

Nāṣir Khusraw's Hermeneutic Philosophical Theology

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This text is of interest both to the specialist in Islamic studies and to the lay person. The specialist finds here a philosophical system integrating purely Ismaili, Neoplatonic, and original constituents which sheds light on both the intellectual history of the Ismaili position and the originality of its author.¹ For the general reader it provides an illuminating formulation of the problem of alienation beyond its religious and historical contexts. Medieval Ismaili thinkers, such as Nāṣir Khusraw and Naṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī, perceived themselves not merely as theologians and spokespersons of their own religious community, but as global thinkers proffering philosophical wisdom and spiritual therapy for humanity. They teach that true salvation is achieved by a spiritual transformation of the human being from an actuality, which is partially animal, to its potential perfection where it ranks with the angels. This metamorphosis takes place by the rational path of knowledge, a knowledge which includes the science of nature and recognizes that bodies are positive icons and instruments for the spirit. The archetypal appeal of Ismaili thought lies in its confrontation with the universal problem of alienation, which contemporary psychoanalysis, existentialism, and Marxism take to be the most serious problem of humanity. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to expand on the variations of this macro theme; the general theme is that we have suffered by becoming estranged from our primordial state of peace and harmony, and need to return to it through a therapeutic process of reintegration and unification.

Philosophical and Theological Contexts

The success of Ismaili doctrines such as *ta'wīl* or hermeneutic return, lies in their proposal for de-alienation; they advocate a spiritual therapy through the intellect and knowledge of the spiritual basis of the cosmos that leads to a vision of unity (*tawhīd*). Besides having this specific existential appeal, the Ismaili system of thought is the offspring of two great traditions, one philosophical, the other religious.

The philosophical paradigm of this vision is found in the works of the Egyptian–Greek philosopher Plotinus (d. 270 AD), who identified the ultimate entity as the One. On the one hand, all existents emanate from the One in the following procession: the First Intelligence, then the World Soul, followed by individual souls, and finally the realm of matter which is the image of the Soul. On the other hand, souls aim to return to the One as their archetypal source. Freedom, happiness, and mystical union are achieved when there is no 'otherness,' no 'alienation' (*farāq*) between the individual soul and the One. This emanation and return harmonize an integrated universe which offered the Muslim monists, the followers of the *tawhīd*, a suitable framework in their quest for unity without alienation between the transcendent spirit and the receptacle of nature. So inviting is this model – an archetypal vision of it is also found in ancient Egyptian and Indo–Iranian cosmogonies – that the majority of Muslim philosophers sought to accommodate the emanational doctrine of Plotinus to the creation out-of-nothing frame of Biblical and Qur'ānic cosmogony.

An objection may be raised to the primacy of Plotinus himself but not to Neoplatonism as such. After all, Neoplatonic themes are based on the Platonic dialogues, and Plotinus and all his disciples refer to Plato as their master. Such an objection may proceed in the following manner. Take any theme used in Islamic mystical thought: for example, the cycle of revelation–descent (*tanzīl*) and of the hermeneutic return to the primordial origin (*ta'wīl*); these are isomorphic with the Neoplatonic cycles of emanation and ascent. Plotinus' doctrine of the ascent, however, was borrowed from several Platonic

accounts, such as the ladder of love in the *Symposium* (201d–212c) and the allegory of the cave in the *Republic* (514a–521b). If this is so, then why not identify Plato as one of the sources of the Muslim philosophers' doctrine of unity? There are several reasons for continuing to regard Plotinus as the true Greek sheikh. He proffered the first complete philosophical system that was consciously designed as an architectonic monism, with its emanation and return dimensions, in which the ultimate entity or the One is beyond all existents. Plotinus had to overcome Aristotle's criticisms of Plato by rejecting the categories of both Aristotle and the Stoics, to respond to the option offered by the Gnostics, and to integrate the ancient Egyptian, Jewish (Philo's synthesis of Hebraic and Platonic traditions), and Oriental wisdoms of his time. Moreover, Plotinus' system differs essentially from Plato's system. For example, Plato equates the Good and the Beautiful, whereas Plotinus places the Good above Beauty. Second, with a few exceptions, Platonic themes were imported into various Islamic medieval religious systems indirectly through Neo-platonism, which were often wrongly attributed to Aristotle.²

Turning from philosophy to Islamic religious literature, we note that the primacy of the doctrine of oneness and the unity (*tawhīd*) of God is expressed in two ways. First, it is the foundational principle of religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*), the other principles being the necessity of prophecy and the Day of Resurrection. Second, it is the doctrine of unity which is re-interpreted as an essential core of Sufism. In this tenor al-Ghazālī states that while for the many the true doctrine is 'there is but one God,' for those who know 'there is nothing but It'. God, or in some mystical sense the Ultimate Being, is interpreted as the inner essence (*dhāt*) of all entities, which is immanent in all existents, and all entities return to It as their source. A popular Sufi mystical vision is the unity of all existents, the *wahdat al-wujūd*, according to which all elements are connected in a living spiritual cosmos. Here, the inner essence of the self and God merge, as the Prophetic tradition states: 'Whoever knows his soul-self, knows his God.' What, one may ask,

are the objections to such a *prima facie* attractive vision? Often, such objections are rooted in an appeal to a set of bifurcations observed between the transcendent sacred Divine and the secular nature, between the eternal or meta-temporal generator and the contingent ephemeral generated, between the continuous mental and the divisible physical, between the sacred laws of religion and the profane passions of human persons, between the inner intentional existential phenomena and the outer alienating extensional events, between spiritual wisdom or the inner light of collective archetypal contemplation and analytical discursive knowledge. The Ismaili unitive solution to this set of bifurcations was to interpret the apparent physical, secular, outer, extensional dimension of life and its religious consciousness as icons blessed by the Universal Intelligence (or Intellect) which is the agent of the Divine. This vision creates an ecophilic perspective of nature that does not treat human life as a moral fall embedded with the original sin and all its psychological consequences. Its beauty has been totally misunderstood by a number of intellectual historians. Trained in simplistic Aristotelian psychology and in the psychology of 'atoms of impressions or sense data,' they misinterpret the intentional dimension of *ta'wīl* as a blanket term for 'esoteric' and apply it as a collective qualification to Ismaili doctrines. It is true that, for a time, the Ismailis had to hide their true beliefs from their enemies by practising dissimulation (*taqiyya*). But there is no magical mystery which is contrary to reason in Ismaili doctrines. Nāṣir Khusraw in this text states explicitly that only knowledge (*dānīsh*) is the true mediator to happiness. It is time to translate in clear language this positive Ismaili message and sweep away the prejudicial misreadings; these are projections of our fantasy of an Oriental, secretive, cult-like order of esoteric 'assassins' into 'the alienated other'.

The chief originality of the Ismaili methodology is a phenomenological approach which integrates intentional epistemology with a monistic ontology. Such a system prevents the formulation of an essential dichotomy between the physical and the mental, between facts and values, and thus eliminates

the philosophical problems of mind/body, spirit/nature, and fact/value dualism as pseudo-problems. In addition to methodology, the major originality of the content of Ismaili doctrines includes philosophical positions, such as explicating an existent in terms of time, depicting God as a supra-entity beyond substantiality and existence, and the identification of the spiritual with the intellectual. As its title indicates, this work depicts the doctrine of revelation (*tanzīl*) and hermeneutic return (*ta'wīl*), a dialectical opening (*gushāyish*) and a return to the primordial origin that results in spiritual liberation (*rahāyish*) or revealment (*kashf*).

Historical Context

Let us begin with a brief account of the historical and religious context of the Muslim world during the life of our author. An eleventh-century Iranian, Nāṣir Khusraw became one of the most important theologians of the Ismailis. The Ismailis form the second largest community of the Shi'ī branch of Islam and today live in different parts of the world, in particular India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Iran, Syria, East Africa, Europe, and North America. To outsiders they are known by a few confusing data – the negative connotations of the term 'assassins', which was in the past so often applied to them, or the positive image conveyed by their modern social, economic, and cultural programmes. Until a few decades ago, most reports on the Ismailis were produced by hostile opponents and ignorant historians. For example, the thirteenth-century Persian mystic-poet Maḥmūd Shabistārī calls Nāṣir Khusraw an enemy of religion, empty of knowledge, wisdom, and unity, and a pure infidel – even though there is a close affinity between his own ideas and those of the Ismailis!³ A cursory reading of this text makes it evident that such allegations are totally groundless.

Far from being on the fringes of the Islamic civilization, the Ismailis established powerful states twice in medieval times. First in North Africa and Egypt, under the Fatimid caliphate, the

Ismailis made significant contributions to Islamic intellectual life through institutions like al-Azhar, which was originally founded in 969 to propagate the Shī'ī vision of Islam. Such an intellectual innovation forced the Seljuqs and their celebrated vizier Nizām al-Mulk (d. 1092), to establish their own institutions of learning where Sunni scholars, among them al-Ghāzalī, taught and sometimes wrote against the Ismailis. This is an example of how the Ismailis encouraged an intellectual climate in the Muslim world. The second was the Nizārī state in Iran and Syria which was eventually uprooted by the Mongol hordes in 1256. From early on, the Ismailis achieved considerable success in theology and philosophy, as evident in the works of Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 934), Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d. 943), al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (d. 974), Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 971), Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 1020), al-Mu'ayyad fi'l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 1078), Nāṣir Khusraw (d. after 1072), and Naṣir al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 1274). Ṭūsī is, I believe, one of the most versatile thinkers of medieval Islam and, with respect to philosophical originality, second only to Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna). As a mathematician, theologian, logician, and astronomer, he revolutionized intellectual Islam by following Nāṣir Khusraw in integrating theology and philosophy into one discipline. This synthesis was very effective in bringing about a renaissance of philosophy and theology in the eastern parts of the Muslim world, as exemplified by the school of Isfahan which focuses on Shī'ī philosophical theology. The amazing similarity between Ṭūsī's system and that of the German philosopher Leibniz supports the thesis of Harry A. Wolfson concerning an affinity between Spinoza and his contemporaries and the Judaeo-Islamic tradition.⁴

Nāṣir Khusraw lived during a period of political and cultural turmoil in the Muslim world prior to the Mongol onslaught. The first four caliphs (632-660) envisioned themselves as vicegerents of the Prophet Muḥammad, implementing the Islamic aspiration for the actualization of one spiritual global world. After the death of 'Alī, the fourth caliph and the first Shī'ī Imam in 661, the vision of expansion and the rule of

spirit were transformed into the pragmatic agenda of the secular dynasties of the Umayyads (661–750) and the Abbasids (750–1258). The unity of the Islamic empire was being challenged from the inside on two fronts. First, in provinces such as eastern Iran, local feudal rulers began to oppose the reign of dynasties perceived to be primarily Arab. Second, a minority of Muslims had identified themselves with the party (*shī'a*) of 'Alī, who was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, and the spiritual figure most closely associated with him. They claimed the right of 'Alī and his descendants to the Prophet's succession as the temporal and spiritual leaders of Islam on the principle that the genuine legitimate ruler must also embody the moral ethos of the Prophet, since human beings are both physical and spiritual beings – or as Plotinus put it, the human soul is an amphibian creature. Some of them attempted to synthesize the theoretical and pragmatic wisdom of Plato's philosopher-king with the spiritual Imam, leading to the integration of the City of God with the City of Earth. A serious hope for such an integration appeared when the first Shī'ī state, the Fatimid caliphate, was established in North Africa. This reality promoted much hope among the reformers, including Nāṣir Khusraw, who undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca and Cairo to seek wisdom and to preach it to the world. This is the context in which he was born and flourished.

The Life and Works of Nāṣir Khusraw

In one of his poems, Nāṣir Khusraw gives his birth date as 1004. He was born in Qubādiyān, a district of Balkh in eastern Iran, to a family of landowners. His early education was multifaceted, and included a mastery of the Qur'ān and Islamic theology. His works show familiarity with Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition, as well as the Islamic philosophies of al-Sijistānī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sinā.⁵ For example, in the *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn* he quotes Aristotle directly, and in the *Zād al-musāfirīn* he discusses the position that the soul is not a harmony of elements in a manner that recalls Aristotle's views as ex-

pressed in his book *On the Soul* (407b26–409a30).⁶ He tasted the pleasures of a secular life while working for the local government. Having experienced an existential crisis and a spiritual vision, he resigned from his position in the year 1045 to nurture his spiritual rebirth through the archetypal experience of the withdrawal and return of the hero. He began a seven-year journey with two major destinations, one being Mecca, the sacred locus of Islam, and the other Cairo, the capital city of the Fatimid Ismaili state, the living power of what he took to be the true successors of the Prophet. His journey took him to several other cities such as Tabrīz and Jerusalem before he finally arrived in Cairo in 1047. From his account of the journey given in his *Safar-nāma*, it is evident that in addition to having a philosophical mind and a spiritual temperament, he was an acute observer of nature and societies. He wrote extensively about specifics such as the physical features of the Nile, earthquakes in Tabrīz, and the three bazaars in the city of Baṣra. His journey broadened his learning and increased the logical strength of his theological argumentation. It nurtured in him the mission of interpreting Ismaili theology as the true vision of Islamic unity with respect to both knowledge and spirituality. After three years in Cairo, he left for his homeland and arrived in Balkh in 1052. Nāṣir Khusraw was now seasoned as an original theologian, philosopher and poet. As noted in several of his works, he became the *ḥujja* (proof) or the chief *dā'ī* (missionary) of Khurāsān and also travelled to other regions, such as Māzandarān in northern Iran, to preach Ismaili Islam. In this period, he wrote some of his masterpieces of theology, philosophy, and poetry in Persian. As might be expected, in Khurāsān he was confronted by the hostile '*ulamā*' of the Seljuq state. In his hometown of Balkh, he was harassed and his house destroyed. He escaped to the Ismaili-controlled district of Yumgān in Badakhshān, where he composed most of his poetry and some of his philosophical works, including the *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*. He remained in Badakhshān for at least fifteen years and died not long after the year 1072. Nāṣir Khusraw lived between the reigns of the Ghaznavids and the Seljuqs, a

period which witnessed a number of very creative thinkers in Iran, including the poet Firdawsī (d. 1020), the master-philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. after 1050), and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). Nāṣir seems to have felt that his theology revealed the essence of Islam. In his writings he invited Muslims and humanity to return to their monotheistic roots of Divine unity (*tawḥīd*). According to his own account of the principle of the intellectual *jihād*, no Muslim theologian can be sectarian, alienating his community with a peculiar theology suited to a limited audience. Nāṣir's universalism follows essentially from his religion of unity.

Perspectives on Nāṣir Khusraw

In spite of the philosophical content of many of his works, Nāṣir Khusraw has not received due recognition as a major philosopher. Some implicitly dismiss or ignore him. For example, in the standard texts used in academic institutions, such as Majid Fakhry's *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, only brief references are made to Nāṣir Khusraw's general position, and in his recent book on Islamic ethics Fakhry does not mention him at all, even though his works are suffused with a profound ethical consciousness.⁷ Often he is referred to as a philosophical poet, as noted by Sa'īd Nafisī, the late Iranian scholar and editor of the *Gushāyish wa rahāyish*: 'The great poet Nasir Khusru (394/1004–481/1088) expounded philosophical thought in all his poetical works in addition to a few books of philosophy that he wrote in Persian prose from the Isma'īlite point of view'.⁸ Jan Rypka noted his 'complicated personality' and calls him a 'free thinker, a heretic, and a poet'.⁹ E. G. Browne labels him 'the celebrated poet, traveller and Isma'ili missionary'.¹⁰ Many recognize Nāṣir Khusraw's fame as a poet but regard his theological works as influenced by others. Paul E. Walker cautiously suggests that Nāṣir's 'Ismaili works depend on those of al-Sijistānī in part, although how and in exactly what respects remains to be investigated'.¹¹ In contrast, a few others view him as a major thinker. In this tenor, Henry Corbin identifies Nāṣir Khusraw

as a leading Ismaili theoretician whose criticism of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī's concept of time makes him an original Muslim thinker.¹² A more balanced view is presented by Farhad Daftary, who takes Nāṣir Khusraw to be 'a prominent Ismā'īlī dignitary ... a *dā'ī*, a philosopher, a traveller, as well as a renowned poet who in fact ranks among the greatest of the Persian poets.'¹³ The solution to this question of the extent to which our author is a philosopher and the originality of his thought may be found only by an analytic investigation of his works.

The Major Works of Nāṣir Khusraw

There are some seven basic works of Nāṣir Khusraw in existence, as well as a number of other writings attributed to him. To begin with there is the *Dīwān*, the collection of his poetry, which includes close to 11,000 verses,¹⁴ and his famous travelogue, the *Safar-nāma*.¹⁵ He has written several texts on philosophical theology or pure theology, the most important of which is the *Wajh-i dīn*,¹⁶ the others being *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, *Shish faṣl*,¹⁷ and *Khawān al-ikhwān*.¹⁸ The *Wajh-i dīn* (*The Countenance of Religion*) is a sophisticated account of Ismaili doctrines in which Nāṣir presents a detailed analysis of topics such as the Imamate, spiritual cycles of time, and a depiction of the creative icons. In this text he declares the sacred position of intelligence and knowledge as second to none but God. For him pure knowledge (*'ilm-i maḥḍ*) is both a command (*amr*) and the mercy (*rahmat*) of God. Consequently, the more a person acquires knowledge, the more he or she becomes proximate to God. The entire cosmos, according to Nāṣir Khusraw, is knowable in terms of whether it is apparent (*zāhir*) or hidden (*bāṭin*). The apparent is received through the external senses, while the hidden insights about topics such as the intelligibles, the nature of human life, and the generation of the contingent world from the eternal or atemporal, are available to us through intelligence and the knowledge-sciences. Wisdom is a divine gift which makes the human being a creator, like an oyster that

produces pearls out of rain water, or a silk-worm that turns the leaves of a mulberry tree into silk. A large portion of the text is devoted to the intellectual and spiritual significance of the pillars of Islam and religious rituals. For example, Nāṣir Khusraw distinguishes between the physical and spiritual senses of the *jihād*, and studies the affinity between prayer and pilgrimage. His aim is to present what he considers to be true Islam – that is, a reasonable and rational religion which accepts the exigencies of this world and looks forward to the promises of the next.

The *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn* (*A Synthesis of the Two Wisdoms*) is another important work in which Nāṣir Khusraw seeks to harmonize religious and philosophical themes of major importance, such as the nature of unity, universals and particulars, Aristotle's classification of four types of expressions, the *cogito*, seven layers of light, and so on. This book is an essential reference work on the contextual meanings of the philosophical and theological vocabulary of the Ismailis. Nāṣir Khusraw's most extensive philosophical text is the *Zād al-musāfirīn* (*The Travelers' Provisions*), which contains an elaborate treatment of topics such as: knowledge and its sources; the generation of the cosmos; the nature of prime matter, motion, the soul, time, place, and composite bodies; ten proofs for the existence of the Maker and why God did not create the world earlier; the holy book and the sayings of the Prophet; human existence, the relationship of soul and body, and an analysis of pleasures; the coming and departure of persons to and from the world; as well as a theodicy of reward and punishment. Our present text, the *Gushāyish wa rahāyish*, is a smaller independent work on philosophical theology that deals with certain topics treated in the *Zād al-musāfirīn* without being a summary of the latter. As such, it is a very useful introduction to the philosophical thought of Nāṣir Khusraw.

Organization of the Text

The *Gushāyish wa rahāyish* constitutes Nāṣir Khusraw's responses to a series of thirty inquiries on philosophical and theological topics put to him, presumably by a member of the Ismaili *da'wa* whose identity remains unknown. His discussion of these topics can be organized conveniently under the following headings: (a) chapters 1–5 begin with an analysis of a cosmogony dealing with the origination of the generated from the eternal, with a consideration of temporal 'physical' and 'non-physical' issues; (b) chapters 6–11 examine the meaning of 'existent,' 'not-being,' and the 'mind-soul problem'; (c) chapters 12–20 explore the physics of certain material phenomena; (d) chapters 21–25 are concerned with salient topics of philosophical theology, such as the question of the Qur'ān being created or eternal, the Divine Word, and the Unity of God; (e) and finally, chapters 26–30 focus on issues of theodicy related to free-will, determinism, and the good life.

As explained in detail in the next section, the text outlines a particular Ismaili cosmology according to which the world is originated by the Divine Word or Command through the Universal Intellect (or Intelligence) and the Universal Soul. Salvation is achieved by means of a hermeneutic return (*ta'wīl*) to the spiritual origin (*aṣl, arche*) of the self, via knowledge as related to the Intellect. While the author does not directly mention the Sunnī position, in chapter 21 on the status of the Qur'ān, he refers to them politely as 'the people of tradition and community'. Sometimes he departs from standard medieval formulations, as indicated in the fourth inquiry where he implies the faculty of nutrition (*khwīranda*) as a mark of an animal, which is different from the peripatetic tripartite classification of the soul (vegetative, animal, and rational) according to the faculties of nutrition, sense perception, and intelligence. Occasionally he replicates an argument from another text, as for example his refutation of the doctrine that the soul is a harmony of the elements in chapter 8 of this text, which is a summary of the same topic in the seventh chapter of the *Zād al-musāfirīn*.

Nāṣir Khusraw and Greek Philosophy

As Farhad Daftary states, 'Ismā'īlī Neoplatonic cosmology came to be generally advocated in its essentials by Fāṭimid authors, including Nāṣir Khusraw, who refined and elaborated various aspects of it in his own metaphysical system.'¹⁹ In this section we shall examine the specifics of how Nāṣir's views embody some – but not all – elements of the Neoplatonic system. For example, he holds to the Neoplatonic creative order of the One to the Intellect, the Soul, and the individual souls, with some major modifications. In the Neoplatonic system, the Intellect and the Soul are generated from the One by a process of emanation, whereas for Nāṣir Khusraw these are originated *ex nihilo* through the Divine Word which is intermediary between God and the Universal Intellect. While in many passages Plotinus takes matter as a mere icon of the lower perspectives of the Soul, Nāṣir Khusraw follows the model of the Empedoclean elements of fire (hot and dry), air (hot and wet), water (cold and wet), and earth (cold and dry). Plotinus rejected the Aristotelian categories, while Nāṣir uses them to define the individual soul as a substance (*jawhar*) which integrates opposite elements due to the power that God has bestowed on it.

In addition, for Nāṣir Khusraw, time in its primary sense is a measure of motion, as it is for Aristotle in his *Physics* (219b1–2). Plotinus' doctrine of time is complex and its exposition beyond the scope of this essay, but he states variously in *The Enneads* that the World Soul generates time (vi.4.15–17), individual souls make time (iii.7.11–12; iii.11.18), and that time is an entity imperceptible in itself (iii.7.12, 25–33).²⁰ Nāṣir Khusraw is very much aware of the various theories on time, as is evident from his discussion of this topic in the tenth chapter of the *Zād al-musāfirin*. Here, he rejects the views of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī and others that time is a substance. He argues that if time were a simple substance, then it would not be divisible; moreover, if time were a substance, it would be impossible for it to pass from an existent entity into no-thing, since the time that has passed no longer exists.²¹

Third, unlike Plotinus' shunning of the body, Nāṣir Khusraw regards the body as an indispensable icon and instrument of spiritual salvation, that is salvation prescribed according to the religious law established by the Prophet. He classifies five levels of ethical balances of spiritual reward and punishment which are isomorphic with the five mathematical balances and measures assigned to bodies. Also the scale in which gold and silver are measured and balanced corresponds to the measure and the balance of the Universal Soul. For him, the Universal Soul is the maker of the world which it does by using the six entities, that is, the heavenly sphere, space, time, motion, the elements, and the planets.

One cannot label Nāṣir Khusraw as an Aristotelian, for the entire concept of the soul's return is absent in Aristotelian philosophy. According to Aristotle, the Ultimate Being or First Mover is a substance, whereas Nāṣir agrees with Ibn Sīnā and Plotinus that the Ultimate Being or God is not a substance. While Aristotle holds on to co-eternity, Nāṣir like Ibn Sīnā and Plotinus maintains the temporal nature of creation. Nor is he a follower of Ibn Sīnā for whom God is the Necessary Existent, whereas Nāṣir places God above the Necessary Existent. For Ibn Sīnā, an existent is either a concatenation of necessity with being (thus the Necessary Existent) or a contingent entity which has a cause, but Nāṣir specifies existents in term of time, upholding that only entities in present time exist.

On God, Being, Time and Existence

Nāṣir Khusraw presents two remarkable ontological doctrines in this work. One is a radical development of the Neoplatonic idea that existence (*ḥastī*) cannot be attributed to God and that, unlike the Avicennian tradition, the Necessary Existent is the Universal Intellect and not the Ultimate Being analogous to the God of monotheism. The other is an original doctrine that specifies existence in terms of the 'present time'.

Let us investigate these doctrines in their historical settings. Graeco-Islamic ontology makes a sharp distinction between

the two central notions of being and existent. Being applies to any meaningful concept including an impossibility (such as a round square), a contingency which may be realized (such as Socrates) or not realized (a dragon), or the Necessary Being. The term 'existent' is reserved for actual entities, that is, contingent entities which are realized by an agent. The character of an entire metaphysical system is affected by its specifications of being and existent. Plato's universe is depicted in many different ways. If one emphasizes the *Republic* over *Timaeus* and *The Sophist*, the universe is depicted in a model of a divided line in which there is a continuum of ontic and epistemic hierarchies. The Ultimate Being of this version of the Platonic model is the Form of the Good which is a supra-being or beyond being (*Republic*, 509B) and a source of all other entities. But all forms as such are existents and they are the only permanent existents. For Aristotle, 'the first teacher' of the Muslim Peripatetics, being falls into the categories of substance and accidents. Paradigm cases of accidents are quantity, quality, relation, place, and time. According to Aristotle, an accident is realized only by the mediacy of a first substance; for example the quality 'red' is realized only when it applies to a flower or an apple. Aristotle's ultimate entity is the non-material, non-moveable, non-sensible substance which is co-eternal with the rest of the world, being its first mover. For Ibn Sīnā, being and its modalities of necessity, contingency, and impossibility are the two *a priori* notions of the mind. Once we conceive the concatenation of necessity (*wājib*) with being (*wujūd*), by the second ontological argument the reality of the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) is implied, because a necessary being necessarily exists; then the emanation of other existents are implied from it by its feature of being the supra-perfect (*fawq al-tamām*).

Nāṣir Khusraw has a different theory. His cosmology includes God, the Word (*kalīma*) or Command of God (*amr-i bārī*), and two kinds of existents, the necessary and the contingent. The Command of God is the Absolute Existent, under which there is the Necessary Existent, the Universal Intellect, followed by

the Contingent Existent, the Universal Soul, which is the actual maker (*ṣāni* ') of the world of contingent existents. God is not an existent and His essence is above the attribution of an entity with an opposition; since not-being is the opposite of being an existent, neither existence nor non-existence can be attributed to God. The model closest to Nāṣir Khusraw's cosmogony is the Neoplatonic system as expressed by Plotinus and Proclus, according to which the One is *hyperousia* (*Enneads*, vi. 9, 3 and 5; *The Elements of Theology*, proposition 20) which may be translated either as supra-existent or beyond-existent.²² Thus, our text warrants that Nāṣir Khusraw rejects the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Avicennian models and accepts the Neoplatonic. However, one should not hold him to be the follower of Plotinus or Proclus for the following reason: Nāṣir Khusraw notes that the expression 'is' is applicable only to that which endures at the present time. A full elaboration of this doctrine is found in the *Zād al-musāfirīn* (pp. 354–64), where he clarifies that just as the statement 'x existed' or 'x was' means that there was a past in which x's state (*hāl*) was realized (*hāsil gasht*), while the statement 'x exists' or 'x is' applies to a state of an entity as it endures today, in a similar manner the existence of the universe rests (*muta 'allaq*) on the particular time which is 'now' (*aknūn*).²³

An important problem in monotheistic systems, in which God is a transcendent entity, is to clarify the relation between the eternal and the generated. Nāṣir Khusraw affirms that there is no need to postulate a time between the phase when the contingent was not generated and the phase when the contingent became generated, because in this context time is not a self-existent entity. Time has neither a beginning nor an end, and consequently the question of 'whether or not God created in time' implies a categorical mistake as time is a constituent of other entities and not an independent entity. His view is analogous to Immanuel Kant's phenomenological sense of time, namely that it is a transcendental condition of having an experience of any entity. For Nāṣir Khusraw time is a phenomenological feature of the conceptual imagination (*wahm*).²⁴ In the *Zād al-musāfirīn*, he uses time to make a dis-

inction between concrete sensibles and abstract categories, noting that whereas the sensibles are in time, categories such as quantities, qualities, and relations are not in time. But he is careful not to identify time with the essence of an entity, since being in time is a condition of the life of an entity, while the essence (*dhāt*) of an entity relates to the definition of an entity.²⁵

Besides Nāṣir Khusraw, two other philosophers have placed the priority of time in their ontology. In the Islamic tradition, we may note Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī (Mullā Ṣadrā) who considered time as a substantial and necessary constituent of existents.²⁶ Mullā Ṣadrā's theory of time escapes the criticism of Nāṣir Khusraw because for the former time is not a self-independent entity but a necessary constituent of other existents. For example, it is not logically possible that there could be a world in which only time exists, but any world of objects must necessarily include the temporal dimensions of those objects. The other is Martin Heidegger for whom the primary metaphysical notion is *Dasein*, meaning 'being present in the world'.²⁷ Neither of these doctrines is explicitly equivalent to that of Nāṣir Khusraw. For a fuller explanation of his view of time-experience, one needs first to proceed in the manner of Henry Corbin's analysis of the Ismaili notion of time and then take the concept of *ta'wīl* or hermeneutic return in a phenomenological sense.²⁸ The full notion of Ismaili time brings us to a Ghazālian view of mystical virtues where phenomenological presence is mixed with *dhikr* and other concepts in intentional phenomenology.²⁹ Both al-Ghazālī and some mystics view active normative epistemic processes as an imitation of God's love, command (*amr*), and grace (*karāma*). Accordingly, ultimate realities are not substances nor external processes but intentional, inner vectors of the spiritual will. One of the most sophisticated notions in these proposed sets of inner (*bāṭin*) mystical phenomenological concepts is the notion of *ta'wīl*. Moved by an ethos similar to that which led the ancient Egyptians to create their pyramids as a gesture towards the descent of the Sun-God's love to the world, Nāṣir

Khusraw formulates the process of *ta'wīl* as a move towards the revelation-descent (*tanzīl*) of God.

Theodicy, Ethics and Salvation

For Nāṣir Khusraw, the physical bodies in this world are symbols, icons, and mediator figures in order to be used for their spiritual significance. For example, the so-called *ṣirāṭ* physically and externally depicts a bridge over Hell, which is thinner than a hair and sharper than the edge of a sword. But intentionally, it is a moral path of choosing virtue and goodness since man is a being between angelicity and animality. Both angels and animals are determined in their acts and, thus, not rewarded or punished. In contrast, since human beings are free and they can use their divinely bestowed intellect and sense of shame-modesty (*sharm*), their acts take moral significance and they have to reckon with the consequences of their actions. This Ismaili doctrine is in fact an Islamic agenda against pure asceticism which considers the body to be evil instead of an icon for spirituality. The fundamental formula for human salvation, for crossing the *ṣirāṭ* in particular and attaining bliss in general, is achieved through knowledge (*dānish*). There are two senses of knowledge, the macro theoretical one, and the practical one which is the implementation of that knowledge through receiving the archetypal and iconic expressions of the religious laws specified by the Prophet, and a hermeneutic return to the Intellect which is our primordial origin. Knowledge allows us to transform our ethical being from animality to angelicity. Faith is the psychic state between fear and hope, but the actual saviour is knowledge. Allegorically, the creative process is a descent which transforms the spiritually subtle into the earthly dense; it is the Universal Soul which embodies the subtle knowledge in the dense cosmos; a part of this task has been transmitted to the Prophet who delivers the knowledge in the form of religious expressions. The hermeneutic return or ascent is analogous to the transformation of the earthly dense

into the spiritually subtle element; that is, by imitating the Universal Soul, one can become its embodiment.

Conclusion

Pedagogically, the popular misunderstanding of the Ismaili intellectual tradition can be divided into four areas of misinformation. The first common mistake has been brought to our attention by recent scholars: it concerns the Crusader type of thinking which perceives the Ismailis in terms of an 'order of assassins' led by an 'Old Man of the Mountain'.³⁰ The second kind of misinformation is found in the works of the opponents of the Ismailis, such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya, who misinterpreted and misrepresented their doctrines as 'heretical'. The third is that of the historians of Ismaili thought who attempt to minimize the originality of their views by labeling them as Muslim Neoplatonists, as if the Ismailis merely copied the works of past philosophers and mixed their axioms with their own contingent theses. Finally, the fourth mistake is the tendency to present Ismaili doctrines as sectarian variations of certain other religious traditions. Indeed, the opposite is true: the significance of the Ismailis lies, among other things, in their global and archetypal visions such as that of hermeneutic knowledge as the path to salvation.

We hope that this text and the introduction to it will shed light on two themes in particular: first, that the Ismaili theories are not just concatenations of Greek sources but contain original creative ideas, both in phenomenological method and content; second, that it is a serious mistake to view the Ismaili vision as a doctrine peculiar to the Ismaili experience and to study their works simply to emphasize their differences from other creeds – this would be like inspecting a mirror for its metallic and glass parts instead of the image reflected in it. The value and beauty of the Ismaili contribution lies in the archetypal message of a universal model of spiritual therapy; in their recognition of the primacy of knowledge, the knowledge that true happiness lies in the intentional dimension

(*bāṭin*) and a non-alienating return to the primordial origin (*ta'wīl*); and finally in the genius of their prescription of an individuation–self-realization process in which the Jungian mediator figure is the science of nature and a spiritual aesthetics of physical icons. One wonders why, in spite of persecution and misrepresentation, the Ismaili tradition has produced great thinkers and persisted in its intellectual vigour. One reason may be the universality of its creative message as an answer to alienation, a problem expressed in legends and world literature, from the story of Jacob and his brothers to the philosophies of Marx and Sartre. In sum, the Ismailis have provided humanity with a vision of a cosmos in which alienation cannot be formulated, because the physical–ephemeral and the spiritual–eternal are interrelated by an iconic relationship, and the human world is harmonized through a hermeneutic phenomenology.

The Institute of Ismaili Studies should be commended for having produced this work. Unless such primary texts are made available, there is no way to analyze their doctrines and to evaluate their import. Translation of technical medieval Persian and Arabic texts into philosophically clear English is a very difficult task. The world of scholarship in Islamic studies owes Faquir Muhammad Hunzai and Kutub Kassam a great debt of appreciation for their labour in editing and translating Nāṣir Khusraw's *Gushāyish wa rahāyish*.

Notes

1 For the most comprehensive survey of the Ismailis, see Farhad Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990); for the most extensive bibliography, see Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā'īlī Literature* (Malibu, Calif., 1977).

2 See Richard C. Taylor, 'A Critical Analysis of the Structure of the *Kalām fī Maḥz al-khair* (Liber de causis)' in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany, 1992), pp.11–40.

3 Maḍmūd Shabistārī, 'Sa'ādāt-nāma,' in *Majmū'a-yi āthār-i Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistārī* (Tehran, 1371/1992), p. 186.

- 4 Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cleveland and New York, 1965), pp. 1, 14, 19 *et passim*.
- 5 See Paul Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 21–2, for Nāṣir Khusraw's debt to al-Sijistānī.
- 6 *Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mu'in (Tehran–Paris, 1953), pp. 73–80; *Zād al-musāfirīn*, ed. M. Badhl al-Raḥmān (Berlin, 1923), pp. 58–68.
- 7 Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York and London, 1970), pp. 46, 124 and 130, and his *Ethical Theories in Islam* (Leiden, 1991).
- 8 Sa'id Nafisī, 'Persian Literature,' in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Weisbaden, 1996), vol. 2, p. 1050.
- 9 Jan Rypka, *A History of Persian Literature* (Dordrecht, 1968), p. 185.
- 10 Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge, 1928), vol. 2, p. 200.
- 11 Paul E. Walker, *Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī: Intellectual Missionary* (London and New York, 1996), p. 107.
- 12 Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, tr. P. Sherrard (London, 1986), p. 134n.7. Corbin points out that Nāṣir Khusraw's expression, 'Khudā shudan', is a paradigm case of the unification of soul and God (Ibid., p. 147). Corbin relates Nāṣir's doctrine of the ascent of the soul as actualization of an angelic potentiality to the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (Ibid., p. 192), and his doctrine of time to Proclus (Ibid., p. 182). In *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, tr. R. Manheim and J. Morris (London, 1983), pp. 30–4, Corbin presents Nāṣir Khusraw as a major Ismaili thinker on the topic of eternity of time against Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī's view that time is a substantial reality. In his *History of Philosophy*, tr. L. Sherrard (London and New York, 1993), p. 139, Corbin uses Nāṣir's views on matter and nature as the paradigm case of Ismaili physics.
- 13 Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs*, p. 215.
- 14 See his *Dīwān*, ed. M. Mīnuvī and M. Muḥaqqiq (Tehran, 1353/1974).
- 15 *Safar-nāma*, ed. M. Dabīr Siyāqī (Tehran, 1356/1977); English tr. W. M. Thackston, Jr, *Nāṣir-e Khosraw's Book of Travels (Safarnāma)* (Albany, N.Y., 1986).
- 16 *Wajh-i dīn*, ed. Gholam Reza Aavani (Tehran, 1977).
- 17 *Six Chapters or Shish fasl*, ed. and tr. W. Ivanow (Leiden, 1949).
- 18 *Khwān al-ikhwān*, ed. Y. al-Khashahāb (Cairo, 1940).
- 19 Daftary, *The Ismā'īlīs*, p. 245.

20 See Steven K. Strange, 'Plotinus on the Nature of Eternity and Time,' in *Aristotle in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lawrence P. Schrenck (Washington, D.C., 1994), pp. 22–56.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 110–28.

22 See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1966–1988), vols. 1–7; and Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, tr. E. R. Dodd (London, 1964).

23 *Zād al-musāfirin*, pp. 354, 484.

24 See Parviz Morewedge, *Essays in Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oneonta, N.Y., 1995), pp. 124–59. This essay profers an interpretation of *wahm* as a prehensive imagination.

25 *Zād al-musāfirin*, pp. 117–18.

26 *The Metaphysics of Mulla Sadra*, tr. Parviz Morewedge (New York, 1991).

27 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquairre and E. Robinson (New York and Evanston, 1962), pp. 389–96.

28 Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation*, pp. 38–41, 100, 134–8 *et passim*, and his *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, pp. 30, 76, 88, 90, 97, *et passim*.

29 Parviz Morewedge, 'Theology,' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York, 1995), vol. 4, pp. 214–24.

30 See F. Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (London, 1994).