riyāda) that is required from the aspiring philosopher-gnostic in order to turn him away from the material world, and for him to be able to devote himself completely to contemplative activity. Religious observances form only one part of such spiritual exercise, and even they must be performed in a contemplative manner. Ibn Sinā states several methods to be useful for the training of the soul, of which he mentions the practice of “true ascesis” (al-zuhd al-ḥaqiqi) in particular.

While the Islamic observance of fasting may serve as a useful first step to philosophical purification, clearly a yearly abstinence from food and drink in the daytime is not what Ibn Sinā has in mind when he speaks of ascesis. Rather, for Ibn Sinā philosophical ascesis means turning away from the worldly pleasures altogether, and liberating oneself from the passions and desires that distract the philosopher from contemplation of more noble things.

Similarly, while the Brethren of Purity primarily relate moral purification to the practice of religious law, they do require considerably more from a philosophical discipline. As we have seen, the Brethren highly revere the ascetics, and while such religious regulations as fasting or prohibition of alcohol are related to this ideal, they are in no way sufficient for the aspiring philosopher. Surprisingly, considering their otherwise rather religious orientation in contrast to al-Fārābī’s rationalism, the Brethren of Purity are the only philosophers who actually explicate the inadequacy of religious law for the philosopher.

This happens when they make a distinction between religious observances (al-ʾibāda al-sharʿiyya al-nāmūsiyya) and philosophical observances (al-ʾibāda al-falsafiyya al-ilāhiyya), the latter of which the Brethren claim to have derived from the ancient practices of Greek philosophers. While the first consists of performing the observances of religious law that are obligatory for all, the second is meant for only those who have advanced further in their spiritual progression. Each philosophical observance seems to have its counterpart among the religious observances, as they are

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related to the same ultimate spiritual purpose, but the philosophical observances take further steps to the purificatory goal.

Hence, philosophical observances include such things as the four philosophical feasts (ʿīd) which take place at the dates of equinox and solstice, all of which are related to some higher spiritual meaning. Each of them is connected to a corresponding Muslim feast, for example, the philosophical spring feast and the feast of Ramaḍān (ʿīd al-fitr) are said to be symmetrical, since both are festivities of joy, the first celebrating the end of winter and the second the end of fasting. Similarly, the philosophical observance of sacrifice (qurbān) corresponds to the Islamic ritual sacrifice during hajj, but its goal is said to be to “approach God with bodily means” (al-taqarrub bi-ʿl-ajsād ilā Allāh), and to renounce fear of death, the “way Socrates did when he drank his cup of poison.”

While the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity then abound with obscure philosophical rituals of unknown origin, the Peripatetic philosophers are much more restrained in describing of what the precise practices leading to philosophical purification could consist. Both Peripatetic philosophers and the Brethren of Purity, however, concur in hailing the blissful effect that music has on the soul. Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, and the Brethren of Purity all wrote rather extensively on the theory of music, which forms part of mathematics within the philosophical curriculum, while al-Fārābī was also a practicing musician. Besides their often rather technical theoretical treatment of music, Arabic philosophers also discuss in more philosophical terms the therapeutic effects that music has on the soul, mostly based on psychological and humoral theories. This therapeutic function also makes music a convenient method for philosophical purification.

Hence, Ibn Sinā mentions musical melodies soothing the lower faculties and arousing convenient images in the imaginative faculty as one possible form of spiritual exercise for the practicing philosopher. Poetry was in Arabic philosophy often seen as having a rather analogous effect on the soul, for example in its capability to evoke images within the imaginative faculty, although technically the subject pertained to poetics as part of the logical Organon. Al-Fārābī then suggests the employment of both poetry and music to influence man’s psychical dispositions. While the way that music and poetry influence emotions and the imaginative faculty can be used for both good or bad purposes, in the context of philosophical purification they can be employed for enhancing the attainment of happiness. Like music, poetic

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543 Ikhwān, Rasāʾil, IV (50), pp. 262-271. The Brethren further associate the philosophical feasts with their cyclical view of history and messianic expectations. Hence, for example, the joyous second feast of springtime relates the death of winter to the subsiding of the cycle of tyranny (dawlat ahl al-jaww), whereas the sorrowful fourth feast of winter is related to the return of the faithful to occultation (istiʿār) and dissimulation (taqiyya).

544 For medieval Arabic musical theory, see Shehadi 1995. Al-Fārābī’s devotion to the subject is manifested in his two-volume Great Book of Music (Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr), the greatest work written on music by any Arabic philosopher. The Brethren of Purity devote their fourth mathematical epistle (1.4.) to music, whereas Ibn Sinā discusses it within the mathematical parts of his philosophical compendiums, such as Healing and Dānešnāme-ye ʿAlāʾī.

545 According to Shehadi (1995, p. 75), the therapeutic function of music was not mere theory for Ibn Sinā, as he actually employed it as a practicing physician. Whether he employed it for the spiritual needs of his philosophical pupils, as he did for the bodily needs of his patients, is unknown.

546 Ibn Sinā, Ishārāt, IV, pp. 82-3.
images have the capability to evoke either a desire or repulsion towards a thing, thus giving the listener an impulse towards acting on it. Specific varieties of tunes or poetic forms can be used firstly for advancement of the rational faculty and directing the soul’s reflection towards the spiritual sphere, and secondly for moderating the passions within the irascible soul.547

The Brethren of Purity’s interpretation slightly differs from the Peripatetic philosophers, as they are influenced in particular by Pythagorean ideas about harmonious mathematical relations underlying the ultimate nature of the world. Also, their musical theory is related to the idea of correspondence between different levels of reality, such as between the four strings of the lute (‘ūd) and the four elements and humors of the body. Hence, melodies composed to proper harmonious proportions have the power to soothe the soul, and even to cure bodily diseases due to their direct connection with the bodily humors. But besides the simple pleasure that music can produce, it also has a relevant function in the soul’s spiritual ascent. Since “corporeal” music for the Brethren is in the end an imitation of the celestial music of the spheres, music has the power to arouse in the soul a desire for ascent to the higher world. Hence, according to the Brethren, “when souls hear music that is devised in harmonious, correct, and balanced proportions, they feel pleasure and joy because of it, and start to long for their Beloved, and desire to remain with their Beloved and to be united with Him.”548

Finally, for the Peripatetic philosophers at least, rational self-governance of the soul discussed above also forms an integral part of the purificatory practice of the philosophical kind. In the end rational self-governance of the soul appears to be in complete harmony with the practice of religious law and other auxiliary methods of purification. As we have seen, the philosophical understanding of the ultimate goal of religious observances is consonant with the objectives of philosophical ethics, as they embody the same principles of moderation of passions and desires, as well as arouse in the soul a desire towards the spiritual sphere of being.

Hence, Ibn Sinā states that practical purification takes place through the combination of the methods (turūq) described in the philosophical works of ethics and the practice of religious duties.549 Apparently the philosopher will just take this purificatory practice further than the rather lenient requirements that are integrated within the religious law.

Now we are in a position to solve the apparent contradiction of the position of ethics within Arabic Peripatetic philosophy, namely that moral purification of the soul seems to be required before the study of theoretical sciences, while at the same time ethics is placed as the last science in the philosophical curriculum following theoretical philosophy. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, in Greek Neoplatonism the ascent of the soul followed a grade of virtues, where the actual philosophical studies were preceded by pre-philosophical ethics corresponding to the first degree of moral virtue.

It seems that at least in theory a similar gradation of moral purification emerges for Arabic philosophy, while the place of pre-philosophical ethics in the purificatory scheme is assumed by religious law. Even before his initiation into the philosophical sciences, the student of philosophy should strive to purify his soul through the practice of religious observances, which serve the function of moderating his natural desires and passions, and arouse in the soul a desire for further spiritual ascent. Some auxiliary practices, such as music or poetry, may serve the same purpose. It is only after the student of philosophy has already been somewhat detached from his bodily desires and passions through this initial purification that he is prepared to delve into the philosophical sciences.

Practice of philosophical ethics forms a higher part of the purificatory ascent that takes place only after or together with the learning of theoretical sciences. This is because understanding of philosophical ethics requires theoretical knowledge, such as knowledge of logic to understand the demonstrations, and even more importantly metaphysical knowledge about the nature of the soul and its ultimate purpose in the world. Once the student proceeds along the steps of theoretical philosophy and contemplative activity, he is also prepared to advance further towards moral perfection through rational self-governance of the soul. In al-Kirmānī’s case the picture is of course much simpler. The only practice that an Ismaili student requires for moral purification, is the one provided by religious law.
"My God, . . . reveal to the darkness of the soul the Sun of Active Intellect, remove from it the shadows of ignorance and perdition, make actual what exists in its faculties potentially, and guide it from the shadows of ignorance to the light of wisdom and intellect." – Al-Fārābī

7 Theoretical ascent

7.1 Philosophical knowledge as saving knowledge

The previous chapter presented the question of practical virtue as part of the philosophical ascent, and explored the purificatory practices attached to the attainment of practical virtue. The primary contents of practical virtue for Arabic philosophers appeared as the Neoplatonic one of gradual separation of the soul from matter which enables the soul to turn away from the material reality towards the higher sphere of spiritual existence. While this idea of practical virtue as relative detachment from worldly things then represents the ideal of philosophical life, in the end it is merely an instrument for the ultimate contemplative goal of philosophy.

All Arabic philosophers identify the greatest human happiness with man’s theoretical perfection, for which his practical perfection is a necessary prerequisite. On the ascending scale of virtue, the practical virtues should lead man towards theoretical virtue, identified with theoretical as opposed to practical wisdom, through which the philosopher’s soul reaches its utmost perfection.

While this theoretical part of philosophy consists of the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, even it is not, however, theoretical in the modern sense of philosophy, in that theoretical knowledge is acquired merely for the sake of knowledge. As the goal of theoretical knowledge is to lead the soul towards a higher kind of spiritual existence, the ascent through philosophical knowledge forms a spiritual path for the soul through which it approaches God and spiritual reality to the extent possible for a human soul. Hence, the idea of saving knowledge is even attached to the seemingly dry speculations of the Peripatetic philosophers, let alone the esoteric philosophy of al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity.

In order to complete the philosopher’s progression towards ultimate happiness, we must now investigate the intellectual part of his ascent. Since Arabic philosophers believe knowledge to lead man towards his transcendental goal of human perfection, the question arises about the nature of that knowledge, and the way in which it relates to the gradual change of human substance towards its spiritual goal. Precisely what kind and what amount of knowledge is required according to the philosophers for man to attain his intellectual perfection? And what are the stages of the intellectual ascent within that progression?

All these questions are intimately related in particular to two specific areas of scholarship on Arabic philosophy, namely epistemology and classification of sciences. Both of these subjects have received a considerable amount of attention within scholarship, and while I will discuss both to some degree, I hope to accomplish this from a different perspective. Neither of these subjects has normally been viewed within the context of the Neoplatonic ascent of the soul. Namely, for Arabic

philosophers the epistemological process is not merely a theory of how man acquires knowledge about the external reality, but also one about the human soul’s ontological change through that process. The increase of intelligible knowledge is reflected in the substance of the soul as its gradual transformation into a purely spiritual substance separated from sensible reality.

Secondly, the classificatory hierarchies of philosophical sciences adopted by Arabic philosophers are not merely intended to arrange the philosophical sciences in a logical order, but rather correspond to the epistemological and ontological progression from sensory to intelligible existence that the philosophical initiate should pass through within his studies. While the origins of these classifications lie in the Aristotelian and Platonic schools of late Antiquity, it is important to see how they correspond to the idea of theoretical ascent for the Arabic philosophers, and how each part within that classification assumes a role within the ascent.

The idea that acquisition of knowledge would lead man towards some transcendent goal of theoretical perfection, and transform his essence spiritually, seems unconvincing from the modern perspective. However, behind it there are a number of suppositions about the nature of knowledge which make it more plausible.

As we have seen, there is an experiential dimension to philosophical knowledge, which Ibn Sīnā in particular at times portrays in almost mystical and ecstatic terms. Moreover, the acquisition of knowledge entails an ontological change in the substance of the knower, which helps to explain how knowledge could cause an internal transformation of the soul from a corporeal-sensible to spiritual-intelligible kind of existence. This derives from the Platonic idea that knowing is becoming, or that the conception of an intelligible form is to become that form, so that a complete identity between the knower (‘āqīl), the intellect (‘aql), and the object of knowledge (ma’qūl) is formed.

Hence, according to Ibn Sīnā, intellection is essentially different from sense perception in that when the intellect perceives an intelligible form, the intelligible object unites to it and becomes one with it, which is not the case in the perception of sensible forms. When the human intellect conceives an intelligible form (ṣūra ma’qūla), that intelligible becomes its essence (taṣīr dhātuhu). The final goal of becoming an “intelligible world” (‘ālam ‘aqli) entails gathering the totality of such intelligible forms to oneself. To achieve that ultimate goal would mean the transformation of the human substance in its totality, as in acquiring the totality of intelligibles it would become like those intelligibles, and hence in effect reproduce within itself the contents of the separate Intellects.

The Brethren of Purity also explicitly link epistemology with an ontological change of the knowing subject. The more man acquires demonstrative knowledge, through reflection and instruction, the better he is able to conceive (taṣawwur) spiritual entities. Then he becomes like those spiritual things potentially, and at death of his body also actually. Consequently, there is a special visionary part in knowing

551 See, chapter 4.3 above.
552 This is the Platonized interpretation of intellection in Aristotle’s De Anima, adopted by Arabic philosophers. See, e.g., Aramale 1977, p. 57.
553 Ibn Sīnā, Mabda’, pp. 18, 97, 112; Shifā’: Ilāhiyyāt, p. 351.
554 Ikhwān, Rasāʾil, I (10), pp. 450-1.
which the modern idea of knowledge lacks, epitomized in the idea of knowing as seeing.

Hence, the idea of saving knowledge in Arabic Neoplatonism is connected to a specific kind of intelligible knowledge, not just any knowledge. Knowledge in the philosophical sense is then to be distinguished from mere belief or opinion. First of all this derives from the Platonic polarity of sensible and intelligible knowledge, so that true knowledge (epistēmē/’ilm) is concerned with the universal, unchanging, and eternal, that is, the intelligible reality behind sensory appearances, whereas on the particulars of the sensible world one can only have beliefs (doksa/’zann) that lack the syllogistic certainty of philosophical knowledge. The knowledge by means of which the philosopher should ascend towards his theoretical perfection consists of the intelligible forms, not the ever-changing events of the world of generation and corruption. These intelligible forms, moreover, have a transcendent existence within the ultimate reality which lies beyond the sensible world.

Hence, the objects of philosophical knowledge are the intelligible forms abstracted from matter on the one hand, and the separate Intellects that are intelligible in their essence to begin with. It is especially the latter which al-Fārābī identifies with wisdom as the perfection of theoretical intellect, since they are the remote causes (al-asbāb al-ba’īda) of the things in the visible world from which the rest of beings draw their existence. True knowledge is concerned with the ultimate causes of existents, rather than their manifold effects at the end of the chain of existence.

This brings about the related idea of the finite nature of knowledge. Unlike the infinite and ever-changing things of the sensible world, such intelligibles are both unchangeable and finite. Hence, it is at least theoretically possible for the philosopher to attain all of them, whereby his soul would become like the separate Intellects in its substance.

A second distinction between knowledge and belief involves that between philosophical knowledge and religious belief. Namely, besides presumptions concerning the sensible world, it is also possible to have non-philosophical opinions concerning the eternal things of the spiritual realm of being. Theoretical knowledge concerning the ultimate reality may be possessed in differing forms, as intelligible knowledge or opinions emulating the intelligible knowledge.

According to the well-known distinction formulated by al-Fārābī in his political treatises, people are divided in their capacity to receive the saving knowledge into the elect few (khāṣṣa) who can grasp the intelligible reality such as it actually exists, either by themselves or through instruction from others, and to the larger masses (’āmma) who can only grasp the theoretical truths through images (mithālāt) imitating the intelligible truth. Hence, the majority of people attain their portion of happiness through the opinions provided for the mass of believers in the form of religious

555 Al-Fārābī, *Fuṣūl*, p. 126. Hence, according to al-Fārābī, real knowledge consists of what is true and certain at all times, not of temporal transitory events, such as a particular man sitting at a particular time.


dogma, whereas only the philosophers attain it by cognizing the actual intelligible truth from which the religious opinions are derived.558

The same idea is adopted by most Arabic philosophers to explain the relationship between philosophical and religious knowledge, although without al-Fārābī’s rationalistic reduction of religious revelation to philosophical truth.559 For al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity, religious dogmas and philosophical ideas represent the exoteric and esoteric levels of the same truth, both of which are necessary for the attainment of happiness. Hence, the Brethren define knowledge (‘ilm) as grasping the form of the object of knowledge (ma’lūm), in distinction of belief (īmān) as assent (taṣdīq) to the sayings of someone else.

In contrast to al-Fārābī’s view of polarity between knowledge and belief, the Brethren’s view is decidedly more religious. Both knowledge and belief are necessary for spiritual salvation, with belief in religious revelation representing the first exoteric level leading towards the esoteric intelligible ideas. As for al-Fārābī, however, people form different classes in their capacity of grasping the truth, of which only the elect (khāṣṣa) are able to conceive the theoretical truth without resorting to similitudes.560

Despite their relative differences with respect to their attitude towards revelation, all Arabic philosophers believe that only philosophical knowledge possesses an absolute syllogistic certainty, whereas revelation only approximates it. Besides, only philosophical knowledge actually corresponds to the ontological structure of the world. Hence, it is clear that for the philosopher only intelligible knowledge can aid the soul in its quest to regain its spiritual nature.

The classical Peripatetic theory about philosophical and symbolic knowledge both leading to happiness enables at least some degree of happiness for non-philosophers, and explains the relationship between philosophy and revelation for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. Still, clearly only philosophical knowledge leads to theoretical perfection and absolute happiness. Theoretical philosophy, for Ibn Sīnā, provides “conceptual and verifiable knowledge” (al-‘ilm al-taṣawwurī al-taṣdīqī) about the world which perfects man’s theoretical faculty, thereby leading him to ultimate happiness.561 It is distinguished from mere belief in that man acquires it through demonstrative means, and hence can attain certainty of its truth, whereas belief through authority is always open to doubt.

For the Brethren of Purity and al-Kirmānī also intelligible knowledge about the world going beyond religious belief is necessary for the soul’s salvation. But for them religious belief and philosophical knowledge are not alternative, but two stages of the same process. Esoteric philosophical knowledge represents the last stage of the soul’s ascent to complete liberation from matter.

Moreover, even this esoteric-philosophical knowledge has religious connotations. It is learned not so much through independent reflection or philosophical study, but through instruction from a divinely supported individual. The imam is an Intellect incarnate in whom the totality of intelligible knowledge and moral virtue is gathered

to one human individual. For the Brethren, this is the “religious man” (al-insān al-dīnī) and “knowing individual” (al-shakhš al-ʿilmī), “a holy soul supported by the power of the divine Word, in whom the knowledge of the true natures of things is gathered, and through whom the knowledge of first creation is attained.”

7.2 Theoretical requirements of happiness

How much theoretical intelligible knowledge does man then need to obtain in order to attain happiness? Both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā provide an answer to this question in devising specific lists of the minimum amount of philosophical knowledge required for the attainment of happiness. Al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity offer in a less explicit form information about the fundamental religious and philosophical knowledge that everyone should acquire.

While happiness as the ultimate ideal of theoretical perfection refers to the actualization of the totality of intelligible knowledge in the human intellect, in the end not all philosophical knowledge appears to be equally essential for its attainment. The theoretical requirements of happiness are then like philosophical credos, which further reveal the Gnostic aspect of philosophical knowledge. They present the philosophical beliefs that are deemed vital for the soul’s salvation, and hence reveal which parts of philosophy are most crucial to the religious dimension of philosophy. While they in a sense are parallel to the fundamental beliefs that any Muslim must possess in order to be saved, there is one central difference: for the philosophers, man comes to know their truth demonstratively through his own intellect, and is not required to rely merely on revelation.

As we have seen, Ibn Sīnā defines ultimate happiness as the transformation of the human soul into an “intelligible world” (ʿālam maʿqūl), a fully actualized intellect that embraces all of the intelligible forms within itself. To achieve this man should conceive the whole Neoplatonic emanationist order of creation within himself, starting from the “Principle of All” (mabdaʾ al-kull), down through the substances of the higher world, the separate Intellects completely detached from matter, the astral souls attached to heavenly bodies, and the heavenly bodies themselves, until it gains the “form of all existence” (hayʿat al-wujūd kullihā) within itself.

Ibn Sīnā gives a precise list of what he “believes to be required for the soul” to gain happiness in more than one work, and while the contents are more or less the same, they are presented in slightly differing manners. These lists embody the idea that the requirement for happiness is for the intelligible order of the universe to become reflected in the human soul. Hence, the minimum knowledge includes essentially the hierarchy of metaphysical and physical entities, that is, First Principle, spiritual substances, and corporeal beings of the material world, as well as the relations prevailing between them. Besides knowledge about man’s place in the

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563 See, Appendix I for the theoretical requirements of happiness for each of the four philosophers.


cosmos is required, that is, knowledge of the substance of human soul as incorporeal and eternal.

Al-Fārābī gives the minimum requirements of theoretical knowledge similarly in various works with slight variations. For him they form part of political philosophy, that is, they are the theoretical opinions that all inhabitants of the virtuous city should possess, whether as intelligible ideas or religious images. Al-Fārābī’s lists are considerably more detailed than those of Ibn Sīnā. But as for Ibn Sīnā, they materialize to incorporate the requirement of conceiving the whole emanationist structure of the world, starting from the First Cause, proceeding through the spiritual existents, and ending in the corporeal beings, as well as the relations prevailing between the beings at different levels of the hierarchy.

Unlike Ibn Sīnā, however, al-Fārābī includes besides metaphysical and physical knowledge the main parts of practical philosophy also. In Aphorisms al-Fārābī refers to knowledge of theoretical philosophy as the beginning of knowledge, since it portrays the general lines of the Neoplatonic account of creation. Besides this, the inhabitants should, however, come to conceive the end and middle of knowledge, the end being happiness as the end point of the human soul’s ascent, and the middle the actions leading to this end. In the more detailed accounts the required knowledge of practical philosophy includes both ethical and political philosophy, and even historical knowledge about virtuous and vicious leaders of past and present.

The lists in the end appear to be virtually identical to the contents of al-Fārābī’s two major political treatises, Virtuous City and Political Governance. Hence, the list of knowledge required from a virtuous citizen presented in Book of Religion is almost a blueprint for the contents of Virtuous City, proceeding through the metaphysical and physical entities of the Neoplatonic hierarchy to cover the nature of happiness and the ethical and political means to achieve it.

For the two philosophers, the theoretical requirements for happiness of are then slightly different especially in that Ibn Sīnā does not seem to include knowledge of practical philosophy, whereas al-Fārābī does. The discrepancy, however, might be more apparent than real. For both, the primary condition for the attainment of happiness is arriving at a general conception of the Neoplatonic structure of the world, from God down to the material world. Since practical purification is as essential to finding happiness for Ibn Sīnā as it is for al-Fārābī, clearly the means towards happiness, that is, ethical and political philosophy, should be known as well. But they do not form part of the theoretical perfection of which the contemplative end of happiness is composed.

Hence, the lists by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā are designed for different goals. Al-Fārābī’s more comprehensive list purports to offer the knowledge that virtuous citizens should have in order to achieve happiness, which includes both intelligible knowledge of the world and knowledge of the practical means to achieve happiness.

566 Al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-milla, pp. 44-5; al-Madīna al-fūdīla, pp. 276-8; al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya, pp. 84-5; Fuṣūl, p. 141.

567 This explains why these political works have a theoretical part in the first place, that is, because they represent the theoretical opinions that the inhabitants should possess, besides the fact that the Neoplatonic hierarchy of reality provides a model for the arrangement of human society. This does not mean, however, as the Straussians claim, that the theoretical parts do not represent al-Fārābī’s own philosophical beliefs.
In *Book of Religion* the second kind of opinions are depicted as opinions concerning voluntary things (*āshyāʿ irādiyya*), that is, related to practical philosophy, whereas the first concern theoretical things (*āshyāʿ nazariyya*).\(^{568}\) Ibn Sīnā, however, promises only to enumerate the intelligible knowledge or theoretical wisdom required for intellectual happiness, which excludes ethical and political philosophy. Clearly, for al-Fārābī also anecdotal information about past kings and leaders is not philosophical intelligible knowledge required for actualization of the theoretical intellect.

For al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity their philosophical compendiums in effect promise to offer the theoretical knowledge required for contemplative happiness. Both require knowledge of both philosophical and religious kind in order to gain happiness. Such knowledge is for al-Kirmānī essentially contained within knowledge about the divine unity (*tawḥīd*), which he states as the main requirement for the soul to attain its eternity. What al-Kirmānī calls the science of divine unity (*ʿilm al-tawḥīd*) in fact encompasses the whole of Ismaili theoretical and religious knowledge required for ultimate happiness, such as it is presented in *Rest of the Intellect*, since that science is an undivided whole divided into parts only for purposes of exposition.\(^{569}\)

On a more particular level, man must come to know the whole Neoplatonic order of descent from God, through “proximate angels” and astral bodies, to material bodies, and back upwards through the hierarchy of generated beings of the lower world culminating in man. Hence, as for the Peripatetics, man must conceive in an intelligible manner both the metaphysical and physical existents and their relations to each other. Besides this, however, specifically Ismaili religious knowledge about the prophets, prophetic cycles, religious hierarchy, and religious law is required.\(^{570}\)

For al-Kirmānī such religious knowledge is intimately bound through the idea of balance of religion (*mīzān al-diyyāna*) to theoretical knowledge concerning the world, as there is no distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge within the science of divine unity, only esoteric knowledge concerning different levels of reality.\(^{571}\)

While the Brethren of Purity do not offer an exhaustive list of the precise items of knowledge that are required for the soul’s salvation, at times they come close to it. For the Brethren both religious belief and demonstrative knowledge are necessary to salvation. The origin of their conception of belief is Quranic, and is condensed to five basic pillars of faith in the Creator, angels, prophets, revelation, and resurrection involving reward or punishment in the afterlife.\(^{572}\) But this purely exoteric belief is still not sufficient for the soul’s intellectual perfection; demonstrative intelligible knowledge about the world, which is not provided by exoteric revelation, is also necessary. For the Brethren, this means knowledge about the hierarchy of hypostases, in particular, God, Intellect, Soul, Nature, and Matter.\(^{573}\)

Both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers are then in essential agreement that the theoretical knowledge required for happiness consists of conception of the physical

\(^{568}\) Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-milla*, pp. 44-5.

\(^{569}\) Al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥa*, pp. 111-2; De Smet 1995, pp. 19, 329. See also, chapter 3.5.


\(^{571}\) See, chapter 3.5 above.


\(^{573}\) Ikhwān, *Jāmiʿ a*, pp. 279-80, 528.
and metaphysical levels of reality, to which might be added some degree of practical philosophy for the Peripatetics, Ismaili religious knowledge for al-Kîrmānî, and belief in religious doctrines for the Brethren of Purity.

Of the remaining parts of theoretical philosophy, knowledge of logic is not listed explicitly among the intellectual requirements of happiness, although it is indispensable for the theoretical ascent for Peripatetic philosophers. Since knowledge of physical and metaphysical reality must be attained in a way that produces certainty, that is, through philosophical demonstration, or even direct intuition in case of Ibn Sinā, knowledge of logic is necessary for acquiring real physical and metaphysical knowledge. In fact, the philosopher who gradually proceeds to discover the nature of reality through the process of independent verification (tahqīq), as opposed to uncritical faith on authority (taqlīd), acquires knowledge of the ultimate reality in a way that perfectly reflects the essentially syllogistic structure of the universe. Therefore, it is not possible to acquire the saving physical and metaphysical knowledge merely as externally transmitted doctrines, without understanding their inherent logical structuring.\textsuperscript{574}

In contrast, al-Kîrmānî does not accord logic any role within his science of divine unity, in which the intellectual balance of the philosophers (mīzān al-‘aql), hailed by the Brethren of Purity, is replaced by his own balance of religion. Since the philosophical truth is attained through the Ismaili hierarchy culminating in the divinely guaranteed knowledge of the imam, attaining certain conviction of the intelligible truth does not require knowledge about logical demonstration.\textsuperscript{575} The Ismaili initiate is not expected to discover the ultimate nature of reality through a process of independent reflection, because an ordinary human intellect is not capable of such a feat without going astray.\textsuperscript{576} Instead, that knowledge is transmitted to the rest of humankind through the human incarnations of the transcendent Intellect, that is, the imams. For al-Kîrmānî, it is the presence of such individuals throughout human history – not Aristotelian logic – that ensures the possibility of certain knowledge about the world.

As for mathematics, like logic, it seems to be a necessary part of the theoretical ascent for all except al-Kîrmānî, for whom mathematics has no use at least within the esoteric saving knowledge. Given the Pythagorean inclinations of the Brethren of Purity, it is natural that they give the greatest relative weight to the importance of mathematics within the soul’s ascent. For them mathematical relations underlie the ultimate reality, and mathematics therefore appears as more than an instrument, although even for them the mathematical sciences seem to appear as a spring board for even higher knowledge.

For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, mathematical knowledge does not in itself form part of the intelligible requirements of theoretical perfection just discussed, but seems rather to have an instrumental role akin to that of logic. However, it occupies a slightly different part within the ascent for each, as mathematics is presented as either a preparatory or intermediary stage in relation to physical and metaphysical knowledge. For both of them, however, even if the ultimate theoretical perfection is achieved

\textsuperscript{575} See, chapter 3 above and De Smet 1995, pp. 357-9.
\textsuperscript{576} See, al-Kîrmānî, Rāha, pp. 103-4, 588.
through physical and metaphysical knowledge about corporeal and spiritual reality, the two other parts of theoretical philosophy also have their place within the soul’s spiritual progression. Even logic and mathematics as the seemingly most purely theoretical of sciences are not free of extra-academic spiritual aspirations.

### 7.3 Ascent from sensible to intelligible knowledge

According to Ibn Sīnā, the more man gains insight in his reflection of the intelligible ideas, the more receptive he becomes to ultimate happiness, and the more his liaisons to corporeal reality are weakened. In the minimum lists of theoretical knowledge the relatively few items of mainly physical and metaphysical knowledge are enumerated in an indiscriminate manner with no particular order of precedence. It is not, however, possible for the student to proceed directly towards conceiving the necessary intelligible ideas about the Neoplatonic order of being in order to become happy.

As mentioned above, prior knowledge of logic is necessary for the student already in order for him to understand the physical and metaphysical works, and to become truly convinced about their truth. But with respect to all other branches of philosophy as well, the system of knowledge forms a relative progression in which one has to proceed according to a determined order. On the whole, the philosophical curriculum should correspond to the idea of the soul’s gradual ascent in order for it to operate as a spiritual road towards ultimate happiness.

In a sense then, as Hadot suggests in his portrayal of the thought of Plotinus, the different grades of philosophical knowledge are reproduced as stages within the soul. As the human soul is situated in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being between the materiality of its bodily activities and the pure spirituality of the higher world, to which it has access through its intellect, it contains within itself both levels of being. The grades of philosophy correspond to the corporeal-sensible and spiritual-intelligible levels of reality, as in the classical Platonic tripartition of philosophy into physics, mathematics, and metaphysics, where each philosophical discipline investigates progressively higher kinds of objects with respect to their degree of materiality.

Hence, the philosophical student’s progression along the grades of philosophy simultaneously forms the soul’s progression within itself towards the ultimate goal of retrieving its purely spiritual essence. The core of the philosophical progression is the soul’s gradual ascent from its initial state of purely sensible existence up to a purely intelligible level of being. In this sense, the idea of ascent is connected to the adoption of the Delphic maxim “know thyself!” (gnōthi seauton) in Arabic philosophy. The theoretical ascent is a voyage towards self-knowledge, or rather knowledge of the

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578 Hadot 1993, pp. 26ff. This might, however, apply better to Plotinus than to the Arabic philosophers, as for him the three hypostases exist even within the individual soul, and it is hence possible for the soul to ascend to the One within itself. This is not strictly the case for the Peripatetic philosophers and al-Kirmānī with their more complex cosmology, and with the restriction of the ascent to an Intellect below God. The Brethren of Purity again come closest to the Plotinian conception in this respect, as all the hypostases below God are present in man as a microcosm.
579 See, e.g., Merlan 1953, pp. 53-4 and chapter 7.4 below.
highest potential of oneself fulfilled through the soul’s ascent towards the highest echelons of spiritual-intelligible reality.

Hence, Ibn Sīnā in one of his treatises on the soul depicts man’s knowledge of himself (maʿrifat al-insān nafsahu) as the most important of pursuits, and self-knowledge as a “stairway towards knowledge of the Lord” (mirqāt ilā maʿrifat al-rabb).580 For the Brethren of Purity the ascent through self-knowledge is further connected to the idea of man as a microcosm. Since man as a microcosmic image of all existence reflects the order of the cosmos from its lowest material to the highest spiritual levels, man also contains within himself knowledge of all existence.581

The ontological change of the soul by means of philosophy is inherently connected to the epistemological process. Ascent from the material to the spiritual is identified with the epistemological ascent from perception of sensibles to grasping of intelligibles. For all Arabic philosophers this process is portrayed by means of Aristotelian psychology, where the soul’s progress is identified as distinct stages within the actualization of human intellect’s capacity to grasp intelligible knowledge, although the terminology and identification of the precise stages varies slightly from one philosopher to another.

The soul’s initial state of materiality corresponds epistemologically to the degree of a completely passive intellect, at which point the possibility for intelligible knowledge is still present only as a potential disposition within the human soul. The end point of man’s spiritual ascent, on the other hand, is equivalent to the epistemological state of a fully actualized intellect, whereby man has acquired the totality of intelligibles.582

Despite the fact that for all Arabic philosophers man attains his final goal of fully actualized intellect through a contact with a transcendent Intellect, from which the intelligibles emanate to the human soul, the epistemological process still involves a process of abstraction from sensible to intelligible knowledge. According to Ibn Sīnā, for the intellect to conceive the intelligibles it must abstract the sensible forms from all their accidental material qualities so that only their common universality remains. The process of abstraction is a gradual one, where the faculties of imagination and estimation each adopt the sensible form in a more purely abstract manner, until the intellect divests it completely from all its accidental qualities. 583 Despite the apparently empirical nature of the process, however, for Ibn Sīnā the intelligible

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580 Ibn Sīnā, Risāla fī maʿrifat al-nafs al-nātiqa, p. 182. See, chapter 6.1 above for the relation of the Delphic maxim to the practical purification of the soul. Altmann (1969a, p. 29) treats the idea of the Delphic maxim connected to the soul’s ascent towards the One as its specifically Neoplatonic interpretation in which the act of self-knowledge implies withdrawal from the sensible world, and in which the soul comes to know itself through looking upwards towards the highest reality.

581 See, e.g., Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 261ff. For al-Kirmānī also there is an ontological correspondence between man as a microcosm and the other levels of reality, but, despite this, he does not favor the theme of self-knowledge. See, De Smet 1995, pp. 27-8.

582 See, e.g., Davidson 1992, pp. 49-50, 84-6 for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā; De Smet 1995, pp. 354-5 and Rābā, pp. 467-8 for al-Kirmānī; and Jāmiʿa, p. 363 for the Brethren of Purity. The technical term for the initial stage is potential intellect (al-ʿaql bi-ʿl-quipwa), or for al-Kirmānī potentially subsisting intellect (al-ʿaql al-qā im bi-ʿl-quipwa), of which al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and the Brethren of Purity also employ the term material intellect (al-ʿaql al-hayalānī). The final stage of intellectual perfection is called by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā acquired intellect (al-ʿaql al-mustafād), and by al-Kirmānī the actual intellect (al-ʿaql bi-ʿl-fiʿ).

583 Ibn Sīnā, Mabda', pp. 102-3.
concepts are not in fact truly abstracted from the particulars, but rather the process prepares the rational soul for the emanation of the universals from the Active Intellect. The indivisible intelligible ideas have an objective existence within the Active Intellect, to which the human soul only has a gradually more complete access through its intellectual progression.584

For al-Fārābī, the active role of human intellect seems greater. For him also the Active Intellect transforms the potentially intelligible sense perceptions stored in the imaginative faculty into actually intelligible thoughts. But for al-Fārābī it is only the first intelligibles, that is, the self-evident principles shared by all men and the first principles of sciences, that are emanated directly from the Active Intellect, whereas the rest is construed by men themselves through demonstrative means.585

For both, when the human intellect reaches its perfection at the degree of acquired intellect (al-‘aql al-mustafād), it attains a more complete conjunction with the Active Intellect, the repository of all intelligible forms, whereby it no longer has need for resorting to sensible forms and the abstractive process in its conception of intelligibles.586

For al-Kirmānī the gradual progression of the soul from sensible to intelligible existence is similarly attached to a gradual epistemological process. Al-Kirmānī identifies theoretical perfection with intelligible cognition of the principles preceding the human soul in existence, that is, the separate Intellects. Initially, the soul is, however, devoid of the forms of existents (suwar al-mawjūdāt), like “blank paper devoid of writing.” The ascent towards cognition of the higher principles occurs gradually, from the non-sensing embryo in its mother’s womb, through the sensing and imaginative souls, up to a perfected soul with completely actualized intellection. From pure sensation the soul will gradually rise to see correspondences between the sensible forms within its imaginative faculty, to seeing the correspondence between sensible existents and things of religion (al-umūr al-shar‘īyya),587 to conceiving images of the separate Intellects (amthilat al-‘uqūl al-qā‘ima bi-‘l-fi‘l), until it finally gains the capability to grasp the non-sensible Intellects themselves. This is the final point of the soul’s progression, whereby it is connected to the Intellects, and dispenses of the lower forms of cognition altogether.588

Despite the relatively low regard given to empirical knowledge in Neoplatonic thought, perhaps even more so for the Arabic Neoplatonists than their Greek predecessors, sensation is valued as the necessary first step towards intelligible knowledge. Given the epistemological background, it seems clear that the soul’s theoretical ascent should start from sense knowledge, from which it gradually advances towards intelligible knowledge.

Al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity are in fact adamant in demanding that the intellectual progression of the pupil should start its ascent from sensible knowledge upwards. The Brethren of Purity call the road of the senses (ṭarīq al-hawāss) a

584 Davidson 1992, pp. 84-93. For the Brethren’s parallel epistemological process, see, e.g., Rasā’il, III (35), pp. 232-43.
587 This is based on the Ismaili idea of balance of religion treated in chapter 3.5., and the resulting correspondence between all levels of reality.
588 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 103, 115, 480-1, 490-2.
staircase through which one ascends to intelligible knowledge, the soul’s ultimate goal. In order to attain that ultimate goal one must, however, start from sense knowledge. The first human degree of knowledge therefore concerns the tangible sensible objects (al-umūr al-mahṣūsa dhawāt al-ashyā’ al-malmūsa). Al-Kirmānī similarly explains that sense knowledge is the proper starting point for the ascent, since the soul in its initial state is closer to the sensibles than the intelligibles. If one, on the contrary, were to start directly from knowledge of the higher realities, then the road to knowledge would become more difficult for the student, as he would be filled with doubts about it.

The epistemological progression then coincides with the general lines of the idea of Neoplatonic ascent, that is, the soul’s reascend from sensible-material to intelligible-spiritual level of existence. For the symmetry of the Neoplatonic descent and ascent to be complete, the theoretical ascent should progress gradually according to an order that represents the reversal of the emanationist process of creation.

Al-Kirmānī in fact states this explicitly, in saying that the “devotional order leading to eternal happiness” (tartīb al-‘ibāda al-mu’addiya ilā dā‘im al-sa’āda) should be opposite to the natural hierarchy of being (al-tartīb al-ταβιτι), so that the first in the order of creation is last in the order of devotion, and vice versa. Man’s quest for theoretical knowledge should then progress gradually along the Neoplatonic order of existents, starting from the beings of “late” existence (wujūd ākhīrī), the degree to which the human soul itself belongs, and proceeding from there until the first existents of the Intellects are reached. In contrast to Plotinus, however, for whom the symmetry becomes complete in return to the One, for al-Kirmānī knowledge of the Intellects is the ultimate limit, while God as the very first being remains beyond the reach of human intellect. Again if this natural epistemological order is not followed, according to al-Kirmānī the soul will be filled with doubts due to its incapability to conceive the things that should not be known before the things that precede them.

The Brethren of Purity similarly require time after time a precisely ordered procession in studying their epistles, although it remains to be seen to what degree the arrangement of their epistles actually corresponds to the Neoplatonic ascent. Only when the epistles are studied in this progressive order, starting from the first epistle and ascending from it one by one until the last one, do they fulfill their role as the “ladder to salvation” (sullām li-l-najāt). Hence, “you, o’ brother, must read these epistles from the first to the last, and not enter on a chapter until you have learned

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590 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 107-8.
591 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, p. 107.
592 Al-Kirmānī, Rāḥa, pp. 107-8.
593 Ikhwān, Jāmi’a, p. 17. “We have imposed as a condition on our masterly books and precise epistles that anyone studying them must begin from the first of them and ascend through them until the last of them, so that we have made them a ladder to salvation” (sharaṭnā fi kutubinā al-muhkama was-raṣā’ilinā al-muṭaqana annahu yajib ‘alā al-nāẓir fihi an yabada’ bi-awwalihā murtaqiyan fihi ilā ākhīrihā wa-ja’alnāhā sullaman li-l-najāt).
what is before it, as then they will lead you to right guidance and the grade of perfection.”

Al-Fārābī presents the same idea of the progressive nature of philosophical knowledge in terms of philosophical methodology in his *Attainment of Happiness*. Al-Fārābī’s progression follows the chain of causation upwards, thus in effect progressing along the reversed order of creation. Each science investigates a specific genus of existents, where the investigation of its objects of enquiry leads to discovery of the causes of these beings, or their principles of existence (*mabādi’ al-wujūd*). When one then proceeds upwards to principles that lie outside that genus, a new discipline investigating a higher genus of existents is found. All this results in that the procession of philosophical knowledge proceeds gradually higher from the principles to the principles of principles, until the furthest principle is found. As for al-Kirmānī, knowledge of existents then proceeds from those posterior in the hierarchy of being gradually upwards.595

The general idea of the theoretical ascent to happiness in Arabic philosophy would then seem to be that since the ontological reality is hierarchical, the progression of philosophical knowledge should also be hierarchical, although following the inverse order of the gradation of ontological reality. For the actual philosophical or Ismaili discipline the theoretical ascent of course does not proceed this way through independent conception of progressively higher levels of reality.596 The practice of philosophical learning rather takes place through instruction by the philosophers, or the Ismaili *da’wa* in case of al-Kirmānī.

The philosophical instruction moreover had by the 10th century been petrified into curriculums of philosophical sciences, within which each discipline occupied its proper place. The Ismailis, on the other hand, had their own curriculum, in which the esoteric Ismaili philosophy formed the highest part. It is now time to see how this general idea of Neoplatonic ascent by knowledge is manifested in the actual curriculums of Arabic philosophy, such as they are presented in the philosophical compendiums on the one hand, and normative classifications of sciences on the other.

### 7.4 Classification of sciences

The curriculum of philosophical sciences was not devised by Arabic philosophers from scratch, but was adopted in slightly variant forms from the Greek philosophical schools of late Antiquity, the one in Alexandria in particular. Following implicit ideas in Aristotle’s own works, Alexandrian commentators had arranged Aristotle’s corpus into a philosophical curriculum. Within such a curriculum to each field of study was

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596 Only a man equipped with perfect theoretical intelct could grasp the totality of his knowledge by himself, as is the case for the protagonist of the twelfth-century Andalusian philosopher Ibn Ṭufayl’s famous fable *Ḥāyya Ibn Yaqẓān*. Stranded on a desert island Ḥāyya proceeds to gradually deduce the whole order of being from empirical reality up to the First Principle. For Ibn Sinā, intelligible knowledge may be reached through instruction, demonstrative reasoning, or direct intuition (*ḥads*). Only a perfect man, that is, a prophet, would be capable of acquiring all knowledge directly by intuitive means, whereas as an eminent philosopher, such as Ibn Sinā himself, would be able to dispense with much hard work due to his relatively strong intuitive faculty. See, Gutas 1988, pp. 20-1, 73, 159ff.
assigned a set of Aristotle’s works which together combined to form a pedagogical path of study. For late Greek Neoplatonists Aristotle’s works had moreover constituted the “minor mysteries,” preceding the “major mysteries” of Plato’s dialogues, which were also arranged to a set curricular order. Through such a curriculum the student would proceed to knowledge of progressively higher realities by studying the required works of Aristotle and Plato.

In the school of Ammonius (d. ca. 517) then, the curriculum would start with a course of pre-philosophical morality, advance through one year of Aristotelian logic, one year of physics, and one year of mathematics and metaphysics. The course would then culminate in three years devoted to the 12 Platonic dialogues best thought to epitomize Platonism, similarly arranged to two cycles ascending from physical to metaphysical knowledge. Arabic philosophy, despite its otherwise Neoplatonic tendencies, largely dismissed Plato from its own curriculum, reflecting in part the omission of Plato in the final Christianized years of the Alexandria school.

The main criterion for the classification of philosophical sciences within these curricula was the correspondence of ontological and epistemological order, so that the philosophical disciplines were categorized into ascending order with respect to the materiality of their objects of enquiry. The order most generally adopted by Arabic philosophers from the late Alexandrian philosophers was the Aristotelian tripartition of theoretical philosophy into physics, mathematics, and metaphysics, corresponding to the Platonic tripartition of being into sensibles (aisthēta), mathematical (mathēmata), and ideas (eidē). Thus, physics was identified by the Alexandrians as the lowest in degree investigating material beings, metaphysics or theology as the highest investigating spiritual beings, and mathematics as the middle science, as its objects pertained to both material and immaterial spheres.

This division then fully manifests the idea of the soul’s ascent through philosophy from a sensible to intelligible level, with mathematics assumed as a necessary intermediary stage to soften the transition from “darkness to light.” Namely, to move directly from the “Platonic cave” to the luminosity of intelligible beings was not

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597 Hein 1985, pp. 7-8; Gutas 1988, p. 149; Sorabji 2004, pp. 319-20. In contrast, Miskawayh’s Tartīb al-sa’ādāt states the time period necessary to learn Aristotle’s philosophy, for a qualified student with a teacher, to be between ten and twenty years. Gutas 1983, p. 235.

598 See, e.g., Hein 1985, p. 13. Al-Fārābī’s Philosophy of Plato summarizes the contents of some 20 Platonic dialogues, introduced with the title “Philosophy of Plato, its parts, and the grades of its parts from the first to the last” (Falsafat Aflā‘ūn wa-ajzā‘uhā wa-marā‘īb ajzā‘īhā min awwalahā ilā akhirihā). The title would suggest a systematic ordering of the dialogues according to subject matter, which one could presume might go back to the Greek Neoplatonists. Interestingly, al-Fārābī does start with Alcibiades, which according to him introduces the question of happiness as human perfection, as do the Greek Neoplatonists, for whom it is identified with the Delphic maxim demanding self-knowledge as the starting point of all knowledge. After this, however, al-Fārābī’s ordering does not bear much resemblance to the Neoplatonic one, nor does it follow a progression from physical to metaphysical knowledge. See, al-Fārābī, Falsafat Aflā‘ūn; Sorabji 2004, pp. 319-21.

599 Merlan 1953, pp. 53ff.; Hein 1995, pp. 25-8, 163ff. Merlan notes the un-Aristotelian character of the tripartition, given that Aristotle does not consider mathematical entities to possess objective existence. Nevertheless, the partition is found repeatedly in Aristotle’s works, although at times Aristotle does substitute astronomy for mathematics. However, Aristotle treats the tripartition of being as a Platonic doctrine. The two ideas are connected in the statement of Metaphysics (1004a2), “there are just as many divisions of philosophy as there are kinds of being” (tosauta merē philosophias estin hosai per’ hai ousiat).
deemed possible.\textsuperscript{600} Besides this tripartition, there was, however, an alternate division of theoretical philosophy, attributed to Plato by some Alexandrian philosophers. In this “Platonic” ordering mathematics was not assumed to form part of philosophy at all, but was instead merely propaedeutic to philosophy, whereas theoretical philosophy proper was composed of physics and metaphysics.\textsuperscript{601} This curriculum was also adopted by some Arabic philosophers, and while it also reflects the idea of Neoplatonic ascent, within it mathematics assumes a different role. The position of logic within the classification was a subject of discussion for the Alexandrians, the question revolving around whether logic was merely an instrument (\textit{organon}) of philosophy or part of philosophy itself.\textsuperscript{602}

For the Arabic philosophers the curricular ideas and classifications of philosophy were transmitted especially through late Greek introductions to philosophy translated into Syriac and Arabic.\textsuperscript{603} As a result, the Alexandrian curriculum is embodied perfectly in Arabic philosophy, for example, in the ninth-century philosopher Qustā Ibn Lūqā’s introduction to philosophy.\textsuperscript{604} Qustā divides theoretical philosophy into the lowest science (\textit{al-‘ilm al-asfal}) of physics, middle science (\textit{al-‘ilm al-awsat}) of mathematics, and highest science (\textit{al-‘ilm al-a’lā}) of metaphysics, with each science further divided into their subsidiary parts. Logic is stated to be an instrument (\textit{āla}) of philosophy, rather than forming part of theoretical philosophy itself. For each part, moreover, Qustā assigns works by Aristotle, although failing to find any for mathematics.\textsuperscript{605}

That the adoption of the Alexandrian classification was not entirely homogenous, however, is apparent in al-Kindī’s interpretation of the same scheme.\textsuperscript{606} For al-Kindī mathematics represents an indispensable preliminary for studying philosophy, rather than part of the actual philosophical sciences, whereas logic forms the first part of philosophy itself. Al-Kindī’s debt to the Aristotelian tripartition of sciences is, however, shown by his division of the rest of theoretical philosophy into three parts according to the ontological order of their objects, even though, rather uniquely, he substitutes psychology for mathematics. Hence, al-Kindī’s progression of philosophy after logic is now physics, dealing with corporeal existents, psychology dealing with existents between corporeality and incorporeality, and metaphysics concerned with purely incorporeal objects.

Both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā are indebted to the Alexandrian-Arabic curricular tradition of the previous centuries in their classification of philosophy. Each of them, however, adopts a different variant of the two major classificatory orders. Ibn Sīnā offers his explanation for the division of philosophy in particular in the essay \textit{On the...}
The main framework of Ibn Sīnā’s division is the classical tripartition of theoretical philosophy supported by the tripartite Platonic ontology of being.

Hence, his general division of theoretical philosophy follows the order physics, mathematics, and metaphysics, designated as the lowest, middle, and highest science respectively. Ibn Sīnā states the criterion for this division explicitly to be the degree of materiality of the objects of enquiry within each science. He, however, states this in terms of the concept pair of definition (ḥadīl) and existence (wujūd). Physics forms the lowest science in degree because in it both definition and existence of the investigated things, that is, celestial bodies, the four elements, and their compounds, are dependent on matter and movement. Mathematics is the intermediate science, because its objects, such as geometrical forms, are reliant on matter and movement only such as they exist in actuality, but not in their abstract definitions. Metaphysics or theology (al-ʿilm al-ilāhī) is the highest science, because its objects, such as God or the abstract concepts of first philosophy, do not require matter and movement in their definitions nor in their existence.

While Ibn Sīnā then follows rather faithfully the Alexandrian idea of gradation of knowledge based on ontological gradation of reality, his novel formulation liberates him from the un-Aristotelian idea of tripartite reality. Mathematical as the middle objects of knowledge have no objective existence, but their immateriality only lies in their definitions. Still, as for the Alexandrians, mathematics presents a bridge between the complete materiality of the physical and utter immateriality of the spiritual worlds. To complete Ibn Sīnā’s classification of philosophy, logic finally precedes the three major parts of theoretical philosophy as its instrument, while the three parts of practical philosophy, ethics, economics, and politics, follow upon all of theoretical philosophy.

Like the Alexandrians, al-Kindī, and others before him, Ibn Sīnā also further links the classification to a reading program of Aristotle’s works. Each subpart of the philosophical disciplines is assigned one or more work by Aristotle. When none are available, as in the case of mathematics, economics, and political philosophy, a work by another Greek author is substituted. Despite the fact that Ibn Sīnā then practically identifies philosophy with Aristotle in his ordering of philosophy, in his actual treatments of the philosophical subjects contained within his compendiums he often quite consciously diverges from the master.

In his autobiography, Ibn Sīnā presents the general lines of his own philosophical education. The sequence of studies that he claims to have gone through in his youth follows so schematically the normative ideas of the order of philosophy that it provokes Gutas to question whether Ibn Sīnā is describing his actual studies,
influenced by generally accepted curricular ideas, or whether he is rather employing his autobiography to promote a normative order of philosophical education. Interestingly, Ibn Sīnā’s own education does not, however, strictly follow his own normative ordering of philosophy which he, in contrast, does adopt in most of his philosophical compendiums.

After his pre-philosophical studies, Ibn Sīnā states that he learned philosophy in the order logic, mathematics, physics, and metaphysics, as an autodidact after receiving some preliminary logical and mathematical instruction. The major difference is then that mathematics has switched places with physics, and now assumes a role as a propaedeutic science, rather than as a mediator between physics and metaphysics. This is the other major variant of the Arabic philosophical curriculum, adopted by al-Fārābī and many others, and hence might have been a natural one for a young Peripatetic like Ibn Sīnā to follow.

Moreover, the fact that it is in variance with Ibn Sīnā’s normative ordering of philosophy, and that in none of his compendia does he present philosophy in this order, would support the view that it was the actual order of his studies, rather than an argument for the order in which philosophy ought to be studied. This is so in particular if the autobiography is a relatively late work, as Gutas himself suggests.

Given the logic of ascent shown in the Alexandrian progression, it is interesting that al-Fārābī adopts the other variant, in which mathematics precedes both physics and metaphysics. The progression still follows the idea of passage from corporeal to incorporeal objects in that physics precedes metaphysics. But the position of mathematics does not seem to fit the gradual progression from materiality to spirituality. Still, al-Fārābī depicts the ascent in terms of materiality.

The philosophical student starts from mathematical concepts which are conceived completely immaterially, and then ascends gradually (yartaqī qalīlan qalīlan) through the echelons of mathematics towards objects that require gradually more materiality in their conception, until he finally ends up in purely corporeal objects, and ascends from mathematics to physics. From the materiality of physics the student is, however, again led gradually towards non-physical principles, until the purely spiritual entities of metaphysics are reached.

The Brethren of Purity adopt the same pattern with respect to the position of mathematics, with the difference that for al-Fārābī logic precedes mathematics and the other theoretical sciences, whereas for the Brethren mathematics is preliminary even to logic. For both the explanation that allows their pattern to be fitted into the idea of the soul’s ascent seems to be that mathematics prepares the student for philosophical thought in general, rather than truly forming part of it, as we will see later. For both al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity, as for Ibn Sīnā, practical

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610 Ibn Sīnā, Sīra, pp. 18ff; Gutas 1988, pp. 149-58.
611 See, Gutas 1988, p. 145 for his proposal for a chronology of Ibn Sīnā’s works.
612 Al-Fārābī’s classification is presented in particular in Enumeration of Sciences, which is quite similar in style to Ibn Sīnā’s Parts of the Intellectual Sciences, although it goes beyond mere definitions of the parts of philosophy. Parallel with this work is the first part of Attainment of Happiness, which follows the same general order of philosophy, but excludes the non-philosophical sciences, such as linguistics.
613 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, pp. 129ff.; Fuṣūl muntaza’a, pp. 96-9.
614 The Brethren of Purity present their normative account of the division of sciences in Rasā’il, I (7).
philosophy finally follows all of theoretical philosophy as its final part in the
classification of philosophical sciences.

While Peripatetic philosophers are for the most part only concerned with the
progression of the philosophical sciences, in the wider Islamic world the “indigenous”
Arabic-Islamic sciences were also incorporated into the classifications. In such
curricula, the partition between native and foreign sciences constitutes the main line
of division. Both were deemed commendable for the education of a truly civilized
man, at least among the more liberal-minded writers.

Such a versatile curriculum is recommended by al-Khwārizmī’s *Keys of the
Sciences* (*Mafāṭīḥ al-‘ulūm*) (ca. 977) for one aspiring to the secretarial art. In this
treatise the Arabic sciences are distinguished from the foreign (*‘ajamī*), the latter
following the classical Alexandrian ordering of philosophy. The philosophical
disciplines are preceded by the native arts of Islamic law, theology, grammar, writing,
prosody, and history. Al-Tawḥīdī similarly adopts both Arabic and Greek sciences
into his treatise on sciences, so that the religious sciences precede some of the natural
sciences, and finally conclude with the “science of Sufism,” although the arrangement
does not seem to follow any particular order.

The Brethren of Purity follow a similar pattern in their general classification of
sciences, sketched in the seventh epistle *On the Theoretical Disciplines and Their
Goals* (*Fī al-Iḥāsā'ī al-‘ilmīyya wa-‘l-gharaḍ minhā*). The Brethren, with their
liberal appreciation of knowledge of all kinds and from all sources, develop a
tripartite division of sciences into preparatory (*riyāḍiyya*), religious (*sharʿiyya
waḍʿiyya*), and philosophical (*falsafiyya ḥaqiqiyya*). The first group, which they also
call the “humanistic” sciences (*‘ulūm al-ʿadāb*), comprise a rather diverse elementary
education from the basic skills of reading and writing, through magic, to history. The
secondary religious education proceeds through the properly Islamic sciences, such as
revelation (*tanzīl*), allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*), and Islamic law, to more
controversial subjects, such as Sufism and interpretation of dreams.

Finally the education culminates in the philosophical sciences, which follow the
order mathematics, logic, physics, and metaphysics, that is, the second major variant
of philosophical classification which al-Fārābī also follows. While the Brethren of
Purity also are indebted to the philosophical tradition of late Antiquity in their
classification of philosophy, the tripartite curriculum of the totality of sciences seems
to be of their own making.

As for the Greek Neoplatonists, for the Brethren also the idea of progression from
materiality to spirituality is present in the order of philosophical sciences in the
passage from physical to metaphysical knowledge. But beyond that, it is also in some
way incorporated to the whole scientific order. For the Brethren of Purity, the most

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615 Bosworth 1963. The author is not the famous mathematician, whose heritage is enshrined in the
word *algorithm* in western languages, but a more obscure civil servant by the name ‘Abd Allāh
Muḥammad b. Ahmad b. Yūsuf al-Kātib al-Khwārizmī. He himself proposes the treatise to include the
basic principles of various disciplines (*awāʿīl al-šīnāʿiyya*), including technical terms, for the education
of a civil servant. This purpose reminds that of al-Fārābī’s *Enumeration of Sciences*, which the author
says to be to introduce the fundamentals of each philosophical discipline so that the reader may pass for
an educated man.

616 Al-Tawḥīdī, *Risāla fi al-ʿulūm*.

essential division of knowledge in general is the binary division between exoteric and esoteric knowledge. The exoteric sciences (zawāhir al-‘ulūm) are explicitly attached to the corporeal sphere of being, whereas the esoteric sciences (bawāṭīn al-‘ulūm) correspond to the spiritual sphere. Just as the corporeal forms grasped by the senses are images of the intelligible forms, so the exoteric sciences encompass allusions to the deeper meanings of the intelligible esoteric sciences.

Hence, the progression from exoteric to esoteric is in effect the ascent of the soul from the material-sensible to the spiritual-intelligible sphere of being. It is through the latter, according to the Brethren, that the “angelic forms” (sūra malakīyya) are cognized, and through them the soul attains its “heavenly degree” (rutba samāwiyya).618 When applied to the Brethren’s tripartite general division of sciences, the first preparatory sciences would seem for the most part to fall out of the exoteric-esoteric division, as they are, according to the Brethren, mostly concerned with gaining a basic livelihood, rather than knowledge of the objective reality. The religious sciences, however, provide the exoteric, revelatory truth about the world, whereas the philosophical sciences constitute the esoteric sciences, which provide for the student the ultimate intelligible truth behind the revelation.

In a sense then a double progression from materiality to spirituality appears in the curriculum of the Brethren of Purity, first from exoteric to esoteric knowledge, and then within the philosophical sciences themselves from physical to metaphysical knowledge.

This greatly resembles the Ismaili conception of sciences, whether the Brethren of Purity actually are Ismailis or not.619 For the Ismailis, the progression of theoretical knowledge proceeds similarly from the exoteric to esoteric, or from the outer appearance of religion (sharī‘a) to its innermost truths (ḥaqīqa). As for the Brethren, the exoteric sciences are related to the apparent reality of sensation, and the esoteric to the ultimate reality of intelligibles. For the Ismailis, all this leads to a properly Ismaili curriculum of intellectual sciences, where the learning of the disciple would proceed from such exoteric sciences as Ismaili law and history, through the science of allegorical interpretation (ta‘wil), up to the ultimate intelligible reality (ḥaqā’iq).620

Interestingly, like the Alexandrian idea of theoretical philosophy, the Ismaili idea of progression of knowledge also culminates in a curriculum of three grades. Between the lowest grade of exoteric religious knowledge and the final stage of esoteric philosophical knowledge of the “ultimate realities” (ḥaqā’iq), there is a middle stage of “lower esoteric” knowledge related to ta‘wil, which functions as a bridge between the two extremes.621

In contrast to the status of philosophical studies in the Islamic world, the instruction of Ismaili sciences was actually institutionalized in the Fatimid centers of learning by the time of al-Kirmānī, at least in Cairo, to comprise both the exoteric and esoteric sciences, and to follow the progression of three grades of knowledge.622 While al-Kirmānī himself does not offer a complete classification of the sciences, his

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618 Ikhwān, Jāmi‘a, pp. 109-10.
619 See, the discussion in chapter 3.4 above.
scheme does fall within the Ismaili curriculum, such as it was practiced in Fatimid Egypt. This classification emerges mostly from his introductory notes to the *Rest of the Intellect*, where he treats the reading required before that particular work. The totality of the *Rest* is related by al-Kirmānī to the highest esoteric, that is, spiritual-intelligible, level of knowledge, corresponding to the third and final stage of the Ismaili curriculum. Before reaching that work, the reader, however, must have studied a corpus of works related to the two preceding stages of exoteric and lower esoteric knowledge.\(^{623}\)

For both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy, then, the general order of sciences is linked to the idea of ascent from material to spiritual, whether that ascent takes place from religious to philosophical knowledge, or within the philosophical sciences themselves.

### 7.5 Philosophical compendiums

Besides the normative accounts of classification of sciences, the philosophers also incorporated the classificatory order into their compendiums of philosophy. Philosophical “encyclopedism,” that is, organizing philosophical knowledge into wide-scale works covering all or most philosophical fields of study, would become an even more prevalent trend in the later centuries.\(^{624}\) However, both the Brethren of Purity and Ibn Sinā already devised such full-scale compendiums. In these works all of the philosophical sciences are incorporated into a single philosophical *summa* following the classificatory order of sciences.

While often described as encyclopedias, the word appears as slightly anachronistic with respect to their purpose. They are not meant as works of reference, nor do they intend to provide an all-round education for literate men. Definitely in the case of the Brethren of Purity, and slightly less so for Ibn Sinā, their works rather have a Gnostic rationale. They provide the saving philosophical knowledge arranged to an organic whole that operates as the rational soul’s ladder to salvation. Hence, if they are encyclopedias, they are Gnostic encyclopedias.\(^{625}\)

Nevertheless, with respect to Alexandrian school philosophy, compilation of such works represents an innovation in exposition of philosophy, as in Alexandria the curriculum consisted of a reading list rather than a single comprehensive work. For Gutas, Ibn Sinā is the first to fully actualize the curricular idea latent in the Alexandrian classification of sciences in this sense into a single opus.\(^{626}\) The Brethren of Purity, however, do the same slightly earlier, although they do not follow the


\(^{624}\) For discussions of “encyclopedias” in the medieval Islamic world, see, Peters 1968, pp. 104-20, Endress 2006, and Gutas 2006.

\(^{625}\) I adopt here the term compendium which Gutas (1988, pp. 102-3) suggests for Ibn Sinā’s *Healing*, on the argument that the work’s internal unity is at variance with what is commonly understood by encyclopedia. Van Ess (2006, p. 8) similarly views *Healing* more as a commentary on Aristotle’s corpus than an encyclopedia. The *Epistles* are even more commonly referred to as an encyclopedia, due to their more eclectic quality, but the term does not accurately describe their purpose. The authors time and again emphasize their aim is leading the soul towards its salvation, not providing a haphazard collection of information for reference or education. While the term *enkyklios paideia*, general education, might still somehow fit their contents, their goal is at variance with the Enlightenment concept of encyclopedia as a collection of all knowledge of the time in a condensed form.

\(^{626}\) Gutas 1988, p. 87.
Alexandrian order strictly, nor is their account of philosophy as purely Aristotelian. In the case of both of them, however, in theory it would be possible for the student of philosophy to follow the whole progression of philosophical ascent through studying the Epistles or Healing from beginning to end.

Ibn Sinâ’s compendiums for the most part follow closely his conception of the curriculum of sciences.627 The same consistency does not, however, always apply to the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. While the Epistles do follow the general order of sciences presented in the seventh epistle, that is, mathematics, logic, physics, metaphysics, and practical philosophy, on a closer look there is much divergence between the actual and normative order of sciences.628

While both the normative and actual ordering classifies philosophy into four parts, they are not the same. In the normative “plan” of the work, philosophy is said to consist of mathematics, logic, physics, and metaphysics, where ethical and political philosophy form part of metaphysics. While the work still proceeds in roughly this order, the logical epistles are now inserted within the first mathematical part, while a fourth “religious-political” section, under the title “legislative-theological sciences” (al-‘ulûm al-nâmûsîyya al-ilâhiyya), is introduced. Besides this major reorganization of the general order of the work, the order of sciences within an individual category, such as logic in particular, does not always even approximately follow the planned order. Moreover, there are additional epistles added here and there, which apparently do not fit into any main category, or have received their place due to later editing.

Finally, regardless of the title of an epistle, the Brethren can end up discussing various apparently unrelated themes within them. Consequently, the Gnostic-ethical orientation of the epistles as a whole is underlined by the fact that throughout the Epistles the way to salvation is emphasized, whether in discussing mathematics, logic, or theology.

Neither al-Fârâbî nor al-Kirmâni wrote a philosophical compendium in the same sense. While many have tended to interpret al-Fârâbî’s political works, Virtuous City and Political Governance, as philosophical summas parallel to those of Ibn Sinâ, this is clearly not the case. While these twin works do present most parts of both theoretical and practical philosophy, with the notable exclusion of logic and mathematics, their purpose is not in fact to give a general account of philosophy, and even less are they meant as encyclopedias.

The theoretical parts of the works proceed through the order of creation, that is, from God down through metaphysical theology to physics, and back through the ascending order of material world. The practical part presents the culmination of the ascent that in Neoplatonic thought takes place through the perfection of man. They are symmetrical in the sense of presenting both the descent of creation, and the ascent of man. The purpose of the works is, furthermore, primarily political, so that the

627 See, Appendixes 2-5 for a comparison of the order of philosophy in the distinct works of the philosophers. The fact that Ibn Sinâ mostly omits mathematics before and after Healing (the mathematical part in Salvation is devised by his pupil), is by Ibn Sinâ’s own admission because he has nothing to add to that science. Interestingly, Ibn Sinâ in two works, the mostly lost Easterners and Philosophy for ʿAlâʾ al-Dawla, reverses the order between physics and metaphysics, an innovation that appears contradictory with the idea of ascent through philosophy.

628 For the divergence between the seventh classificatory epistle and the actual arrangement, see also, De Callataý 2008.
theoretical first part is subjected to the practical second part. Since al-Fārābī’s ideal state emulates the structure of the cosmos, it is indispensable that the theoretical parts precede his political philosophy. The treatment of existents is focused in particular on the hierarchical ordering of the cosmos, whether at the level of the spiritual world, human body, or soul, in order to provide an argument for a similar ordering of the city.

From among Ibn Sīnā’s works, al-Fārābī’s political works are in fact parallel with the idea and arrangement of Provenance and Destination, although Ibn Sīnā’s work largely dispenses with political philosophy. This work also consists of two parts, the first of which follows the order of descent, whereas the second follows the return through the ascent of the human soul, including a discussion of prophecy and revelation. Al-Kirmānī’s Rest of the Intellect also follows an almost identical order of descent and ascent of the Neoplatonic cosmic circle.

None of these works then is a compendium in the sense of presenting the whole of philosophy in a curricular order, nor does their arrangement suggest that the student of philosophy should start his studies directly from God as the first being. Rather they are arranged to reflect the idea of Neoplatonic descent and reascent for a student already relatively advanced in his studies.

Al-Fārābī, however, presents his curricular order in Attainment of Happiness and Enumeration of Sciences, without ever incorporating it to a complete philosophical compendium. For al-Kirmānī all of the Rest of the Intellect represents the very highest order of esoteric knowledge within the “science of divine unity,” which he does not classify in conventional terms into metaphysics and physics.

Ibn Sīnā and particularly the Brethren of Purity are highly conscious that their philosophical compendia have a characteristic of providing the “Gnostic” knowledge required for salvation, in the precise order that the student should follow. For the Brethren of Purity, as for al-Kirmānī, the Gnostic character of their works is more pronounced due to their Ismaili influence, as they repeatedly emphasize the saving character of philosophy. Still, it is not true, as Peters argues, that the Epistles would be set apart from Ibn Sīnā’s “encyclopedias” by this Gnostic emphasis, for a similar idea is clearly present in Ibn Sīnā in a more subtle way. 629 It is not coincidental that Ibn Sīnā provides such titles as Salvation and Heating for his two most famous philosophical compendiums.

The Brethren of Purity depict the saving function of their epistles repeatedly in eloquent terms. The epistles are given the form that they have in order to follow the soul’s ascent; they are a ladder of salvation or a guidebook for the spiritual traveler. The Brethren declare themselves to be the spiritual guides who “have paved the rugged road, cleared it from spikes, boulders, and rocks, and alleviated the afflictions of the travelers. Then we made ponds and wells filled with sweet water, and planted trees supplied with sweet and aromatic fruit, setting a garden at the head of each stage of travel. They are places for rest and relaxation with beautiful servants, lads, and maidens attending to them, so that they are relieved from the weariness and hardships of travel, and are ready and rested in order to set off for the next stage with a healthy

629 See, Peters 1968, p. 113.
Each of the 52 epistles is a stopping point (manzil) within the ascent towards a still more beautiful garden of different colors, until the final resting place of ultimate happiness is reached.

Rest of the Intellect is presented by al-Kirmānī in similarly Gnostic terms, even though it does not follow a progression of ascent from lesser to higher knowledge. Rather it presents the highest order of esoteric knowledge, hence completing the soul’s theoretical ascent within the Ismaili curriculum. According to al-Kirmānī: “We named this book Rest of the Intellect, for it contains what the potential intellects desire to know, as the acquisition of that knowledge constitutes their rest.” This is the spiritual knowledge that for al-Kirmānī is transmitted to mankind through the intermediacy of the imam, the Intellect incarnate. The book is composed according to its own peculiar arrangement which further reflects its Gnostic character. Together it forms the “city of knowledge” (madīnat al-‘ilm), as it is divided into seven walls (aswār), each of which is further divided into seven pathways (mashāri’), that lead the student along the path of theoretical perfection.

7.6 Pre-philosophical knowledge

Philosophical knowledge arranged according to an ascending progression of spirituality then forms the core of the theoretical ascent to happiness for all Arabic philosophers. As we have seen, the ascent does not take place entirely through philosophy, but the student should be first prepared to receive the philosophical instruction by non-philosophical means. The pre-philosophical instruction includes in particular the moral molding of the soul discussed in the previous chapter, taking place mainly by means of the religious law.

But even with respect to purely theoretical education, philosophical studies should be preceded with preparatory sciences preparing the discipline for philosophical education. For both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity such preparatory instruction is mainly connected to the distinction of exoteric and esoteric knowledge, in which the exoteric sciences provide the initiation towards esoteric knowledge identified with philosophy. But even for the Peripatetics, some theoretical preparation seems necessary before embarking on philosophy proper.

The first kind of pre-philosophical education in Arabic philosophy consists of religious education. Religious sciences obviously form a particularly important

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632 See, De Smet 1995, pp. 16-8 for the relation of the work’s arrangement to the Shi‘i notion of “city of knowledge,” manifested in the Shi‘i prophetic hadith “I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Alī is its gateway” (anā madīnat al-‘ilm wa-‘Alī bābūhā). Interestingly, considering the question of their Isma‘ili allegiance, the Brethren (Rasā‘īl, IV (52), p. 460) repeat this hadith: “I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Alī is its gateway, and he who seeks what is in the city, let him come to the gate” (anā madīnat al-‘ilm wa-‘Alī bābūhā, fa-man arāda mā fī al-madīna fa-‘l-ya‘ti al-bāb).
prerequisite for Ismaili philosophy, but they appear to play some propaedeutic role even for the Peripatetic philosophers. In its propaedeutic sense, religious education is related not only to moral cultivation of the character, but also to the first steps of theoretical learning.

For al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity there is a clear-cut distinction between religious and philosophical understanding of the world, or exoteric and esoteric knowledge. The first is related to the corporeal-sensible and the latter to the spiritual-intelligible sphere of being. But unlike for the Peripatetic philosophers, the two do not represent alternative roads to knowledge about reality, the way of the common people versus the way of the philosophers. Rather religious and philosophical knowledge represent two stages of the ascent, where the proper order is to proceed from the exoteric to esoteric. The corporeal realm that the exoteric sciences are concerned with is a reflection of the spiritual one, and it is indispensable to proceed from the image to its source, rather than the other way round.

Hence, for al-Kirmānī it is incumbent for the student to have proceeded through the exoteric religious sciences before he delves into the esoteric philosophy contained in *Rest of the Intellect*. Al-Kirmānī explicitly relates the pre-philosophical education to the sensible stage of the soul’s ascent, that is, the initial potential stage of the human intellect. As the soul initially is dependent on sensibles in its cognition, the Ismaili discipline should start from the works that correspond to this cognitive and existential state. The religious works in a sense operate as an introduction to the philosophical knowledge provided in the *Rest of the Intellect*, paving the way for the student to understand the higher principles and goals discussed in it.

Al-Kirmānī repeatedly and emphatically states that it is crucial for the student to follow the proper order of knowledge in order for the *Rest of the Intellect* to realize its potential of bringing happiness and salvation to its reader. When this work of esoteric knowledge is studied as the culmination of the required curricular order, it acts as an “antidote bringing about health and a beautiful reward” to its student. However, one who against all instructions rushes to read it without the necessary prerequisites, will only hurt his soul (ʿālim li-nafsihi), as the work will then act on him “like a poison leading towards perdition and painful torment.”

Al-Kirmānī sketches a rough outline of his pre-philosophical curriculum in the third “pathway” (*mashra‘*) of the introductory chapter of *Rest of the Intellect*, which is in effect a reading program of the works that the student must have completed before the book in question. It is not an exhaustive list, however, as the few specific works mentioned are given more in the form of an example, and presumably many others were included in the actual curriculums of the Fatimid centers of learning.

The list, however, does coincide with the general curricular ideas prevalent in Fatimid Egypt, in which the Ismaili studies were divided into three grades. Reminiscent of the Alexandrian curriculum of lower, middle, and highest knowledge, the Fatimid curriculum would consist of the first stage of purely exoteric studies (*zhāhir*), a middle stage of “lower esoteric” (*bāṭin*) knowledge, related to the

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allegorical interpretation (ta'wil) of scripture and law, and finally the higher esoteric knowledge of the ultimate realities (haqā'iq).\textsuperscript{635}

For al-Kirmānī the exoteric studies should start first and foremost with the Quran, which is the point of departure for all further knowledge. The Quran contains within it entirety of knowledge, wisdom, and religious forms (suwar al-dānîn) in a condensed form, and instigates the soul towards further seeking its salvation in the afterlife. Secondly, al-Kirmānī’s preliminary readings include works related to the exoteric “practical worship” (zāhir al-‘ibāda al-muta’lliq bi-’l-‘amāl), that are in effect composed of the Ismaili interpretation of religious law, and includes three works on Ismaili jurisprudence by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān (ca. 903-74).\textsuperscript{636} The third group consists of historical works relating the narrative of the Ismaili movement, also authored by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān.\textsuperscript{637}

These three branches of knowledge would seem to constitute the lowest level of esoteric knowledge. There is nothing particularly Ismaili in them, however, as the Quran, Islamic law, and history would be included in the elementary education of any educated man in the Islamic world, whether Sunni or Shii.\textsuperscript{638}

The next grade of knowledge in al-Kirmānī’s curriculum, however, represents an ascent towards the more properly Ismaili knowledge of the deeper esoteric kind. These include first of all several works on the esoteric interpretation (ta’wil) of the Quran and religious law by several Ismaili authors, such as the fourth Fatimid caliph-imam al-Mu‘izz (d. 975), and the preceding Ismaili dā‘īs Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, al-Nasafi, and al-Sijistānī.\textsuperscript{639}

Further in the ascent, the esoteric part of the curriculum is continued by a lengthy list of al-Kirmānī’s own works, which he states to be introductory to the Rest of the Intellect. These include writings of very distinct kinds, of philosophical, polemic, and dogmatic nature.\textsuperscript{640} The first group of his own works lists four writings dealing with subjects as distinct as polemics against philosophers, Muʿtazilites, and various other

\textsuperscript{635} Fyzee 1965, pp. 234-6.

\textsuperscript{636} The three works of Ismaili fiqh suggested by al-Kirmānī are Book of Purity (Kitāb al-tahāra), Pillars of Islam (Da‘ā‘im al-islām), and Concise Book (Kitāb al-iqtiṣār wa-l-ikkhiṣār). As Daftary notes, Ismaili legal literature is rather scarce in comparison with those produced in the Sunni and twelver-Shi‘i schools of law. The Ismaili legal system was produced during the peak Fatimid period of Ismailism in the 10th century, and almost exclusively by al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān. According to Daftary, Ismaili law moreover generally agrees with that of the twelver-Shi‘i both in content and general principles, including the idea of expanding the legal sources from the Quran and sunna to include the authority of the imam. For the Ismaili legal system, see, Daftary 1999, pp. 249-52 and Poonawala 1996, and for al-Nu‘mān’s writings in general Daftary 2004, pp. 142ff.

\textsuperscript{637} These also include three works with the titles The Campaigns (al-Maghāzī), Exposition of the Annals on the Virtues of the Pure Imams (Sharḥ al-akhbār fi ḥaḍā‘ī al-a‘imma al-athār), and Book of Virtues and Vices (Kitāb al-maṣūqib wa-l-mathālīḥ). While the discipline of history was in general Islamic classifications related to the Arabic-Islamic sciences, according to Daftary (1990, p. 233), historical works were rare among the Ismailis.

\textsuperscript{638} In contrast to general Sunni religious education, exoteric commentary on the Quran (tafsīr) and prophetic traditions (hadīth) are notably absent. In the Fatimid Ismaili literature in general both were rendered almost obsolete by the presence of the “speaking Quran” (al-Qur’ān al-naṣīq) in the form of an imam among believers. Daftary 1990, p. 233.

\textsuperscript{639} Of these only al-Mu‘izz’s Book of the Esoteric Interpretation of the Law (Kitāb ta’wil al-sharī‘a) is mentioned by name.

\textsuperscript{640} See, De Smet 1995, pp. 14-6 for a classification of al-Kirmānī’s works according to this tripartition, and Walker 1999, pp. 25-46 for a general discussion of the chronology and contents of his works.
Sunni and Shi'i sectarian groups, the dual observance of actions and knowledge, the imamate, and an attempt at reconciliation between the doctrinal differences of the preceding ḍa'īs. The second consists of epistles on what al-Kirmānī calls the divine sciences (al-ʻulūm al-ilāhiyya), including epistles treating the eternity of time and creation by divine commandment (amr), which, according to al-Kirmānī, prepare the student for understanding the present work like “heat prepares the wax to receive an imprint.” The third group includes only a single lost epistle that apparently discussed the afterlife.641

While this latter part of his curriculum does not show any clear-cut idea of progression from lower to higher knowledge, there is something of an ascent from general Ismaili lore to knowledge about theology and the afterlife. All these works for al-Kirmānī, however, lead to his main work, Rest of the Intellect, which is his properly philosophical treatise, dealing with the highest order of esoteric knowledge about spiritual and religious reality.

For the Brethren of Purity the necessity of pre-philosophical instruction is similarly connected to the distinction between exoteric and esoteric knowledge. As we have seen, for them pre-philosophical knowledge consists of two levels. The first preparatory (riyādiyya) or humanistic (ādāb) sciences span from basic skills of reading and writing, through grammar, poetry, and trading crafts, to biographies (siyar) and history. As for al-Kirmānī, the religious-normative sciences span from exoteric revelation (tanzīl) through religious law to an allegorical interpretation of religion (ta‘wīl). In the Brethren’s syncretistic vision such things as interpretation of dreams and Sufism are also included within the religious education. As for al-Kirmānī, the pre-philosophical education is not strictly exoteric then, but includes the introduction to understanding the esoteric meanings and allegorical interpretation of the exoteric religion.642

The Peripatetics do not lay similar emphasis on a pre-philosophical religious education. While Peripatetic philosophers also adopt a similar distinction between religious and philosophical knowledge, at least for al-Fārābī religious knowledge seems to represent the path of the common believer incapable of grasping the intelligible truth, rather than the first step of knowledge for everyone.

Religious sciences do have a prominent role in the education of the general populace, however. In Enumeration of Sciences al-Fārābī treats Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and dialectical theology (kalām) as outcrops of political philosophy, and hence as the last, rather than first, part of his classification of sciences.643 Both assume their legitimacy within the philosophical curriculum due to their political function, rather than form a stepping stone to higher esoteric meanings, as they do for al-Kirmānī and

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641 Al-Kirmānī’s list of his own works include 1) The Exhortation to the Guiders and the Guided (Kitāb tanbih al-hādi wa-ʿl-mustahdī), Book on the Hallmarks of Religion (Kitāb maʿālūm al-dīn), Book of Lights on the Demonstration of the Imamate (Kitāb al-maṣābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma), and Book of Meadows (Kitāb al-riyād), 2) a group of theological treatises, including The Penetrating Treatise (al-Risāla al-maḏīʿa), The Treatise of the Garden (Risāla al-rawḍa), The Treatise of the Catalogue (Risāla al-fihrist), and other unnamed epistles, and 3) the epistle The Matchless Treatise on the Hereafter (al-Wāḥīda fī al-maʿād). For these and other works by al-Kirmānī, see Walker 1999, pp. 25ff. and Daftary 2004, pp. 124ff.

642 Like al-Kirmānī, the Brethren do not mention exoteric interpretation of revelation (tafsīr) among the religious sciences, thus giving further credence to their ultimately Ismaili view of the sciences.

643 Al-Fārābī, Iḥsāʿ, pp. 107-113.
the Brethren of Purity. Jurisprudence for al-Fārābī has the function of expanding religion with regard to both its theoretical and practical parts, that is, the religious dogma and required actions, by deducing further principles and ordinances from the basis found by the philosopher-prophet. Theology, on the other hand, is devoted to a dialectical defense of religion.\textsuperscript{644}

For al-Fārābī religious revelation and the related Islamic sciences in effect represent a rhetorical-persuasive interpretation of theoretical philosophy, and are hence wholly derivative. Religion is in essence an “imitation of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{645} In Book of Religion he accordingly says explicitly that the religion consisting of rhetorical images of philosophy is not meant for the philosophers, as they can grasp the philosophical truth directly by demonstrative means.\textsuperscript{646} In Attainment of Happiness he further states that the persuasive and imaginary methods of instruction should be employed only for the general populace (‘āmma/jumhūr), whereas the elect (khāṣṣa) ought to be instructed by demonstrative means producing certain intelligible knowledge.\textsuperscript{647}

But while the philosopher does not acquire his knowledge about reality through religious symbols, religious education still might play some role in the philosopher’s primary rhetorical education. In the context of the Platonic education of the future philosopher-king, al-Fārābī insists that the prince should be instructed in theoretical matters first by rhetorical means (bi-ʾl-tūrūq al-iqnāʾiyya) and symbolic images (bi-ṭarīq al-takhylīl), until he becomes aware of the ultimate non-bodily principles (al-mabādī al-quswā/al-mabādī al-laylat hiya jismāniyya) behind them.\textsuperscript{648} Moreover, he counts among the pre-requisites of an aspiring philosopher that he hold fast to the opinions and actions prescribed by the religion of his upbringing.\textsuperscript{649}

If all people equally then receive religious education in their youth, some, that is, those who fulfill the prerequisites of a philosopher, might ascend from the religious-rhetorical to philosophical-demonstrative knowledge. In the context of the virtuous city, the common populace should be restricted to sense images, according to al-Fārābī, but at times some intellectually capable ones may be elevated to the intelligible truth behind them, if the rhetorical religious dogma fails to convince them.\textsuperscript{650}

In the actual living practice of the Islamic world, any philosopher’s elementary education would of course have consisted of religious instruction. Al-Fārābī is reported by the biographical tradition to have been a ḍādi as a young man, before abandoning the path of a religious scholar to pursue philosophical knowledge.\textsuperscript{651}

\textsuperscript{644} For similar descriptions of the nature of fiqh and kalām, see also, Kitāb al-ḥurūf, pp. 131-3.
\textsuperscript{645} “al-milla muḥākka liʾl-falsafā.” Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 185. Al-Fārābī treats the theme of the relationship between philosophy and religion in a similar vein in numerous works, and it is clearly the central focus of his political philosophy. See, e.g., Kitāb al-ḥurūf, pp. 131-3, 153-7; Kitāb al-milla, pp. 46ff.; al-Siyāṣa al-madaniyya, pp. 85-6.
\textsuperscript{646} Al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-milla, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{647} Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 181.
\textsuperscript{648} Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{649} Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{650} Al-Fārābī, al-Siyāṣa al-madaniyya, pp. 104-5.
\textsuperscript{651} Ibn Abī Ḫayyāʾibī’a, ‘Uyun al-anbā’, p. 557.
Ibn Sīnā depicts the first stages of his personal intellectual upbringing in Bukhārā in his autobiography.652 The first stage of his pre-philosophical education consisted of studying the Quran and general humanistic literature (adab) under the guidance of a private teacher, which he claims to have finished by the age of ten. After that he studied Islamic law (fiqh), and became familiar with the techniques of argumentation involved within that discipline. These rather meager studies are the extent of the religious education that he mentions to have gone through, omitting completely such major Islamic sciences as Quranic exegesis or Prophetic tradition. Finally, his pre-philosophical studies include rudimentary mathematics, the “Indian calculus” (hisāb al-hind) taught to him by a vegetable seller.653 The actual mathematical studies based on the established Greek authorities would follow later incorporated to his philosophical studies.

Gutas again emphasizes the schematic nature of the account that Ibn Sīnā provides about his intellectual upbringing. The account seems to focus on the role of his elementary education as preparatory for philosophy, excluding sciences normally included in the religious education, such as hadīth, which are not appropriate for that purpose. In particular, Ibn Sīnā clearly introduces Islamic jurisprudence in the context of the dialectical skills of argumentation that it develops in him, thus preparing him for philosophical logic as the first stage of the properly philosophical studies.654

Even for the Peripatetic philosophers then, religious education, however minimal, has some role in preparing the student for theoretical philosophy, besides the important role it plays in moral education. But besides the religious sciences, Peripatetic philosophers also elevate some of the more secular Arabic sciences to a propaedeutic role within the philosopher’s primary education.

As we saw, Ibn Sīnā passingly mentions his general Arabic humanistic studies (adab) in his autobiography. Al-Fārābī seems to require some level of historical knowledge also. Besides the knowledge of more philosophical nature, the citizens of the virtuous city are required to study the history of the virtuous and vicious kings and leaders of past and present.655 Such anecdotal historical studies would presumably fall within the preliminary part within the education towards virtuous citizenship, just as history (al-siyar wa-‘l-akhbār) is included in the preparatory sciences of the Brethren of Purity.

652 Ibn Sīnā, Sīra, pp. 18ff.
653 The “Indian calculus” as part of elementary education would probably consist mainly of the basic arithmetical operations still learned by the student during his first years of education. In his classification of philosophy, Ibn Sīnā lists addition (jum‘) and subtraction (tafriq) according to the “Indian style” (bi-l-hind) as one of the applied (far‘i) parts of theoretical arithmetic. The term was common in the titles of Arabic text books of calculus, and is related to the adoption of the decimal system from the Indians. The Arabic-Indian numbers were not the only system of notation employed in the Arabic-Persian world, however, as is apparent from al-Khwārizmī’s treatment of the subject, but the Arabic alphabet in particular was also employed for the purposes of counting. Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām, p. 112; Hein 1985, p. 205; Bosworth 1963, p. 109.
654 Gutas 1988, pp. 154-7. Hence, for Gutas, the omission of other sciences, such as hadīth or tafsīr, does not mean that he did not study them, but merely that they have no place within the scheme he wants to present. It is, however, interesting to see that their omission is also consonant with the Ismaili leanings of his family. As we have seen, neither of these is included in al-Kirmānī’s religious education either.
655 Al-Fārābī, Kitāb al-milla, p. 45.
More importantly, al-Fārābī quite explicitly gives linguistics (‘ilm al-lisān) a central role in pre-philosophical propaedeutics. He devotes the whole first part of his *Enumeration of Sciences* to linguistics and its subdivisions, as the only non-philosophical science included within the curriculum, besides the dialectical sciences related to political philosophy. For al-Fārābī the linguistic sciences are further divided into seven sub-branches, roughly falling into the modern subjects of lexicography, grammar, and poetics.\(^{656}\) Linguistics forms the very first science in the ascending ladder of knowledge which the work in effect constitutes, and hence functions as an introduction to the philosophical sciences that follow.\(^{657}\) Besides the brief summary he provides of the linguistic sciences in this work, al-Fārābī also makes an original contribution to the subject in his *Book of letters.*\(^{658}\)

The idea of the grammatical science as propaedeutic to philosophy is in fact in complete harmony with the Alexandrian view of sciences. For Plato, study of grammar, along with rhetoric, is also a sort of preliminary practice (*pregumnasma*) for philosophy.\(^{659}\) In an Alexandrian biography of Aristotle his elementary education is said to consist of poetry, grammar, and rhetoric.\(^{660}\)

For al-Fārābī, however, linguistics, and the grammatical science (‘ilm al-nahw) in particular, functions more than anything as a preparation for logical reasoning. There is an obvious parallel between grammar and philosophical logic, and the relation between the two was a subject of discussion in al-Fārābī’s time, the former representing an indigenous and the latter a foreign science.\(^{661}\) For al-Fārābī, grammar is concerned with the rules of correct usage within a single language, whereas the latter is concerned with correct intellection (‘īb-yu’qal), the subject of the first being words and expressions, and that of the latter intelligibles. Hence, logic is a kind of universal grammar common to the human intellect in general.

Due to this relation, for al-Fārābī grammar is useful for the purpose of learning logic so that the student is aroused towards the first more universal principles of that science. Hence, sufficient linguistic studies should precede logic within the curriculum of the student of philosophy. Al-Fārābī is also highly conscious of the classical origin of this pedagogical program, as he states the ancients to have employed grammar as an introduction to logic.\(^{662}\) Al-Fārābī himself devised some pre-logical treatises making use of linguistics to introduce logical ideas, such as his elementary introduction to logic identifying grammatical with logical terms.\(^{663}\)

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\(^{656}\) Poetics as a part of linguistics, or the “science of the poetic rules” (‘ilm qawānīn al-ash‘ār), discusses things such as meters, rhymes, or poetic expressions, and is thus distinct from poetics as a part of the logical *Organon.*

\(^{657}\) For the consistent ordering of the work in this sense, see also, Lomba Fuentes 1969.


\(^{659}\) Hein 1985, pp. 170-1. The importance of rhetorical studies as *propaideia* to philosophy, with its link to the study of classical literature, was never embraced by Arabic philosophy, in contrast to the Latin world. See, Watt 1995.

\(^{660}\) Gutas 1988, pp. 196-7.

\(^{661}\) See, e.g., Mahdi 1970, for the famous debate on the merits of logic and grammar, carried out between the Baghdad Peripatetic Abū Bīšhr Mattā (d. 940), al-Fārābī’s teacher, and the jurist-theologian Abū Sa‘īd al-Ṣīrāfī (d. 979).


\(^{663}\) Al-Fārābī, *Fusūl tashtamīl ‘alā jamī’ mā yu’durr ilā ma’rifatihi man arāda al-shurūf* ‘īfī šīnā‘at al-mantūq. Al-Fārābī’s pupil and future head of the Baghdad Peripatetic school also predisposes study of grammar and rhetoric in the education of the philosopher.
In sum, for the Peripatetics, a major function of pre-philosophical theoretical education may be seen as preparation for demonstrative reasoning. Even religious education to some extent fulfills this role. For the mystically and religiously inclined Ibn Sīnā, studying of the Quran, and religion in general, undoubtedly also has a purely spiritual function in raising the attention of the pupil from material to spiritual reality, similar to the one it has for al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity. As we have seen, religion also plays a central role in moral education, to which the study of biographies and history may also be related, insofar as they contain edifying stories of virtuous individuals.664 However, in his autobiography, Ibn Sīnā clearly attaches his studies of jurisprudence as a science to the development of dialectical pre-philosophical reasoning.

For al-Fārābī, religion in general embodies rhetorical and dialectical argumentation, and insofar as religious education for him has a role in philosophical education, it may lead the philosopher towards the higher order of purely deductive reasoning. Besides religious studies, grammar and poetics both operate as an introduction to syllogistic logic. In another way, for both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā the primary religious education, combined with the adab, may be seen as analogous with the primary studies of rhetoric and literature in the classical world.665 For Peripatetic philosophers, however, the rhetorical and intelligible phases of the studies are linked in a more substantial way. Religious opinions are symbolic images of the intelligible philosophical truth, and hence provide a first step for the soul desiring to ascend upwards towards a purely spiritual-intelligible state of being.

7.7 Philosophical introductions and the beginning of philosophy

Pre-philosophical knowledge then plays at least two different roles in the theoretical ascent of the philosopher. For al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity exoteric religious knowledge represents the lower grade of knowledge connected to the sensible sphere of being. Hence, it is the initial point of departure for the soul in its sensible state. For Peripatetic philosophers some of the Arabic-Islamic sciences play primarily a role in the logical habituation of the student in preparation for purely demonstrative reasoning.

For both, however, it is ultimately through philosophical knowledge that the rational soul may ascend to a purely spiritual-intelligible state of being, as it is only philosophy that provides knowledge of the intelligible nature of ultimate reality. But what is the starting point of the actual philosophical studies? A natural starting point for the philosophical student consists of an introduction to philosophy, which explains to him the nature, purpose, and parts of the philosophical road upon which he is about to embark.

As we have seen, in classical times the division of philosophical sciences had developed into a curricular order, much of which was transmitted to the Arabs in one

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665 The idea that the classical propadeutics to philosophy, consisting of rhetorical studies related to the classical Greek and Latin literature, is in al-Fārābī replaced by the ‘Islamic classics,’ is also suggested by Watt 1995, pp. 74-5.
form or another. In the Alexandrian school tradition, the curriculum included a genre of topical introductions to the study of philosophy, which preceded the actual philosophical works. Such introductions normally treated a number of questions in a fixed order, giving the student the necessary framework for understanding the nature and purpose of his philosophical studies. The influence of these introductions filtered down to Arabic philosophy, both as near verbatim paraphrases and as more free adaptations of the themes treated in them.

Of the two major variants of Alexandrian introductions, the first was a general introduction to philosophy (prolegomena pros pāsan filosofian), which introduced the student to the nature of philosophy through treating a set of “pre-philosophical” questions. These included standard themes like the possibility of philosophical knowledge (ei estin filosofia), that is, a refutation of skeptical arguments, and the definitions, classification, and purpose of philosophy.666

The questions related to the purpose and division of philosophy are treated by the Brethren of Purity very briefly in the beginning of their very first epistle, in giving the definition of philosophy and the division of its parts, while further on they give a set of nine further questions that the student should ponder before studying philosophy.667 Ibn Sīnā, similarly, treats parallel themes in the introductions to his major works, as well as in his classificatory essay which begins with the definition of philosophy, and then proceeds to offer a detailed classification of sciences.668

The other variant of Alexandrian introductions was an introduction to Aristotelian philosophy (prolegomena pros tēn Aristotelikēn filosofian) that consisted of ten points treating both questions specific to the Aristotelian corpus, and questions related to the nature of philosophical studies in general.669 The first include themes such as the distinct classes of Aristotle’s works, the kind of language employed in each, and Aristotle’s using of deliberate “obscurity” (asafeia/ighmād) in his writing. The more general points include such questions as the nature and goal of the philosophical path, and the qualities required of the teacher and student of philosophy.

Many of these questions also infiltrated Arabic philosophical works in varying contexts. In addition, al-Fārābī, provides an almost verbatim paraphrase of such an introduction with the title What must precede the study of Aristotle’s philosophy (Mā yanbaghī an yuqaddam qabla ta’allm falsafat Aristāt), reproducing nine of the ten standard points.670 While al-Kirmānī’s introduction to his Rest of the Intellect is more independent of the Alexandrian model, it also has the same purpose. In particular, it deals with the ultimate purpose (gharad) of Ismaili philosophy, the benefit (manfi‘a‘a) that the reader derives from it, as well as the proper order of the Ismaili studies.671

666 Hein 1985, pp. 33ff.
668 See, e.g., Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām; Najāt.
669 Hein 1985, pp. 238ff.
670 Al-Fārābī, Mā yanbaghī an yuqaddam. See, Hein 1985, p. 254 for the ten points included in the Alexandrian introductions. Besides al-Fārābī, a reproduction of the ten-point introduction to Aristotle has been preserved in Arabic form in Ibn al-Ṭayyib’s (d. 1043) introduction to Categories. Like al-Fārābī, Ibn al-Ṭayyib is attached to the Baghdad Peripatetic school, thus further attesting to their Alexandrian affiliations.
671 Al-Kirmānī, Rūḥa, pp. 99ff.; De Smet 1995, pp. 18-22. De Smet sees that al-Kirmānī’s introduction follows the classical model of philosophical introduction, but the connection between the two seems slight at best.
The very beginning of philosophical studies for the student would then constitute of such an introduction to philosophy, through which he would come to understand the necessary qualities of a philosopher, the nature of philosophy and the interrelation of its parts, as well as the purpose for which philosophy is practiced. This final purpose is of course the ultimate happiness towards which the student strives through the theory and practice of philosophy. Only after understanding the ultimate goal of his philosophical education, may the student proceed to the philosophical works which finally form the way of ascent for the soul.

The third of the ten standard questions treated in the Alexandrian introductions to Aristotelian philosophy was that of the starting point of philosophy. Al-Fārābī’s introduction also reproduces this debate, giving various alternatives professed by distinct schools of philosophy. However, even the Alexandrian introductions were not unanimous about the correct starting point, but vacillated between four major alternatives: ethics, physics, logic, and mathematics.

Al-Fārābī’s treatise presents all four positions, each related to a specific philosophical school, and supported with arguments. The priority of ethics is supported by the necessity of the soul’s purity before acquiring intelligible knowledge, whereas the priority of physics is supported by the initial familiarity (a’raf/aqrab) of its subject matter to man, as it treats the objects of the sensible world related to immediate experience. Logic and geometry are both supported by the indispensability of formal reasoning for understanding philosophy. Geometry is placed before logic by the Platonists, according to al-Fārābī, because of the superior certainty of its demonstrations.

While, al-Fārābī finally concludes that none of the four alternatives is to be discarded, he ends up arranging them in the sequence of ethics, geometry, and logic. As shown in the previous chapter, the ethics that al-Fārābī refers to here is not necessarily philosophical ethics, but rather practical religious morality. In relation to the beginning of theoretical philosophy, al-Fārābī states that the student should first learn enough of mathematics to understand the nature of geometrical demonstrations, and then proceed to logic.

All four of the alternative starting points of the theoretical ascent in some way find proponents within Arabic philosophy. For all Arabic philosophers pre-philosophical ethical instruction is necessary in the sense described in the previous chapter, although, in contrast to the Alexandrian Neoplatonists, Arabic philosophers place philosophical ethics at the end of the philosophical curriculum. Both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, however, tilt towards accepting logic as the indispensable starting point, but consider it more as a tool of philosophy than part of philosophy itself.

The position of mathematics within the theoretical ascent is the one that causes most disagreement. The Brethren of Purity emphatically place it as the starting point

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672 Al-Fārābī, Mā yanbaghī, pp. 11-2.
673 Hein 1985, p. 382.
674 According to Hein (1985, p. 383), among the Alexandrian introductions to Aristotelian philosophy, al-Fārābī’s treatise comes closest to the opinions of the sixth-century Neoplatonist Elias in this particular question. Both cite a maxim supposedly written above the Platonic school (kutiba ‘alā bāb haykalihī): “He who does not know geometry, shall not enter here” (ageometrētos mēdeis eisitō/man lam yakun muhandisan fa-lā yadkhul ‘alaynā). Elias, however, believes Plato to have prioritized geometry over logic only because logic in the Aristotelian sense did not exist in his time.
of philosophical studies, al-Fārābī situates it after logic as the first properly philosophical discipline, and Ibn Sīnā considers it to be the middle science between physics and mathematics. Insofar as logic is considered merely an instrument of philosophy, for al-Fārābī the starting point of the ascent is properly mathematics, and for Ibn Sīnā physics.

Finally, al-Kirmānī uses the argument of “familiarity” and “proximity” to endorse the beginning of knowledge in the sensibles, which within the classical philosophical terms would mean the primacy of physics. But for al-Kirmānī it rather refers to the exoteric religious knowledge, whereas he is interested in physics only as part of the emanationist account of creation.

There is also an alternative starting point for the soul’s ascent in knowledge, which is not directly related to any philosophical discipline. This is the theme of self-knowledge crystallized in the Delphic maxim discussed above. Among the Greek Neoplatonists, knowledge of the self was often emphasized to be the beginning of all knowledge, reflected in the appointment of Alcibiades as the first within the Platonic cycle of dialogues.\(^{675}\)

The necessity of self-knowledge for any true knowledge of the exterior world is emphasized by both Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity, but for both self-knowledge seems to form rather an integral part of the theoretical ascent, and hence to be more a process than a first step of philosophy. Nevertheless, al-Fārābī also presents Alcibiades as the first dialogue in his Philosophy of Plato, summarizing its contents as the exposition of the true nature of human happiness.\(^{676}\)

At least in this restricted sense, then, self-knowledge would seem to represent the necessary point of departure for the philosophical ascent. Namely, before embarking on philosophy the student must become aware that his true self consists of an immortal substance, whose ultimate happiness consists of its theoretical perfection, which is the final purpose of his philosophical studies. This knowledge is divulged to the student within the philosophical introductions, as well as in Ibn Sīnā’s little treatises on the soul.

### 7.8 The beginning of philosophy: logic and mathematics

While al-Fārābī in his prolegomena attempts to reconcile the various views, following a schematized order of presentation, he is more decisive on the question of the beginning of philosophy in his original works. When classifying philosophy al-Fārābī consistently places logic as the first part of philosophy, before mathematics. In Exhortation to the Way of Happiness he further explicitly states that logic is the first discipline from which the student should start. It is the instrument through which man learns to distinguish true from false opinions, and through it he can test his opinions on an objective measure, and gain certainty about their truthfulness. Hence, he states: “Preoccupation with this discipline must necessarily precede all others.”\(^{677}\)

675 Hence, Proclus (d. 485) states: “Let this, then, be the beginning of philosophy and of Plato’s teaching, the knowledge of ourselves.” Sorabji 2004, p. 321; Hein 1985, p. 114; Altmann 1969a, p. 31.

676 Al-Fārābī, Falsafat Aflūn, p. 3.

677 Al-Fārābī, Tanbiḥ, pp. 21-2. “yalzam ḏarrātatan an takūn al-‘ināya bi-hādhīhi al-ṣīnā’a tataqaddam al-‘ināya bi-‘l-ṣanā’i’ al-ukhar.”
are naturally disposed to reason, to gain a faculty of truly rational thought they must be taught the correct rules of reasoning.

For al-Fārābī, logic is then the first art that man must learn in order to enhance his natural epistemological capabilities so that he is able to distinguish true from false opinions, and to gain certain knowledge. Only after learning the logical rules of reasoning, is the aspiring philosopher prepared to understand the nature of external reality through philosophical arguments. As an instrument of philosophy, logic is then necessary to those devoted to philosophical enquiry at all stages, whether in independent investigation (fāḥṣ), instruction (ta’lim), or study (ta’allum) of philosophy.678

Ibn Sīnā concurs with al-Fārābī in giving logic the priority as the first step of philosophy, with largely similar arguments. Ibn Sīnā, however, treats the logical discipline more consistently as a necessary instrument for the practice of philosophy, which in itself falls outside the principal parts of philosophy.

The question about the status of logic as a part (meros) or instrument (organon) of philosophy was one also debated by the Alexandrian commentators. According to a general Alexandrian view, logic was held to be a part of philosophy by the Stoics, an instrument by the Peripatetics, and both by the Platonists.679 Al-Fārābī views logic as primarily an instrument (āla) of philosophy, but he does not set it clearly apart from the principal parts of philosophy.

In Ibn Sīnā’s classification of philosophy, however, logic is treated separately outside the actual tri-division of philosophy into lower, middle, and higher knowledge. While the principal parts of theoretical philosophy are defined through the ascending degree of spirituality of their subject matter, and are thereby related to the rational soul’s gradual ascent, logic has no place in such a division. Rather, Ibn Sīnā treats logic at the very end of his classificatory essay as the instrument that enables man to acquire both the theoretical and practical wisdom (al-ḥikam al-nazariyya wa-‘l-‘amaliyya) with which the primary parts of philosophy are concerned.680 In relation to the rational soul’s ascent, for neither, however, is logic part of the actual ascent, but an instrument that enables the theoretical ascent of the soul to take place.

The logical Organon is of course not exclusively concerned with demonstrative reasoning. Arabic philosophers adopted the Aristotelian logical curriculum of Greek philosophical schools, including Porphyry’s Eisagōgē as its introduction, but complemented it by adding Rhetoric and Poetic to the Organon.681 Hence, of the eight works only one, Posterior Analytics, is strictly speaking concerned with the demonstrative method (apodeiktikis/burhān), around which the remaining works are centered, according to al-Fārābī.

The rest consist of preliminary works (tawżīḥ) preceding demonstration, and of works dealing with non-demonstrative methods of argumentation, that is, dialectical (al-aqāwīl al-jadaliyya), sophistical (ṣūfīstā‘iyya), rhetorical (khuṭbiyya), and poetic (shi‘riyya) arguments.682 For al-Fārābī rhetorical arguments endeavor to persuade

678 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, pp. 120-3; Tanbīḥ, pp. 21-5.
680 Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām, pp. 115-8. See also, Ishārāt, I, pp. 117ff.
681 According to Gutas (2006, pp. 94-5) the supplemented version of the logical corpus goes back to the Greek Neoplatonists.
682 Al-Fārābī, Iḥsā‘, pp. 63ff.
(iqnā’) the listener, whereas poetic arguments evoke symbolic images (khayālāt) in his mind. Hence, both have for al-Fārābī an important role in particular at the political level, since religion consists essentially of a rhetorical-symbolic image of the truth. Thus, as in the Graeco-Latin world, rhetoric also is at least in the restricted sense of a logical art introduced into the Arabic curriculum of philosophical education.

The Brethren of Purity likewise treat logic as an instrument, the “balance of the philosopher” (mithān al-faylasūf) which enables the student to distinguish truth from falsehood, as well as good from evil. The logical epistles are inserted at the end of the mathematical part of the work, but number only five instead of the entire Organon; the “non-demonstrative methods” are dropped altogether.683 Besides their instrumental role, the Brethren, however, true to their style state the goals of some of these logical epistles in esoteric terms. Hence, the purpose of the epistle on Eisagōγē is not only to instruct on the difference between philosophical and linguistic discourse (kalām), but also to awaken the soul to understanding what the human essence consists of, and what brings it its perfection and eternity.684

As the Greek philosophers were not in agreement about the starting point of philosophy, neither were the Arabic-Persian ones. The Brethren of Purity, following their Pythagorean inclinations, opt for beginning of philosophical studies with mathematics, which precedes logic among the four principal parts of philosophy.685 Again the place of mathematics in relation to philosophy reflects a classical discussion of this theme. Whereas in the Alexandrian and Aristotelian classification of philosophy mathematics was placed as the middle science, reflecting the ontological status of its objects, in a scheme attributed to Plato mathematics was seen as propaedeutic (propaideia) to philosophy, and was not properly a part of philosophy at all.686 Hence, for Platonists mathematics is the elementary knowledge which prepares the student for philosophy proper.

In Arabic philosophy, this Platonic view of mathematics as philosophical propaedeutics becomes manifest in particular in al-Kindī, for whom the student must first study mathematics, before he can proceed to the Aristotelian corpus, starting with logic. While mathematics is not properly part of philosophy for al-Kindī, only by first learning the mathematical sciences can the student of Aristotle come to understand the true substance of Aristotelian philosophy.687

683 The “blueprint” of the work (I.7.) lists the five parts of logic as poetics, rhetoric, dialectics, analytics, and sophistics, hence including all the non-demonstrative methods, besides the actual theory of demonstration. Their final arrangement of the epistles, however, completely diverges from this scheme, containing five logical epistles: Eisagōγē, Categories, De Interpretatione, First Analytics, and Second Analytics.
684 Ikhwān, Jāmi’ a, p. 129.
685 Ikhwān, Rasā’il, I (7); Jāmi’ a, pp. 110-2.
687 Al-Kindī, Kammiyyat kutub, pp. 369-70. “For if someone was deficient in mathematics, that is, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, and he then devoted to these [Aristotelian sciences] all his life, he would never attain complete knowledge about them. His efforts in them would never bring about anything more than external transmission, insofar as he memorized them, but he would not gain knowledge about their essence” (fa-innahu in ‘adima aḥad ‘ilm al-riyāḍāt allatī hiyā ‘ilm al-‘adad wa-l-handasa wa-l-tanajjum wa-l-tā’lif, thumma ista ‘malā hādhihi dhahrahu, lam yastatimm ma’rifat al-shay’ min hādhihi, wa-lam yakun sa-yahu fīhā muksibuhu shay’ an illā al-riwāya, in kāna hāfīzan, fa-ammā ‘ilmuhā atā kunhīhā wa-taḥsiluhu fa-layya bi-mawjūd).
The Platonic idea of mathematics as propaedeutics is even transferred to Arabic terminology, where mathematics is most commonly conveyed with the term “preparatory exercise” (propaideia/riyāda) and its derivatives.688 For the Brethren of Purity this produces a confusion of terms, as in their classification of sciences they, on the one hand, speak of the preparatory sciences (al-ʿulūm al-riyādiyya), consisting of basic instruction spanning from reading and writing to history, and of the mathematical sciences (al-riyādiyyāt) as part of philosophy, on the other.689 Nevertheless, for the Brethren of Purity mathematics clearly has such a propaedeutic function in training the student towards understanding philosophical principles.

Hence, the Brethren state the purpose of their very first epistle on arithmetic (ʿilm al-ʿadād/aritmāṣiqi) as “training (riyāda) the students of philosophy, lovers of wisdom, reflectors of the true natures of things, and investigators of the causes of all existents.”690 The Brethren state that they have placed the mathematical sciences as first in the order of philosophical knowledge, so that the students would prepare and purify their souls through them, and hence be prepared for understanding the further physical and metaphysical truths.691

For the Brethren of Purity the primacy of mathematics is, however, more than anything supported by their Pythagorean notion of the mathematical nature of all reality.692 The forms of numbers (ṣuwar al-ʿadād) correspond to the forms of material existents (ṣuwar al-mawjūdāt fī al-hayālat), and the numbers are the model (nāmūḏhāj) of the higher world which the things of the lower world reflect. Throughout the epistles, the Brethren give analogies between the numbers of the decimal system and degrees of existents, such as the equivalence of the numbers from one to nine with the nine metaphysical hypostases. Since numbers then have an ontological priority, mathematical knowledge consequently must possess an epistemological priority.

If the ultimate metaphysical reality is in some sense analogous with the nine root numbers, then knowledge of the number arouses man to realize the ultimate nature of reality, of which the sensible world is a reflection. Consequently, the Brethren depict mathematics, or rather arithmetic in particular as the science of number, by innumerable superlatives, such as the “root of sciences” (jadhr al-ʿulūm), “origin of wisdom” (ʿunsur al-hikma), “beginning of knowledge” (mabdaʾ al-maʿārif), “first elixir” (al-iksīr al-awwal), and “lamp of the philosophers” (miṣbāḥ al-mutafalsīfīn). It

688 The Greek word mathēmatika was translated by two groups of terms into Arabic. Whereas the root word mathēma (that which is learned) produces taʿlim (instruction), the term propaideia (preparatory teaching) translates into riyāda (exercise). Hence, al-Fārābī knows mathematics as ʿilm al-taʿālim (the science of instructions), al-Khwārizmī as al-ʿilm al-taʿālim wa-ʿl-riyāda (the science of instruction and exercise), etc. Hein (1985, pp. 178-81) suggests that initially the philosophers connected to the Alexandrian tradition, such as al-Fārābī, tend to employ the term taʿlim, with its implication of mathematics as part of philosophy, whereas those professing a Platonic view of the status of mathematics, such as al-Kindī and the Brethren of Purity, employ the term riyāda. Later, however, the latter term becomes generalized, as in Ibn Sīnā who talks about the mathematical science as al-ʿilm al-riyādī without holding a Platonic view about mathematics as propaedeutics.

689 Ikhwān, Rasāʾīl, I (7). As Hein (1985, pp. 170-1) notes, this is parallel with the way Plato employs the term mathēmata for both elementary instruction in general and mathematics in particular.


692 For the Pythagorean influences in the Brethren, see, Netton 1982, pp. 9-16.
is the foundation (aṣl) from which all other branches of knowledge (furūʿ) are derived.693

Due to its ontological and epistemological primacy, mathematics has a crucial function for the ascent of the soul for the Brethren. Since numbers are a “model from the higher world” to which all forms of all existents correspond ontologically, through knowing them the philosophical initiate may rise gradually towards knowledge of other mathematical, physical (ṭabīʿīyyāt), and supra-physical (mā ḥawqā al-ṭabīʿīyyāt) things. Hence, the ultimate goal of arithmetic is for the soul of the philosophical student to be gradually guided from the sensible to intelligible sphere of being, and from the composed things of the corporeal world towards things separate from matter (mujarradāt).

Thus, for the Brethren arithmetic initiates the soul’s ascent towards knowledge of the complete unity of divine being (maʿrifat al-tawḥīd) and acknowledgement of the Creator.694 While for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, logic as the beginning of philosophy is an instrument for acquisition of knowledge, and as such does not form part of the soul’s ontological ascent, for the Brethren of Purity mathematics is the indisputable beginning of that ascent.

Mathematics is of course not composed of only arithmetic within medieval Arabic philosophy, but of the standard quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music.695 For the Brethren of Purity the other mathematical disciplines play a similar role in instigating the rational soul towards ascent, although they are given less priority than arithmetic.696

Both music and geometry provide knowledge about the harmonious structure of the world, in which each existent occupies its proper place, and understanding the harmonious relations prevailing in the cosmos will “guide the souls of the intelligent towards the mysteries and truths of the sciences, and their esoteric meanings and wisdoms.”697 Besides, the practical application of the musical theory plays a more practical purificatory role in the molding of the soul towards practical perfection.698

Moreover, astronomy teaches man about the existence of a supralunar world of spheres. Mathematical knowledge on the whole teaches man that there is another kind of existence beyond the world of immediate sense experience, and thus arouses a desire in the soul to reach towards that higher form of existence. Astronomy (ʿilm al-

693 Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 18, 30.
694 Ikhwān, Jāmiʿa, pp. 18, 93-4.
695 The quadrivium probably goes back to the mathematician Nikomakhos of Gerasa (d. ca. 120 CE), who divides mathematics into parts according to their objects of enquiry. Arithmetic is concerned with absolute quantity (to peri tou kath’ heauto), music with relative quantity (to peri tou pros allo), geometry with the stable and continuous (to men menon kai ēremoun), and astronomy with the moving and revolving (to de feromenon kai peripoloun sfairikē). See, Hein 1985, pp. 182ff. for the adaptation and variations of this division in Greek and Arabic philosophy.
696 In their classification of philosophy (I.7.), the Brethren divide mathematics according to the standard Arabic order of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. In the actual arrangement of the epistles geography is, however, inexplicably introduced between astronomy and music as the fourth epistle. To further corroborate that this represents confusion in the later editing of the epistles, rather than an original plan, in the Comprehensive Epistle geography is moved after the quadrivium as the fifth epistle.
698 See, chapter 6.8 above.
attached to the soul’s ascent, al-Fārābī supports beginning the study of theoretical philosophy with mathematics by the abstract clarity of its objects of study. Hence, “the first genus of beings into which one should inquire is that which is easier for man and in which perplexity and mental confusion are less likely to occur. This is the genus of numbers and magnitudes.”702 This is of course the science of mathematics, within which the student ought to start from arithmetic as the science of numbers, and ascend therefrom to geometry as the science of volumes.

Al-Fārābī does not strictly follow the classical quadrivium in his conception of mathematics, but introduces additional mathematical arts, all of which together form an ascending epistemological progression from pure abstraction towards a gradually increased degree of materiality.703 From the study of objects that can be conceived as completely abstract from matter, that is, the subject matter of arithmetic, the student should proceed in his reflection step by step among existents whose conception (tašawwur) requires a gradually ascending degree of materiality. Then he will reach objects in which “numbers and magnitudes are inherent essentially,” but which require “slight reference to matter” in their conception.704 All of this produces a ladder


701 The theoretical part of Attainment of Happiness, in contrast to Enumeration of Sciences, in fact begins with mathematics, omitting logic altogether.


703 In fact, al-Fārābī does divide mathematics according to the quadrivium in a few works, such as the De ortu scientarum surviving only in Latin. In his two major works exposing the order of philosophy, Enumeration of Sciences and Attainment of Happiness, in which the division of sciences is more clearly attached to the soul’s ascent, al-Fārābī presents a seven-fold division of mathematics.

704 “In this way one begins with things that may be comprehended and conceived irrespective of any material. He then proceeds to things that can be comprehended, conceived, and intellected by only slight reference to a material. Next, the things that can only be comprehended, conceived, and intellected with slightly more reference to a material. He continues thus toward the things wherein number and magnitude inhere, yet that which can be intellected in them does not become intelligible...
of mathematical sciences, ascending from the pure abstraction of arithmetic and geometry to their applications in optics (‘ilm al-manāzir), astronomy (al-ajsām al-samāwīyya), music (mūsiqā), study of weights (‘ilm al-athqāl), and mechanics (‘ilm al-‘iyya).705

For al-Fārābī mathematics seems to have a similar propaedeutic function in philosophical instruction as for the Brethren of Purity, excepting the Pythagorean tendencies. Knowledge of mathematics does not appear to be an end in itself, but is bound to the epistemological progression preparing the student for other kinds of philosophical knowledge. In al-Fārābī’s case, the mathematical sciences are specifically a preparation for physics, through an ascent from pure abstraction towards greater degree of materiality. The borderline between the mathematical and physical sciences is slightly fluid, but at the end of his mathematical ascent the student will enter a new genus of existents that cannot be conceived at all without reference to matter. Hence, the progression of mathematics gradually elevates him towards a conception of the existents of the natural world, and the physical principles (al-mabādī’ al-‘fab‘iyya) that are necessary to understand them.706

The kind of mathematics with which either al-Fārābī or the Brethren of Purity are concerned is a theoretical one that prepares the student towards understanding higher philosophical truths. The more practical branches of mathematics in which scholars of the medieval Islamic world made great progress, such as algebra, do not form part of the philosophical curriculum for either of them.707

As we have seen, both al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity go against the standard Alexandrian order of sciences, which was adopted by most Arabic philosophers from al-Kindī to Ibn Sīnā, where mathematics forms the middle knowledge between physics and metaphysics. While for the Brethren of Purity this is supported by the ontological priority of the mathematical sciences, it is not immediately clear how this combines with the idea of the soul’s gradual ascent for al-Fārābī. Still, al-Fārābī except by progressively greater reference to the material. This will lead him to the heavenly bodies, then music, then the study of weights and mechanics, where he is forced to deal with things that become intelligible only with difficulty, or that cannot exist, except when they are in materials” (fayyakun qad ihtada’ mimnā qad yash ham wa-yutaqawwarr bi-lā mudda aṣlan. thumma ilā mā min sha’ nihi an yuḥtāj fī ta faḥhumihī wa-taṣawwurīhi ilā mudda mā ḥāja yasira juddan, thumma ilā mā al-ḥāja fī ta faḥhumihī wa-taṣawwurīhi wa-ji an yu’qal ilā mudda mā ḥāja azyad qaftan. thumma lā yazzal yartaqī fimā talhauquhu al-a’dād wa-l-‘a zam ilā mā yuhtāj fī an yaṣīr mā yu’qal minhu, muhtajān fī an yaṣīr ma’qilin, ilā al-mudda akhtar, ilā an yaṣīr ilā al-ajsām al-samāwīyya, thumma ilā al-mūsiqā, thumma ilā al-atḥāqī wa-‘ulām al-ḥiyal, fa-yuḍṭarr ḥīna’idhin ilā is‘ī māl al-ashkāl’ alla‘ī ya’sur an yaṣīr ma’gula idh lā yumkin an tūjād ilā fī mawādd). Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, pp. 132-3 [Mahdi 1962, pp. 19-20].

705 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 132; Fuṣūl muntaza’a, p. 96. All three of the sciences added by al-Fārābī to the quadrivium are counted by Ibn Sīnā (Aqsām, p. 112) among the “applied” (far‘iya) sciences of geometry. The seven-part division is not carved into stone, however, as al-Fārābī suggests that to optics may be added further sciences derived from arithmetic and geometry, such as the science of moving bodies (al-a‘zām/ukar al-mu‘a‘arrīka).

706 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, p. 133-4. In al-Fārābī’s terminology, the distinction between mathematics and physics is in the number of “principles of existence” in each. While physical objects possess all four of the of principles of existence, roughly equivalent to the four Aristotelian causes, mathematical objects only have three, lacking a material one. Hence, ascent from mathematics to physics is equivalent to ascent from immateriality to materiality.

707 Ibn Sīnā (Aqsām, p. 112) considers algebra (al-jabar wa-l-muqābala) an applied branch of arithmetic.
depicts the progress of philosophical knowledge, in *Attainment of Happiness* in particular, as one of continuous ascent (*irtiqāʾ*), first from the purely abstract mathematical entities to physical existents, and then from physical to metaphysical ones. Each leap to a new science, or to a new class of existents, follows organically from the previous one, so that, for example, ascent within the mathematical entities eventually forces the student to insert a new principle that leads him to the class of physical existents.

Al-Fārābī’s preferred ladder of sciences does not constitute, then, as clearly an ascent from the material-sensible to the spiritual-intelligible sphere of existence, as it does in the case of Ibn Sīnā. However, when mathematics is understood as propaedeutic to the two major philosophical sciences dealing with the external reality, it performs the function of preparing the student with its abstract concepts towards the properly philosophical ascent taking place within physics and metaphysics.

In sum, from the perspective of the soul’s ascent towards ultimate happiness, both logic and mathematics are indispensable for the theoretical ascent of the soul. Logic is an instrument of philosophy, without which philosophical knowledge is impossible. Mathematics has either a preparatory, as in the case of al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity, or intermediary role, as in the case of Ibn Sīnā, in the progression of theoretical knowledge.

When philosophy is viewed as a spiritual progression towards happiness, neither logical nor mathematical knowledge, however, constitutes an end in itself. The items of knowledge listed by Arabic philosophers as necessary for attainment of happiness consist of knowledge related to the spheres of physics, metaphysics, and practical philosophy, whereas none of the philosophers insists on logical or mathematical knowledge. Hence, it is physics and metaphysics that form the two primary parts of medieval Arabic philosophy, at least from the perspective of the theoretical ascent of the soul.

### 7.9 The core of philosophy: physics and metaphysics

For the Brethren of Purity and al-Fārābī then mathematical knowledge as the beginning of philosophy points the way towards the next stage within the ascent of knowledge: physical knowledge about the material world. According to the Brethren of Purity, after a student “has prepared and purified his soul through the mathematical sciences, and persisted in studying them, the sage ought to guide him towards the further sciences, until he is brought to the end of learning.”

For the Brethren the physical knowledge to which the student is prepared to ascend after this preparatory mathematical education already exists potentially in some sense in the mathematical learning now mastered by the student, which is the reason why philosophers set it at the head of the philosophical curriculum in the first place. After understanding “their meanings and mysteries other sciences appear to them, and come to exist in their souls potentially, so that when they confront them,

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they learn and accept them swiftly.”

Through proceeding into the science of physics, the student will then actualize that potential, and the ascent from one step of knowledge to the next appears seamless. Similarly for al-Fārābī, the progression within the mathematical sciences eventually leads to the science of physics, as the reflection of mathematical objects inevitably leads the student to ponder their manifestation in the natural world.

For all Arabic philosophers physical knowledge forms the first step of knowledge about the external world, or what Ibn Sīnā, following the Alexandrian tradition, calls the “lower knowledge” (al-‘ilm al-asfāl). It is the first object of knowledge, because it is concerned with the natural world of material bodies, which are already in some way familiar to man through sense perception, and which within the theoretical ascent correspond to the human soul’s initial sensible state. For al-Kirmānī physics is rather treated as one integral part of the Ismaili esoteric philosophy presented in Rest of the Intellect, and as such it is not placed in the beginning philosophy.

In its treatment of natural philosophy Arabic philosophy follows a standard curriculum of Aristotelian physical works, treating first the general principles governing all corporeal beings, then the elements, and finally the sublunar world of generation and corruption. Even al-Kirmānī’s treatment and ordering of the physical part of his work is largely Aristotelian. The Arabic philosophical depiction of nature arises from the four elements gradually towards more complex bodily compositions, proceeding through minerals, plants, and animals. Finally it culminates in man as the crown of sublunar beings. In sum, it comprises within itself, besides the physics dealing with inanimate objects, both biology and psychology, that is, the treatment of ensouled bodies.

From the perspective of the theoretical ascent, what is relevant, however, is the relation of the knowledge about the natural world to human happiness. While for the philosophers the acquisition of intelligible knowledge in general contributes to happiness, in the case of physics, what appears to be required in particular, is first of all knowledge about the structure and generation of the material world. The physical curriculum follows the ascent of the creative process of the material world, and hence the student becomes aware of the hierarchical manner in which nature is arranged.

For al-Fārābī, the student at this point should reflect on bodies and their qualities, starting from simple bodies, that is, heavenly bodies and the four elements, and proceed from there to the composed bodies of stones, minerals, plants, animals, and

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710 Al-Fârābī (Iḥṣâ‘, p. 91) defines physics (al-‘ilm al-ṭabî‘iyya) as investigation of natural bodies (al-ajsâm al-ṭabī‘iyya) and their properties (a’râd).

711 For Ibn Sînâ (Aqsâm, pp. 108-10), the physical curriculum consists of eight parts: 1) principles common to all physical entities (Physics); 2) elements (On Heaven and On World); 3) generation, corruption, and transformation of bodily entities (On Generation and Corruption); 4) states of the four elements before mixing (Meteorology, I-III); 5) states of the generated beings (Meteorology, IV); 6) plants (On Plants); 7) animals (On Animals), and 8) the soul and its faculties (On Soul and On Sense and Sensibilia). The Epistles follow roughly the same order, although the 17 physical epistles include many additional titles, with varying degrees of relevance to the physical sciences. Al-Fârâbî’s (Iḥṣâ‘, pp. 96ff.) eight-point division is almost identical with that of Ibn Sînâ, except that he, like the Brethren of Purity, includes a separate part dealing with minerals, dropping instead human psychology (De anima) outside of physics.
man. Thus, he will gain knowledge about the totality of the corporeal world and its parts.\textsuperscript{712} As we have seen above in the lists of knowledge required for happiness, it is such understanding of the ultimate structure of existence, including the corporeal world, that all philosophers set as the primary requirement for happiness.\textsuperscript{713} The knowledge required is then universal knowledge about the intelligible order of the corporeal world, that is, the astral bodies, elements, and composed bodies, and the way they are arranged. Hence, al-Fārābī requires of the virtuous citizens knowledge about natural bodies (\textit{al-ajsām al-tābī‘īyya}), their generation and corruption, and the wisdom and justice that govern their being.\textsuperscript{714}

But besides its intrinsic importance for the soul’s ascent, physics also plays an intermediary role in leading the student towards other forms of knowledge that are directly relevant to the soul’s salvation. Namely, knowledge about the physical world leads to knowledge about man and his place in the universe. It is not sufficient to know that the world consists of certain parts, but knowledge about the principles and causes behind them is also required. In al-Fārābī’s \textit{Attainment of Happiness} physical knowledge, like mathematics, forms a seamless progression from lower towards higher principles, until the student reaches a point at which purely physical principles are no longer sufficient.\textsuperscript{715}

Physics not only leads to metaphysics for al-Fārābī, but also to ethics and practical philosophy. The progression of physical knowledge culminates in knowledge about man, the rational soul, and man’s perfection, or the final cause of his existence. Hence, it teaches man “that the natural principles inherent in man and in (physical) instruction are not sufficient for man to reach the perfection for the sake of which he was brought into existence.”\textsuperscript{716} This is what Ibn Sīnā calls the “fruit of physics” (\textit{thamarat al-tābī‘īyya}), knowledge about the human soul’s eternity and afterlife.\textsuperscript{717}

While even such somber Peripatetic philosophers as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā perceive a Gnostic dimension in physical knowledge, for the esoterically oriented Brethren of Purity it is all the more apparent. Hence, the purpose of the physical epistles is to “train the souls and purify the spirits by learning the physical mysteries existing in living bodies and how the spiritual souls are united to earthly bodies. Through that knowledge man also learns the hidden mysteries that man needs to know in order to be liberated from the world of bodies.”\textsuperscript{718}

Similarly for the Brethren all the individual physical epistles point towards a deeper esoteric knowledge, in particular the functioning of the Universal Soul in nature. Sometimes the apparently physical treatises lead in surprising directions. Hence, the goal of the third physical epistle on generation and corruption (\textit{al-kawn wa-‘l-fasād}) is not only to instruct that the true cause of the change of the elements is

\textsuperscript{712} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Taḥsīl}, pp. 134-5.
\textsuperscript{715} Al-Fārābī, \textit{Taḥsīl}, pp. 134ff.
\textsuperscript{717} Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Mabda‘}, p. 1.
one of the faculties of the Universal Soul, but also to lead towards knowledge about
the leaders supported by divine emanation from the Universal Soul, and about the
final leader who will bring the cycle of concealment to end. 719 The treatise on
the minerals, on the other hand, not only reveals that the minerals are the lowest of the
manifestations of Nature as a faculty of the Universal Soul, but also instigates man
towards the purificatory ascent. Namely through it he learns that minerals are the
lowest point of departure for the ascent and purification of the particular souls which
ends up in the world of spheres. 720

As for the Peripatetics, for the Brethren also physical knowledge more than
anything else leads up to knowledge about the nature and place of man in the world,
and hence the purpose of his existence within it. This purpose is accentuated by the
insertion of such epistles as “Man is a microcosm” (al-insān ‘ālam ṣagḥūr) within the
physical part, which reveal the Brethren’s own peculiar view of man’s place and
purpose within the cosmos, and emphasize the importance of self-knowledge in his
quest for salvation.

While the science of physics then holds both inherent and instrumental importance
for man in his quest for ultimate happiness, it also guides the student towards the
highest part of theoretical philosophy, metaphysics. Whereas physics in its reflection
of the natural world forms an ascending ladder of knowledge towards gradually more
perfect beings, at its summit the philosophical reflection must reach beyond the
physical realm of being, where lie the ultimate causes of nature itself. As metaphysics
is a science that deals with immaterial existents, the transition from physics to
metaphysics represents ascent from the corporeal to the non-corporeal sphere of
being. And since in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of being purely spiritual existents lie
above corporeal beings, the transition also stands for an ascent from the imperfection
of composed material entities towards the perfection of purely spiritual existents.

For al-Fārābī there are two points within physics that bring the reflection of
existents to a point where non-physical principles of explanation must be introduced.
The investigation of heavenly bodies leads to the discovery of beings that are non-
corporeal, and more perfect in their being than anything in the natural world, that is,
the immaterial entities that produce the perfect motion of the planetary spheres.
Secondly, the study of animals and man leads to the discovery of the soul and
intellect, and hence leads the reflection beyond the material world to the origin of
immaterial entities. 721 Thus, the ascent from physical to metaphysical knowledge is
just as smooth for al-Fārābī as is the one from mathematics to physics.

For the Brethren of Purity also the physical sciences lead the student seamlessly
towards an understanding of the metaphysical principles behind them. Hence, the
Brethren state the first metaphysical epistle to be directed to those who “have learned
the sensible concepts, reflected on the physical existents, and witnessed the corporeal
visible beings, and who now desire the intelligible, psychical, and metaphysical
benefits in order to reach the world of paradise and proximity of the Merciful.” 722

719 Ikhwān, Jāmi’ a, p. 148. See, chapter 3.4 above for the relationship of these leaders to the seven
speaker-prophets and the cyclical history of the Ismaili doctrine.
720 Ikhwān, Jāmi’ a, p. 151.
721 Al-Fārābī, Tahṣīl, p. 137.
722 Ikhwān, Jāmi’ a, p. 334. “wa-hiya mawdū’ā li-‘ladhīna…waqafat ‘alā ma‘āniya al-maḥṣūsāt, wa-
‘āyanat al-tabi‘iyyāt, wa-shhāhadat al-mar’īyyāt min al-umūr al-jismānīyyāt, wa-ishtāqat ilā al-ifādāt al-
While for al-Fārābī and the Brethren of Purity there is a smooth transition from the reflection of natural to supranatural existents, for Ibn Sīnā the ascent takes place by the intermediacy of mathematics, as stated earlier, as the nature of mathematical entities falls between the pure materiality of corporeal and the pure immateriality of spiritual beings. Thus, both physics and mathematics lead the student towards the culmination of theoretical knowledge in metaphysics. Therefore, according to Ibn Sīnā, metaphysics should be studied only after both of these sciences, as it builds on concepts investigated in physics, such as movement, place, and time, whereas in its theological part it requires knowledge provided by astronomy, which again requires arithmetic and geometry.\footnote{Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Shīfā': Ilāhiyyāt}, p. 15. Of the four parts of mathematics, music is, however, not necessary for understanding metaphysics.}

As in physics, not all parts of philosophical metaphysics are equally important for the attainment of ultimate happiness. Parallel to the conception of the hierarchy and generation of the natural world taught by physics, metaphysics most importantly instructs the student about the hierarchy of spiritual existents above the sublunar world. Since these spiritual beings are the cause of the natural world, metaphysics also gives knowledge about the ultimate causes of the physical world, thereby completing the philosophical account of creation.

While in Arabic philosophy metaphysics is often practically identified with theology, the theological part of metaphysics is of course not the only content of this science. Besides, metaphysics comprises the so-called first philosophy (\textit{al-falsafa al-ūlā}) investigating being at its most general level, and providing the first principles for the other parts of philosophy.\footnote{The relation between the theological and ontological parts of metaphysics was not always immediately clear in that identification of metaphysics with theology is a misconception, and divides the science into three parts with three distinct spheres of science has no self-evident premises. Al-Fārābī is equally clear in that identification of metaphysics with theology is a misconception, and divides the science into three parts with three distinct spheres of subject matter: 1) exists as exists (\textit{al-mawjūdāt wa-l-ashyā' allatī tu'rād lāhā bi-mā hiya mawjūdāt}), 2) principles of demonstration of the individual theoretical sciences (\textit{mabādi' al-barāhihn fī al-`ulūm al-nazariyya al-juz' ʿiyā}), and 3) incorporeal existents (\textit{al-mawjūdāt allati laysat bi-aqṣām wa-lā fi aṣām}). Ibn Sīnā’s clever definition of the three parts of philosophy encompasses within itself all parts of metaphysics, while still defining metaphysics through its relation to immateriality. As he states metaphysics to be concerned with things which “do not require matter or movement in definition or existence,” the definition comes to encompass not only the theological objects of God and the spiritual \textit{pleroma}, but also the objects of first philosophy, general attributes of being, such as oneness (\textit{wahda}) or identity (\textit{huwiyya}). In his \textit{Parts of the Intellectual Sciences} Ibn Sīnā furthermore divides metaphysics into five parts. Of these the first two, investigating concepts common to all existents (\textit{ma`ānī `ammā li-jami` al-mawjūdāt}) and foundations (\textit{uṣūl}) of the other philosophical sciences, would constitute first philosophy. The third and fourth, God and the spiritual substances, constitute theology, whereas the fifth more properly pertains to practical philosophy. See, Ibn Sīnā, \textit{Ṣira}, p. 32; \textit{Shīfā': Ilāhiyyāt}, pp. 2ff.; \textit{Aqsām}, pp. 106, 112-4; al-Fārābī, \textit{Iḫsā'}, pp. 99-100; Gutas 1988, pp. 18-9, 238ff.; Genequand 1996, pp. 783-7.}
which provides the knowledge required for salvation. Theology (al-`ilm al-ilāhī) is the crowning part of philosophical knowledge, or what Ibn Sinā calls the “fruit of metaphysics.”

It is then this kind of philosophical-religious knowledge that is indispensable to salvation within metaphysics for the philosophers. As to its more specific contents, firstly it is necessary to come to know the pleroma of spiritual existents and the way they are arranged. This means in particular knowledge about the hierarchy of separate Intellects, identified with the Quranic angels, and their guidance of the material world. Or in the case of the Brethren of Purity, the duality of Intellect and Soul, and the way they are manifested in the material world.

True to its name, theology, however, finally culminates in knowledge about God as the First Cause of all being, even if that knowledge will always remain in some sense limited since the human soul can never attain complete understanding of the transcendent God. For al-Kirmānī, Ismaili philosophy as a whole is knowledge about divine unity (‘ilm al-tawḥīd). But as the Ismaili God is an utterly transcendent entity beyond description by intellectual concepts, the most important thing the initiate will learn is to avoid applying attributes of the created beings to Him. Likewise for the Brethren, man’s “ultimate goal and highest degree is to worship God through attesting His oneness and divesting Him from the attributes pertaining to His creations.”

For Peripatetic philosophers it means rather knowledge about the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic First Cause and its attributes, and the way the rest of existence is emanated from Him. Altogether the ultimate goal of metaphysics is then to instruct about the totality of being above the lower material world, or as Ibn Sinā states it, “knowledge of God’s governance, knowledge of the spiritual angels and their ranks, and knowledge of the order of the arrangement of the spheres.”

Despite the inscrutability of God especially for the Ismailis, knowledge about God represents the culmination of the theoretical knowledge through which soul reaches its salvation and happiness. This is the case despite the fact that there is no epistle by the Brethren of Purity solely discussing God, and although the metaphysical treatises of Ibn Sinā, al-Fārābī, and al-Kirmānī, following the order of emanation, start rather than end with God. Theology as a whole presents the philosophical account of God’s creation of the world through the intermediacy of purely spiritual beings. Hence,

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727 Al-Kirmānī, Rūḥa, p. 501.
728 “wa-kāna al-gharāḍ al-aqṣā wa-’l-manzila al-’alyā luwa ’ibādat Allāh ‘azza wa-jalla wa-’l-iqrār bi-tawḥīdihī wa-tanzel ‘an jamī’ mā fi mudā’atihī wa-sīfāt makhlūqātihī.” Ikhwān, Jāmi’a, p. 406. In its transcendence the Brethren’s God then comes near the Ismaili God, or the God of Plotinus for that matter, which is completely beyond being and attribution. However, in the end there seems to be some possibility for the Brethren to gain direct unveiled knowledge about God’s mystery through the soul’s ascent to the level of the Intellect, which knows its Maker. See, Marquet 1973 pp. 49-54.
according to the Brethren of Purity, “knowledge of God is the most noble of sciences.”

For al-Fārābī the philosopher’s reflection has been depicted as an ascent from lower to higher principles, from mathematics up to metaphysics, until he “has become near to reaching a degree of theoretical knowledge by which happiness is attained.”

It is finally consummated in knowledge about the First Principle above which there is no other, but which is itself the ultimate cause of all other existents. Knowledge of the First hence provides the philosopher a novel insight over the totality of being through which he has proceeded at this point. Then he gains “knowledge about existents through their ultimate causes, which is a divine reflection of existents.”

7.10 The end of philosophy: ethics and political philosophy

As knowledge about the external world culminates in metaphysical knowledge about God and the spiritual world, this would seem to complete the ascent of the soul to perfection and happiness. At this point the aspiring philosopher has presumably completed his quest for intelligible knowledge, and hence fully actualized his theoretical intellect. If ultimate happiness is equal to theoretical perfection, and theoretical perfection to the intelligible knowledge provided by theoretical philosophy, then the student should now have reached the stage of ultimate happiness.

In the Alexandrian curriculum the ascent of the soul through knowledge in fact does culminate in metaphysics as the highest stage of philosophical knowledge. In contrast to the Alexandrian order, in which ethics precedes theoretical philosophy, in Arabic philosophy metaphysics is, however, still followed by practical philosophy.

Hence, the question once again arises why is ethical and political philosophy set as the conclusion of the philosophical curriculum, rather than at the beginning? When practical philosophy deals with the ways to attain happiness, what is the point of introducing it only when the ascent to happiness is already complete?

It seems that the most important reason for this is that the knowledge provided by theoretical philosophy is a necessary prerequisite for practical philosophy, just as physics is for metaphysics. Al-Fārābī seems to support the conclusion that the end point of theoretical philosophy concludes the quest for happiness by his statement that the student approaching the end of metaphysics has now “nearly reached” the degree of theoretical knowledge by which happiness is attained, after which he is ready to proceed to the practical part so that “he may begin to act the way he is supposed to act.”

While metaphysics does then constitute the end of theoretical knowledge for al-Fārābī, it is immediately followed by a further genus of practical knowledge.

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731 “ma’rifat Allāh ajall al-‘ulūm.” Ikhwān, Jāmi‘u’a, p. 22.
734 Only in Miskawayh’s Tartīb al-sa‘ādāt is ethics stated to precede theoretical philosophy, as the order for the study of Aristotle’s philosophy is given as ethics, mathematics, logic, physics, and metaphysics. See, Gutas 1983, p. 236.
indispensable for correct action. Both physics and metaphysics, through the discovery of the soul and intellect, lead the philosopher to knowledge about the perfection and final goal of man. Through them he learns that man’s perfection is distinct from the other existents of the natural world, and it is necessary for man to actualize his intellect in order to reach that perfection. He also learns that other particular means are also required in order to reach the ultimate goal, and that he can only implement those means through political association with other people.

All this leads to the final transition from one science and genus of existents to another, this time from metaphysics to ethics and political philosophy, which for al-Fārābī constitute a single “human science” (al-‘ilm al-madanī/insānī). Paradoxically then the student of philosophy will have to have gone through the whole of theoretical philosophy in order to understand that his perfection is intellectual, and primarily acquired through theoretical philosophy. This is because only through understanding the ultimate nature of the world, can he fully understand the purpose of man within it.

Similarly, for Ibn Sīnā and the Brethren of Purity physics and metaphysics are necessary in order to reach the knowledge provided by practical philosophy. As we have seen, for the esoterically oriented Brethren all philosophical sciences, in one way or another, in the end lead to knowledge about the soul and its ascent, the eschatological events involved in its resurrection, and the esoteric meaning of religion. The Brethren of Purity are far less systematic in the actual arrangement of their epistles than Ibn Sīnā, however, and in fact treat the central ethical questions related to the soul’s salvation from the first epistle to the last.

But for Ibn Sīnā theoretical philosophy in the end is also consummated in the religious knowledge about the soul and its salvation. Hence, the “fruit of physics” is knowledge about the soul’s eternity and afterlife. The “fruit of metaphysics” is theology, which for him seamlessly leads to the central questions of practical philosophy. Namely, the final part of his theology unites his Aristotelian-Neoplatonic metaphysics into the religious questions central to the context of Islamic revelation. It treats the question of providence that the spiritual substances exercise over the earthly beings, and leads to knowledge about Intellects as the Quranic angels of revelation. Furthermore, Ibn Sīnā counts further knowledge about prophecy and afterlife among the “derived” (far‘īyya) parts of metaphysics.

It is through this applied metaphysics that man learns the true nature of happiness as an intellectual perfection, and the philosophical interpretation about the nature of afterlife. While practical philosophy investigating the particular means to attain happiness should follow upon this, in his surviving compendiums he does not devote a special section to them, but treats them rather as the final part of metaphysics. As Gutas notes, despite his Aristotelian background, Ibn Sīnā in fact was throughout his career singularly uninterested in treating ethics in any other context than this “metaphysics of the rational soul” placed as the final part of metaphysics.

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736 Al-Fārābī, Taḥṣīl, pp. 137-40.
738 Ibn Sīnā, Aqsām, pp. 113-5.
While for Ibn Sīnā theoretical philosophy then leads to philosophical-religious knowledge about the soul’s eternity, afterlife, and prophecy, surprisingly he does not appear to consider them as part of the theoretical knowledge through which the intellect is actualized. His minimum lists of knowledge required for happiness focus entirely on knowledge about the hierarchy of existence, with knowledge about the eternity and incorporeality of the human soul mentioned only once. Unlike al-Fārābī, he does not mention knowledge about the nature of the afterlife or prophecy and revelation at all. Apparently this is the case because such knowledge is not strictly speaking intelligible knowledge which is limited to the conception of the ultimate causes of existence. Rather, it follows upon theoretical intelligible knowledge about the world as the “fruit” of the theoretical sciences.

At least for al-Fārābī, there is, however, besides a further reason why practical philosophy completes the philosopher’s education. Namely, as we have seen, al-Fārābī is very emphatic that a true philosopher is not an academic philosopher, but one who actualizes his theoretical knowledge to a lived praxis. Even if the philosopher at the end of theoretical philosophy has completed his knowledge about the world, he still has not completed his quest to become a philosopher. In order to become one, he must also learn how to actualize his knowledge by instructing it to others.

Through practical philosophy the philosopher learns not only the particular means that lead towards man’s practical and theoretical perfection, but also the ways in which they are implemented in order to form a virtuous society. As for al-Fārābī the true philosopher is also the legitimate ruler, the final political part of philosophy completes his transformation into a real philosopher – a philosopher who has not only reached his own perfection, but who is also capable of conveying it to others. However, since the particular political knowledge is based on universal intelligible knowledge, without his prior theoretical education al-Fārābī’s philosopher-king would have no basis for his rule.

In the end then, all philosophical knowledge culminates in knowledge about man, his purpose, and salvation, and the prophecy and revelation that enable it. Ethical and political philosophy therefore brings about the synthesis of the philosophical with the religious world view. Still, the question remains how the philosopher is inspired to seek his salvation through philosophy in the first place, if the question of happiness is only investigated at its end.

As shown above, for Arabic philosophy operating in the context of Islamic religion, religious education serves the function of pre-philosophical education. Hence, it inspires the believers towards the right path in their quest for happiness. Moreover, both al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā wrote little treatises that serve a similarly inspiring purpose. Al-Fārābī’s *Exhortation to the Path of Happiness* guides the aspiring philosopher to seek his happiness through both theoretical and practical education, as do Ibn Sīnā’s various little treatises on the soul. The nature of philosophy as a way to spiritual happiness is moreover emphasized by the philosophers in innumerable introductions which guide the initiate towards the right

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740 See, Appendix 1.
741 See, chapter 5.1 above.
path of philosophy. Through them the student of philosophy is familiarized with the way to happiness before investigating it systematically as part of practical philosophy.

Islam summons all Muslims to a belief in God, angels, prophets, revelation, and judgment day. When viewed from a religious perspective, medieval Arabic philosophy answers this call. Philosophy in the end provides its own interpretation of these articles of faith, which it adapts to its own peculiar Aristotelian-Neoplatonic world view. It provides knowledge about God as the first principle of creation, and the way the rest of existents are emanated from Him. It demonstrates the existence of a supramaterial realm of Intellects, identified with the Quranic angels of revelation. The physical and metaphysical sciences produce as their fruit a philosophical interpretation about the true nature of prophecy, revelation, and afterlife. Physics and metaphysics hence are the central parts of philosophy in its Gnostic goal of providing the knowledge required for salvation. But even logic and mathematics ultimately serve this final goal of the philosopher’s ascent to saving knowledge. In sum, philosophy is a road to ultimate happiness and spiritual salvation, where all philosophical knowledge has its ultimately Gnostic component.

742 Quran, IV: 136.
Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the idea of philosophy as a path to happiness through comparison of two distinct intellectual currents within early Arabic philosophy. The Arabic Peripatetic and Ismaili schools of philosophy appear as widely divergent in their initial viewpoints on philosophy.

The attitude of the Peripatetic philosophers from al-Fārābī on is secular and rationalistic, as they self-consciously carry on the tradition of the Greek philosophers. Especially for al-Fārābī religious revelation is derivative of philosophy, serving the essentially political purpose of divulging the philosophical truth to the common populace.

Ismaili philosophy, on the other hand, appears more religiously oriented in its initial position. It rejects at the outset the idea of the unaided human intellect’s capacity to reach truth about the world. Only the presence at each point of human history of a mediator figure, the divinely supported imam, ensures the validity of the esoteric truth which Ismaili philosophy ultimately represents. Both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity are moreover clearly more esoteric in their orientation than the Peripatetic philosophers, viewing philosophy as the hidden truth behind the exoteric exterior of religious revelation, unfolding to the mankind throughout the human history.

Still, both traditions converge in the most important question concerning philosophy, namely its purpose in the human life. Both perceive the ultimate reason for which philosophy is practiced in the first place to lie in its saving function of leading man towards his greatest happiness. Moreover both traditions draw their inspiration from Neoplatonism to portray the philosophical path to happiness.

The focal point of both schools of philosophy is a concept of happiness that corresponds to the contemplative ideal of the classical Aristotelian and Neoplatonic perceptions of eudaimonia. Ultimate human happiness is perceived as a transcendent ideal of perfection, or the greatest human good that is attainable for man. Human perfection is further identified with the perfection of the theoretical intellect as the summit of human faculties.

Moreover, for both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy attainment of happiness embodies the counterpart of the Neoplatonic creative process of emanation, through which the soul returns to its origin in the spiritual world. Hence, ultimate happiness is identified with the soul’s connection with a transcendent Intellect of the spiritual world, whether the tenth Intellect of Peripatetic cosmology, al-Kirmānī’s first Intellect, or the Intellect as the second hypostasis of the Brethren of Purity. Through this identification of happiness as an approximation to a semi-divine entity of the higher world, happiness gains a mildly mystical flavor in Arabic philosophy, although only Ibn Sīnā at times portrays the experience of happiness in truly ecstatic terms.

Finally, all four philosophers identify ultimate happiness as an intellectual bliss of the virtuous souls in the afterlife, making happiness and salvation almost synonymous terms, and hence providing the philosophical explanation for the Quranic account of the hereafter. Despite this, worldly happiness is viewed by all as consonant with the pursuit of otherworldly happiness, and philosophy is perceived to provide the way to
achieve happiness in this worldly life thus making the perspective of Arabic philosophy not wholly otherworldly in orientation.

Finally, the view of happiness in Arabic philosophy is completed by the inclusion of practical-moral perfection in the concept of happiness. While happiness as the final goal of human existence consists of both intellectual and moral perfection, the practical goal still appears as an instrument towards the ultimate contemplative goal. However, within man’s embodied existence for all Arabic philosophers the pursuit of happiness is embodied in a quest for both theoretical knowledge and moral virtue.

Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophers further converge along general lines in their view about the path towards the attainment of happiness. For both it consists of a dual way of theory and practice, through which man strives to approach both his theoretical and practical perfection as much as possible. However, the two traditions of philosophy diverge in their views about the precise role that philosophy should play in this process. The differences of view in the end revert to distinct perceptions about the origin of saving knowledge, and the relationship between philosophy and revelation. Both Ismailism and Peripatetic philosophy purport to offer a complete spiritual path that leads the initiate towards his ultimate perfection.

For the Peripatetics, however, the initial position is that philosophy and reason are by themselves sufficient to lead man towards happiness and salvation. The ultimate benefit of both theoretical and practical philosophy are stated to reside in their functional role of leading man towards happiness, in that theoretical philosophy actualizes the human intellect and the practical provides the means towards moral virtue. Ibn Sīnā, however, moderates al-Fārābī’s more rationalistic position through stating that it is practical philosophy together with religion that constitutes the instrument towards attainment of practical perfection.

The concept of philosophy for the Peripatetics then materializes into a comprehensive ideal of philosophy as a way of life, in which the contemplative ideal is accompanied with the pursuit of virtue. This transcendent ideal of philosophy is also apparent in the definitions of philosophy adopted by Arabic philosophers from late Antiquity, in which philosophy is likened to a quest towards man’s divinization, and is understood as a practical as much as a theoretical pursuit.

While for the Ismailis also man reaches his intellectual perfection through the acquisision of theoretical knowledge about the world, practical philosophy appears as superfluous in the quest towards happiness. For al-Kirmānī there is no need for a philosophical ethics seeking the practical means towards happiness, because such means are fully provided to man through religious revelation. Hence, al-Kirmānī is expressly critical of the philosophical path to happiness in general, and of Aristotelian virtue ethics in particular, as he does not perceive it to lead man towards either virtue or happiness.

The main point of divergence lies in the role given to human reason in the path towards happiness. Namely, al-Kirmānī denies that man could reach happiness solely through reliance on the precepts of reason, and asserts that only divine revelation enables certain knowledge about the means towards salvation. Hence, al-Kirmānī identifies the practical part of the way to happiness with the religious law verified through prophecy, which then occupies the position taken by ethics in the Peripatetic system. Hence, for al-Kirmānī there is no special philosophical way of life which
would set the practitioners of philosophy apart from the common populace, but all believers equally share the common rules of conduct regardless of their intellectual capabilities. The function of theoretical philosophy, however, remains identical to that of the Peripatetic philosophers, namely the actualization of theoretical intellect. However, from the Ismaili perspective its validity also is ensured by the existence of divinely supported imams.

The position of the Brethren of Purity seems to lie somewhere between the Peripatetics and al-Kirmānī. On the one hand, the Brethren of Purity are just as critical as al-Kirmānī of those philosophers who substitute religious law for complete reliance on human reason, and the Brethren also view divine support as essential for reaching salvation. On the other hand, for the Brethren philosophical ethics does play a role in the path towards happiness, as they do not identify the practical part wholly with religious law.

A central idea going throughout the Epistles is the essential harmony of religious revelation and true philosophy, such as it was practiced by the ancients. Accordingly, the path towards happiness is formed of the combination of both. As for its practical part, philosophical ethics is, however, not sufficient in itself, but a divinely inspired guidance in the form of religious law is indispensable. However, for the Brethren virtuous life is not restricted to the obedience of religious law, but they moreover identify an esoteric level of practice for the spiritually advanced. Hence, the Brethren also in the end come to identify a special way of life of the philosophers, which distinguishes the philosophically inclined from common believers in their pursuit of happiness.

Of the two constituent parts of the philosophical way to happiness, the practical part becomes identified with the practical purification of the soul, which is a Neoplatonic motif shared by both Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy. This refers to the need for the human rational soul to liberate itself from the entanglements of its body and lower faculties which bind it to the material-sensible world. The process of practical purification then appears for the human soul as a quest towards a rediscovery of its purely spiritual essence.

Even if the final goal of human existence is perceived as a contemplative life, the necessity of practical purification is supported by various grounds. First of all, the two spheres of being, the spiritual-intelligible and material-sensible, are seen as contrary to each other, hence making it impossible to face both simultaneously. Secondly, on purely epistemological grounds practical purification is necessary, as in order for the soul to be tuned towards receiving the intelligible emanations of the Intellect, it should be purified from the distractions that turn its attention downwards towards the sensibles. Moreover, practical purification arouses in the soul a desire towards a return to the spiritual-intelligible world, which is contrary to the downwards pull of its bodily nature, which rather makes it oblivious to its true spiritual essence.

The actual content of the practical perfection as the end point of practical purification is expressed by Arabic philosophers through virtue ethics. However, there appears to be some tension between the Aristotelian ideal of moderation adopted by Peripatetic ethics, and the Neoplatonic goal of complete purging of the soul of its bodily liaisons and transformation into a pure intellect. What emerges from the Platonic-Aristotelian ethical theories embraced by Arabic philosophers is an ideal of
balanced psychical disposition, in which the desires and passions of the lower faculties are subjugated to the dominance of practical reason. However, as virtues are portrayed as Aristotelian mediums, this ethical ideal represents one of moderation, rather than a state of complete apatheia with respect to the soul’s lower functions. Since the ideal nevertheless requires a degree of control over one’s desires and emotions, the ideal of philosophical life appears to be one of practice of moderate ascesis.

When viewed from the perspective of the practical ideal of philosophical life, all Arabic philosophers adopt a relatively moderate position, while there is slight variance as to the level of asceticism advocated by the individual philosophers. For Ibn Sinā the philosophical life appears to be composed of a rationally governed state of moderation, while the Brethren of Purity adopt a slightly more ascetic tone in their encouragement for renouncement of worldly delights. While Arabic philosophers in general perceive the philosophical life of virtue, despite its contemplative objectives, to be possible only as part of a society, the Brethren do encourage towards withdrawal to their own community of the virtuous. Nevertheless, the ideal philosopher is one who also fully embodies the social virtues in his benevolent attitude towards fellow men. While the ideal of philosophical life in Arabic philosophy appears as a relatively moderate one, it does involve the ascetic goal of relative detachment from the worldly life.

All the reasons stated above to make practical purification necessary, also support its precedence with respect to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, as man can only truly pursue his theoretical perfection after being purified from the distractive influence of the worldly desires. In Greek Neoplatonism the idea of practical purification materializes in a ladder of virtues, which represent a gradual detachment from the worldly sphere, and in which some degree of pre-philosophical purification precedes the study of philosophy. In Arabic philosophy, however, the order of the practical and theoretical parts of philosophy appears somewhat ambiguous initially. While at times moral virtue is assumed as a necessary prerequisite of theoretical studies, at other times it is conceived of as following from theoretical virtue, reflected in the position of practical philosophy at the end of the Arabic philosophical curriculum.

Al-Kirmānī is the most explicit of the four in placing practical worship clearly as a prerequisite for acquisition of philosophical knowledge, while the Brethren of Purity also clearly require a great degree of moral purity from a student of philosophy. Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā appear to view moral molding as both a necessary prerequisite for the study of philosophy, and as the end point of philosophy where theoretical knowledge is actualized into a virtuous praxis.

For al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā the contradiction appears to be resolved when the idea of purification is placed in the context of a political community. Namely, despite their focus on individualistic ethics as part of practical philosophy, for both the attainment of happiness is possible only as part of a society. Moreover, for both the political context of practical purification is that of a virtuous religion whose regulations now assume the function of purificatory practices within the philosophical ascent. Accordingly, despite the initial divergences between Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy on the question of the role of philosophy versus religion in practical
purification, in the end both schools view the religious law as the main instrument for practical purification. For al-Fārābī religious law is in effect the political actualization of philosophical ethics for a particular nation. Moreover, both interpret the religious regulations into the context of Neoplatonic ascent through differentiating distinct levels of meanings within the religious rites for the masses and the intellectual elite.

However, only for al-Kirmānī is the praxis of philosophy restricted to the following of religious law. For al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and the Brethren of Purity religious law is clearly insufficient for reaching the moral perfection that is stated to be the practical goal of philosophy. Hence, additional philosophical practices appear to be necessary in order to complement the religious practices incorporated into the law.

From all this there emerges a path of the philosophical praxis, which together amounts to the ideal of philosophical life. Religious law operates as the first grade of moral purification, which arouses a tentative desire within the rational soul to an ascent towards the spiritual sphere of existence, and initiates its detachment from the material sphere of being. This would constitute the stage of pre-philosophical purification of the soul within the philosophical path to happiness. Besides this, however, supplementary practices and general exercise of ascesis are necessary for the philosopher to train his soul towards virtue. Music and poetry may also play a role in the instigation and habituation of the soul to virtue. Finally, for the more advanced student of philosophy the philosophical self-governance presented in the ethical works emerges as the final mode of practical purification for the philosopher.

In the end practical purification is, however, subordinate to the contemplative objective of philosophy. The ultimate goal of theoretical perfection is brought about by the acquisition of intelligible knowledge about the world, whereby human intellect becomes like the immaterial Intellects of the spiritual world. The epistemological process is reflected in an ontological ascent of the human substance from the state of materiality to spirituality.

Although the theoretical perfection is in principle equated with the actualization of the totality of intelligible knowledge within the human soul, in practice, however, not all philosophical knowledge is of equal value for the purpose of the attainment of happiness. For both Peripatetic and Isma'ili philosophers the theoretical knowledge required for happiness consists essentially of conceiving the general Neoplatonic hierarchy of being at both its physical and metaphysical levels. While knowledge related to practical philosophy is also presented as necessary for salvation, for the most part it does not appear to be related directly to the intelligible knowledge of which the theoretical perfection is composed.

Like the practical purification of the soul, the theoretical ascent also proceeds gradually towards its goal. It is not possible to proceed directly from the initial potential state of the human intellect to the intelligible conception of highest reality, as in its initial sensible and potential state man would be unable to understand them. The epistemological process towards a fully actualized intellect is rather a progressive one from the initial sensible state of the human soul towards gradually higher degrees of abstraction. On a general level the theoretical ascent of the soul comes to correspond inversely with the Neoplatonic hierarchy of creation, so that man starts his ascent in knowledge from the last sensible existents within the hierarchy of being and
proceeds upwards. Both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity are highly emphatic about the necessity of such graduation for the attainment of happiness, whereas al-Fārābī also presents philosophy as a progression from lower to higher principles.

For all Arabic philosophers this idea of gradual theoretical ascent materializes into curricula of knowledge, largely following classical ideas of classification of philosophy. However, between Peripatetic and Ismaili philosophy, and the individual philosophers within each tradition, the actual classificatory arrangements they adopt vary greatly.

For both al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity the major distinction is that between exoteric and esoteric knowledge, where the first is explicitly associated with the corporeal-sensible and the latter with the spiritual-intelligible sphere of being. Hence, the progression of the student from exoteric to esoteric knowledge represents the soul’s ascent from its sensible to an intelligible state. For al-Kirmānī the Ismaili curriculum is set wholly within this framework, so that the studies proceed gradually towards higher esoteric knowledge, concluding in his major work of esoteric philosophy, Rest of the Intellect. The same idea of progressive ascent does not appear to apply within the highest philosophical knowledge itself, however, for al-Kirmānī does not present it as an ascent from physical to metaphysical knowledge, for example. For the Brethren of Purity, on the contrary, there emerges a double ascent, first from exoteric-religious to esoteric-philosophical knowledge, and secondly within the philosophical sciences.

Whereas for al-Kirmānī and the Brethren of Purity the religious studies represent the first exoteric grade of the ascent, for the Peripatetic philosophers also religious education plays a role within the pre-philosophical theoretical education of the student. For al-Fārābī religious revelation and the related sciences appear to present the primary rhetorical-dialectical education preceding the actual intelligible knowledge, while the analogical reasoning of jurisprudence acts as a preparation for logical reasoning for Ibn Sinā.

Besides religious education, however, other branches of knowledge also serve the purpose of molding the rational soul towards the philosophical ascent. Of these linguistics as a preparation for logical reasoning is elevated in particular by al-Fārābī, while study of history and biographies may be seen as related to the moral molding of the philosophical initiate. As a further training of the student for his philosophical studies, general philosophical introductions and preparatory treatises serve particularly the purpose of explaining the nature and purpose of philosophy.

As for the curriculum within the philosophical sciences, for all Arabic philosophers logic emerges as the indispensable instrument that enables the ascent. Hence, for al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā it is the self-evident starting point for philosophical studies, while the Brethren of Purity apparently following their Pythagorean inclinations place it as the second science after mathematics. Beyond this, all of them are in agreement that the theoretical ascent proceeds gradually from physical to metaphysical reality.

However, mathematics occupies two alternative positions within the Arabic curriculum. For the Brethren of Purity and al-Fārābī it is preparatory towards higher philosophical knowledge, and hence is placed at the beginning of the ascent. For Ibn Sinā it functions rather as an intermediary between the purely corporeal physical
objects and the purely spiritual metaphysical entities, thereby smoothing the transition from one science to the other. However, regardless of the classification they have chosen, for all Arabic philosophers the philosophical sciences form a gradually ascending progression, where each science leads seamlessly towards the higher one within the theoretical ascent of the soul.

Even though the philosopher’s theoretical ascent culminates in knowledge about God as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of being, the Arabic philosophical curriculum culminates in practical philosophy. While the knowledge provided by ethical and political philosophy does not appear to form part of the theoretical knowledge required for the actualization of the intellect, practical philosophy emerges as the natural consummation of theoretical knowledge. Both physical and metaphysical knowledge lead up to knowledge about man’s spiritual substance, purpose within the totality of creation, and the philosophical interpretation of prophecy and afterlife. Moreover, for al-Fārābī, political philosophy completes the philosopher’s education through guiding him to actualize his theoretical knowledge in the instruction of others.

Hence, while the philosopher’s quest towards purifying himself from material attachments already began at the start of his philosophical path, through practical philosophy his knowledge about the practice of philosophy also reaches its completion.
Appendix 1. Theoretical requirements of happiness

1) Al-Fārābī

Kitāb al-milla (pp. 44-5)
Opinions concerning theoretical things:
1) God and His attributes
2) spiritual beings, their degrees and actions
3) generation of the world, its parts and degrees
4) generation of first and composed bodies and their degrees
5) connection of the things of the world to each other and their arrangement
6) everything in world occurs according to justice and there is no injustice in it
7) relation of each thing to God and the spiritual existents
8) generation of man and his soul
9) intellect and its degree in the world and with respect to God and the spiritual existents
10) prophecy and revelation
11) death and afterlife
12) happiness and misery in the afterlife

Opinions concerning voluntary things:
13) prophets, virtuous kings, leaders, and rightly guided imams, and their good actions in past times
14) vicious kings, immoral leaders, governors, and imams of perdition, and their bad actions in past times
15) present-day virtuous kings and imams, their good actions, and similitudes and differences with the past leaders
16) present-day immoral leaders and imams of perdition, and their similitudes and differences with past leaders

Fuṣūl al-madāni (p. 141)
1) beginning
   a. God
   b. spiritual beings
   c. saints to be followed
   d. beginning of the world and its parts
   e. generation of man
   f. grades of the parts of the world
   g. relation of things to each other
   h. grade of things in relation to God and spiritual beings
   i. grade of man in relation to God and spiritual beings
2) middle
   a. actions by which happiness is achieved
3) end
   a. happiness

Al-Madīna al-fāḍila (pp. 276-8)
1) First Cause and Its attributes
2) immaterial existents, their attributes and actions
3) celestial substances and their attributes
4) natural bodies, their generation and corruption, and the perfection, providence, justice and wisdom of the things happening to them
5) generation of man and the faculties of his soul, emanation from the Active Intellect of the first intelligibles to him, and free choice and volition
6) First Ruler and revelation
7) subsequent rulers
8) virtuous and non-virtuous cities and the happiness and misery of their inhabitants
Al-Siyāsa al-madaniyya (pp. 84-5)
1) ultimate principles of existents
2) ranks of existents
3) happiness
4) first leadership and its ranks
5) actions by which happiness is achieved
6) the necessity of performing these actions

2) Ibn Sīnā

Shifa’: Hāhīyyāt (pp. 353-4)
1) separate principles
2) final causes of things occurring in universal motions
3) form of the whole
4) relations of its parts to each other
5) arrangement of the whole from First Principle until the most remote existents
6) providence
7) Essence preceding the whole, the manner of Its existence, unity and knowledge, and relation to the hierarchy of existents

Risāla fi ma’rifat al-nafs al-nātiqa (pp. 190-1)
1) Necessary Existent
   a. attributes
   b. transcendence
   c. providence over the created beings
   d. knowledge of existents
   e. omnipotence
2) beginning and emanation of existence from It to:
   a. intellectual substances
   b. spiritual astral souls
   c. elemental bodies of minerals, plants, and animals
3) substance of human soul
   a. its incorporeality
   b. its eternity

3) Brethren of Purity

Beliefs beneficial to all (Rasā’il, III (42), pp. 452-3)
1) world is created
2) world has been created in time by a Creator
3) Creator is wise
4) Creator is pre-eternal
5) Creator is compassionate
6) Creator has created the world in the best possible order and arrangement without defects or faults
7) Nothing takes place in the world without God knowing it in advance
8) God has angels who do what He orders them to do
9) God has chosen people who acts as his mediators

Belief as commitment to five beliefs (Rasā’il, IV (46), p. 67):
1) Creator
2) angels
3) prophets
4) revelation
5) resurrection and reward and punishment in the afterlife

Four foundations of knowledge in the virtuous city (Risālat al-jāmi’a, p. 528)
1) Intellect and what it embraces
2) Soul and what it contains
3) Nature and what supports it
4) Matter and what is formed of it
4) Al-Kirmānī

Knowledge of the divine unity (Rāhat al-‘aqīl, p. 501):
1) avoiding attributing things to God
2) proximate incorporeal angels and their actions
3) corporeal substances and their attributes
4) lower bodies and their actions
5) generation and destiny of man
6) prophets, initiators of cycles, awṣiyā’, and ḥudūd past and present
7) religious laws
Appendix 2. Al-Fārābī’s ladder of sciences

1) یلشائی’ ال-عہم (contents)

Political science, jurisprudence, and theology

Metaphysics
Exists as existents → Premises of proofs of the particular theoretical sciences → Incorporeal existents

Physics
Physics → Heavens and the world → Generation and corruption → Meteorology, I-III → Meteorology, IV → Mineralogy → Botany → Zoology and the soul

Mathematics
Arithmetic → Geometry → Optics → Astronomy → Music → Science of weights → Mechanics

Logic
Categories → On Interpretation → Prior Analytics → Posterior Analytics → Dialectic → Sophistics → Rhetoric → Poetics

Linguistics

2) یالس علیا (pp. 129ff.)

Political science

Metaphysics

Physics

Mathematics
Arithmetic → Geometry → Optics → Astronomy → Music → Science of weights → Mechanics

3) یالتی بی ‘الاسا’ را (pp. 20-1)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical</th>
<th>Practical</th>
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<tr>
<td>Metaphysics</td>
<td>Political philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>Logic</td>
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4) یالم علیا (pp. 96ff.)

Practical philosophy

Metaphysics

Physics

Mathematics
Arithmetic → Geometry → Optics, moving bodies, and other things following from arithmetic and geometry → Heavenly bodies → Music → Weights → Mechanics
5) Al-Madîna al-fâdîla (contents)

**Metaphysics** (supralunar world)
First Existent → Emanation of existents from the First and degrees of existents → Emanation of the Intellects and heavenly bodies

**Physics** (sublunar world)
Sublunar bodies → Form and matter → Order of material and divine existents → Nature of heavenly bodies → Generation of material bodies

**Psychology** (man)
Man and his psychic faculties → Rational soul and its intellection → Choice, volition, and happiness
→ Dreams → Revelation and vision

**Political philosophy and ethics**
Necessity of political association → First Leader → Virtuous and non-virtuous cities → Ultimate happiness and misery

6) Falsafat Arisṭūṭālis (contents)

**Political and human philosophy**

**Metaphysics**

**Physics**

**Logic**
Categories → On Interpretation → Prior Analytics → Posterior Analytics → Topics → Sophistics → Rhetoric → Poetics
Appendix 3. Ibn Sīnā’s ladder of sciences

1) Aqsām al-‘ulūm al-aqliyya

Practical philosophy
Political philosophy
↑
Economics
↑
Ethics

↑

Theoretical philosophy
Applied theoretical (far‘iyya)

Metaphysics (higher knowledge)
Providence of spiritual substances
↑
First spiritual substances
↑
First Truth
↑
Principles of physics, logic, and mathematics
↑
Concepts common to all existents
↑

Mathematics (middle knowledge)

Music
↑
Astronomy
↑
Geometry
↑
Arithmetic

↑

Physics (lower knowledge)

On the Soul & On Sense and the Sensible
↑
Zoology
↑
Botany
↑
Meteorology, IV
↑
Meteorology, I-III
↑
Generation and corruption
↑
Heavens and the world
↑
Physics

**Logic (instrument of philosophy)**
- Poetics
  - Rhetoric
  - Sophistic
  - Dialectic
  - Posterior Analytics
  - Prior Analytics
  - On Interpretation
  - Categories
  - Eisagōgē

2) **Al-Shifā’ (contents)**

**Metaphysics**
- First philosophy → Theology → Prophecy → Acts of worship → Political philosophy
  - Mathematics
    - Geometry → Astronomy → Arithmetic → Music
    - **Physics**
      - Physics → Heavens → Generation and Corruption → Meteorology, I-III → Meteorology, IV → Soul → Botany → Zoology
    - Logic
      - Eisagōgē → Categories → On Interpretation → Prior Analytics → Posterior Analytics → Dialectic → Sophistic → Rhetoric → Poetics

3) **Al-Najāt (contents)**

**Metaphysics**
  - **Physics**
  - **Logic**

4) **Al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbiḥāt (contents)**

**Prophecy**
  - **Ethics/mysticism**
  - **Metaphysics**
  - **Physics**
  - **Logic**
5) Al-Ḥikmā al-‘arūḍīyya (contents)

Metaphysics

Physics

Logic

6) Dāneneshnāme-ye ‘Alā’ī (contents)

Mathematics

Physics

Metaphysics

Logic

7) Easterners (intended contents according to Gutas 1988, pp. 124-5)

Ethics

Physics

Metaphysics

Logic

8) Al-Mabda’ wa-‘l-ma‘ād (contents)

Metaphysics

Necessary Existent → Heavens → Universal Body, Soul, and Intellect → Hierarchy of emanation → Providence over earthly existents

Physics

Elements → Plants → Animals → Man → Intellect → Degrees of abstraction

Ethics

Happiness → Theoretical and practical intellect → Happiness and misery in the afterlife → Revelation and prophecy
Appendix 4. Brethren of Purity’s ladder of sciences

1) On Theoretical Scientific Disciplines *(Rasā’il, I.7./Jāmi’a, pp. 110-2)*

**Metaphysics**
- God → Spiritual beings → Psychic beings → Governance → Return

**Physics**
- Corporeal principles → Heavens and the world → Generation and corruption → Meteorology → Mineralogy → Botanic → Zoology

**Logic**
- Poetics → Rhetoric → Dialectic → Analytics → Sophistics

**Mathematics**
- Arithmetic → Geometry → Astronomy → Music

III. Philosophical sciences of ultimate reality

II. Religious-normative sciences

I. Preparatory sciences
2) Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ (contents)

Comprehensive Epistle

IV. Legislative-theological sciences

III. Psychical-intelligible sciences

II. Physics

I. Mathematics
Appendix 5. Al-Kirmānī’s ladder of sciences

1) Ṣāḥīḥ al-‘aql (pp. 108ff.)

Esoteric theoretical worship
Esoteric interpretation of revelation and law → Introductory philosophical works → Rest of the Intellect

Exoteric practical worship
Jurisprudence → History

Religious books
The Quran

2) Ṣāḥīḥ al-‘aql (contents)

I. Introduction
1. Purification and preparation of the soul before reading this book
2. Required previous learning from teachers and religious books
3. Books that must be read before this book
4. Purpose of the arrangement of this book in walls and pathways
5. Blessing gained from reading this book in accordance with the way of faith and practice of worship
6. Misfortune gained from reading this book in defiance of the way of faith and practice of worship
7. Benefit of the soul from reading and comprehending this book and its advantage on the attainment of perfection

II. Unity of God
1. Oneness of God and the falsity of His being a non-existent
2. Falsity of God being an existent
3. God has no attributes, is non-corporeal, non-intelligible, and non-sensible
4. God has no matter or form
5. God has no opposite or likeness
6. God is not expressible in language
7. The most truthful statement of God denies Him the attributes of created beings

III. First Existent = Pen
1. First created being whose existence is not from its own essence, to which the existents end, and which is outside the corporeal world
2. Generation of its existence from God through creation and that grasping the manner of its coming to exist is impossible
3. Its existence is the creation itself, being created itself, and the oneness itself, and nothing precedes it in existence
4. It is complete, eternal, non-changeable, one, and without likeness, and it intellects only its own essence
5. On the essence of its substance, what follows necessarily from its attributes, and that it is one and many
6. Its glory, beauty, and delight with its own essence are too great to be described, and it is impossible for it to grasp what is outside it and that from which it derives its own existence, but it still yearns to do so and is bewildered by it
7. It is the first mover to all moving things, has no need for anything besides its essence, and is intellect, intellecting, and the intellected

IV. Procession from the First Existent

1. The manner of procession
2. First processive being, which is the second Intellect, is called the Pen, and is like the First in perfection
3. Second processive being, which is the first subsisting potentially, is the prime matter, and is called the Tablet, and whose existence comes from the first processive being, and which is the principle of the bodily world
4. The cause because of which that which exists from the first innovated being is not of the same kind
5. Heavenly letters which are the noble principles within the world of procession, and their number, and what exists because of them, and the manner of their coming to exist
6. The cause because of which the heavenly letters must come to exist as seven Intellects separate from bodies
7. Things coming to exist through the procession exist outside of time, are pure forms, are one and many, only intellect their own essences and what precedes them in existence, and infuse their radiance on bodies and souls

V. Nature and the heavenly bodies

1. Essence of nature
2. Nature has two ends: first and second perfection
3. Nature has knowledge
4. Footstool = proximate angel = first moving mover
5. Throne = proximate angel = farthest sphere
6. Bodies of the spheres
7. States of the heavenly bodies

VI. Lower bodies

1. First matter
2. Four elements
3. Movements of the four elements
4. Four elements are immutable and durable, and transmutable into one another
5. Cause of the heaviness and divisibility of bodies
6. That earth is not circular
7. That water does not envelop the surface of earth and that the form appearing from it toward the air is the human form

VII. Kingdoms of lower bodies and human perfection

1. Second matter
2. Beings in the domain of air
3. Minerals as bodies
4. Minerals as natural souls possessing actions and knowledge
5. Plants as bodies of more complexity and benefit than minerals
6. Plants as growing souls
7. Animals as bodies, their generation, and higher complexity and benefit than that of plants
8. Animals as sensing souls
9. Human soul as sensing
10. Human soul as rational
11. Rational soul and its actions
12. Rational soul as eternal, and the cause of its eternity and happiness and of destruction and misery
13. Afterlife and resurrection
14. Human soul as rational and divinely supported, and its connection with the Holy Spirit
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