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• F O U R •

*The Philosopher-Prophet in
Avicenna's Political Philosophy*

James W. Morris

With time, human beings tend to take miracles for granted. Perhaps the most lasting and public of all miracles, those to which Islamic philosophers devoted so much of their reflections, were the political achievements of the prophets: how otherwise obscure figures like Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad came to shape the thoughts and actions of so much of civilized humanity. Within the high culture of Islamic civilization, the thought and writings of an itinerant Persian doctor and court administrator we know as Avicenna (370/980–428/1037) came to play a similarly central role: for almost a millenium, each of the traditions of Islamic thought claiming a wider, universal human validity has appealed either directly to his works or to logical and metaphysical disciplines whose Islamic forms were directly grounded in them.

This study considers some of the central philosophic underpinnings of that achievement. Starting with a summary of Avicenna's historical and intellectual setting and the competing traditions that grew out of his work, it then outlines the basic features of his philosophic and literary strategy for the central

political issue of the authority to interpret the prophetic legacy. Next, his treatment of the "two faces" of prophecy and the role political philosophy plays in uniting them is examined, as is what he calls prophecy's three "distinctive characteristics" and the political miracles in which they are conjoined. The conclusion suggests the many problems posed by the far-reaching historical impact—and ongoing philosophic import—of Avicenna's creative Islamic application of his theory of prophecy.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The fame in medieval European thought and modern scholarship of Islamicate philosophers like al-Fārābī (257/870–339/950), Averroes (520/1126–595/1198), and Maimonides (530/1135–602/1204)—to mention only the most familiar names—has tended to obscure the very different place of philosophic studies in relation to other forms of Islamic thought before and after Avicenna and the fundamental shift for which he was largely responsible. Leaving the works of al-Fārābī aside for a moment, the wider classical heritage of philosophic and scientific investigation was present to Avicenna in four traditions, each with differing relations to the Arabic religious sciences and their representatives.

The first group, represented by such prominent contemporary writers as Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) and al-ʿĀmirī (d. 381/991), and connected with the earlier philosophic school of al-Kindī, was largely devoted to a courtly, literary expression that focused on the ethical teachings of earlier philosophers and sages and their congruence with what were widely viewed as similar ethical teachings of Islam. After Avicenna's time, this type of writing became diluted and lost almost all awareness of any separate philosophic discipline with its own demands and critical per-

spectives. Avicenna's own attitude toward this tradition is most evident in his radical refusal either to reduce the goal of philosophic inquiry to ethics or to identify ethics with the standpoint of Islamic law or nascent Sufi disciplines.

A second alternative, very much a part of Avicenna's family background and youthful training, was the tradition of earlier Ismaili Shiite philosopher-theologians, who had deployed the resources of the Hellenistic philosophic traditions to justify and defend the political and wider soteriological claims of a series of imams claiming rightful rulership over the Muslim community. Their dialectical use—or abuse—of philosophic tools to support claims to a prophetic wisdom and authority lying beyond ordinary human capacities resembled the way later kalam theology used Avicenna's logic and metaphysics, as discussed below. Indeed, Avicenna's theory of intellectual prophecy is largely designed to counter that dangerous misunderstanding of philosophy as simply a handmaiden to some higher revealed wisdom, while at the same time using the popular appeal of such reasoning to draw a wider audience to the study of philosophy.

The third contemporary group—and the frequent rhetorical target of Avicenna's glorification of his own "Eastern Wisdom" (*ḥikmah mashriqiyyah*)—were the scholastic commentators of Aristotle, heirs to a longstanding Hellenistic tradition (partially shared by al-Fārābī) in the older intellectual center of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. The political dimensions and aims of Avicenna's complex—and highly problematic—strategy of "Islamicization" of philosophic discourse outlined below appear most clearly in contrast to the marginalization and eventual disappearance in the Muslim East of that school of Aristotelians (a number of them Christian) who persevered in the strict separation of philosophic and religious discourse.

A fourth, and very real, alternative for Avicenna was exem-

plified in the life of his correspondent and contemporary, the scientist and polymath al-Bīrūnī (362/973–440/1048), who happily pursued his scientific interests under the benevolent patronage of the same zealous Sunni warlord, Maḥmūd of Ghazna (361/971–421/1030), whose support Avicenna so carefully avoided. Judging from his surviving writings, al-Bīrūnī seems to have been unconcerned with the wider political role of philosophic perfection in an Islamic community. Nothing can bring out more dramatically the political intentions and framework of Avicenna's writing on both philosophic and religious topics and its multiple rhetorical dimensions than this contrast with the writing and activities of al-Bīrūnī.

Within the broader historical and institutional developments of Avicenna's time, it is evident that each of these alternative visions of philosophy's place in the Islamic world faced daunting practical and political obstacles. Those developments included the failure of Shiite hopes of revolutionary reform, the growing status of Islam as the majority religion of all social groups, the radical decentralization of political authority, the concomitant increasingly pan-Islamic institutionalization of common "theologies" (whether *kalām* or *uṣūl al-fiqh*) justifying the practices and assumptions of the legal schools, and the spread of different forms of popular piety later termed Sufism. In the former Abbasid lands, the situation of philosophical studies, both in terms of conceivable political options and in terms of the competing claims of different Islamic religious sciences, was entirely different from that prevailing in al-Fārābī's time. And each of those alternative philosophic traditions became increasingly marginalized, often to the point of disappearance.

In contrast, the measure of Avicenna's political insight and powerful rhetoric in that situation is that within a generation after his death, by the time of the famous jurist-theologian and Sufi writer Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (450/1058–505/1111), his

own philosophic writings had become the central focus of intellectual discourse throughout the Eastern Islamic world. The attraction of Avicenna's philosophical account of the nature of prophecy and revelation—and its implicit claims concerning the true understanding and aims of Islam—had become so compelling that the two major competing intellectual and practical perspectives, which we may very loosely call Kalam and Sufism, were obliged to take over (in ways largely pioneered by al-Ghazālī) many of the logical tools, writings, and metaphysical concepts of the Avicennan corpus. The short-lived renaissance in late twelfth-century Muslim Spain and Morocco of a much more rigorously Aristotelian version of Islamic philosophy highly critical of Avicenna's theological compromises or innovations is unthinkable without the wider popular spread (again largely through al-Ghazālī) of the by then competing concepts of Avicenna's prophetic philosophy. Even the occasional vehement complaints of an Ibn Taymiyyah (661/1263–728/1328) had little immediate effect on those contrasting scholastic versions of his thought.¹

Avicenna's ideas (either through his writings or through summaries and manuals of his metaphysics and logic) remained at the center of the curricula of the advanced religious schools, both Sunni and Shiite, throughout the Islamic world until the nineteenth century. During this whole period, beginning no later than the time of al-Ghazālī, the study of Avicenna's writings was divided among three interpretative tendencies. The first, and the only one to remain faithful to the logical and scientific

1. For Ibn Taymiyyah's pointed criticisms of Avicenna's artful "montage" (*tarkīb*) of philosophic themes and Islamic language and symbolism, in the larger context of his polemic against al-Ghazālī's "Book of Samā' and Ecstasy" (chap. 18) in the *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and the Sufi and popular religious practices it justified, see J. Michot's translation of, and commentary on, several treatises by Ibn Taymiyyah in *Livre de l'audition et de la danse* (Paris: Vrin, 1990).

focuses and wider political concerns of Avicenna's own writing, was the Peripatetic (*mashshā'ī*) school most eminently represented by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (597/1201–672/1274). Al-Ṭūsī personifies the creative adaptation of Avicenna's understanding of political philosophy in his wider support and personal pursuit of scientific endeavor, his adaptation of that perspective to radically shifting political circumstances and theological milieus, and his adamant defense of Avicenna's heritage against what he saw as its widespread theological and mystical abuse.²

The other two intellectual currents were the later forms of Kalam, most often derived from the prolific theological writings of al-Ṭūsī's nemesis, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (544/1149–606/1209), and a wide range of metaphysical systems associated with various later schools of Islamic mysticism. Among the theologians, al-Rāzī and a host of later imitators, following up on the pioneering efforts of al-Ghazālī (and to a great extent mirroring the use of philosophy by earlier Ismaili writers), stripped away and utilized in isolation the logical and metaphysical concepts in Avicenna's works that were helpful in supporting their versions of Islamic theology or in explaining the epistemological presuppositions of the schools of Islamic law. As al-Ṭūsī and his followers vehemently objected, such a theologizing and piecemeal approach to Avicenna—which eventually became preponderant throughout much of the madrasah

2. Unfortunately, the many extant studies of al-Ṭūsī (whether in Western languages or in Persian and Arabic) tend to focus on narrower subjects—e.g., his astronomical endeavors, Ismaili Shiite writings, role in Imami Shiite kalam, political functions (under the Mongols and earlier), and relations with al-Qūnawī (and other disciples)—without indicating the way these writings and activities are tied to his lifelong devotion to the study and teaching of Avicenna's philosophy and its political applications. See the discussion and references in my "Ibn Khaldūn's Critique of Sufism," forthcoming in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy: A Historical Journal* 2 (1992).

system—entirely eliminated the scientific and philosophic concerns and the wider political implications so central to Avicenna's project, while ignoring his very problematic use of Islamic rhetoric.

The range of Islamic mystics who later came to appeal to his metaphysics and cosmology as a rational explanation of their visions or a justification of their spiritual practices was even more extensive. Nonetheless, the Muslim authors most involved in this mystical appropriation of selected aspects of Avicenna's philosophic work—especially al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī (549/1155–587/1191), and Ibn 'Arabī's influential commentator, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 672/1274), as well as later Shiite figures like Mullā Ṣadrā (980/1571–1050/1640)—insisted explicitly (and in a manner quite critical of Avicenna) that their key spiritual insights into the intentions of the prophets went considerably beyond the limited intellectual results of the Peripatetics and that their realization was inseparably linked to highly demanding individual processes of spiritual purification and religious devotion opposed to everything known about Avicenna's moral habits and lifelong practical concerns.³

So it is not surprising that modern interpreters who have ventured beyond the (very different) Latin Avicenna have tended to reflect one or the other of these competing strands of later Islamic thought. The following interpretation of his discussions of prophecy, while focusing on the massive, but largely unacknowledged influence of al-Fārābī's political thought, also draws from the relatively neglected commentaries of al-Ṭūsī, which

3. See my historical survey of these later uses of Avicenna in "Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106 (1986): 733–756, and 107 (1987): 101–120, especially the discussion of the correspondence between al-Qūnawī and al-Ṭūsī in the first section. More detailed illustrations, with extensive translated material, can also be found in the important study by J. Michot cited in note 6 below.

provide many helpful illustrations of the subsequent practical application of Avicenna's political intentions.

INTERPRETATION AND AUTHORITY: AVICENNA'S STRATEGY

The key to Avicenna's creative adaptation of political philosophy to the Islamic society of his day was his treatment of prophecy, particularly his brief, puzzling assertions concerning the existence of an intellectual inspiration underlying the cognitive aspects of prophetic revelation. They have often been taken out of context to represent a pious description or psychological theory applicable to, and justifying the popular belief in, the perfection of the prophecy of Muhammad and other respected messengers. And Avicenna doubtlessly wanted most readers to take them in this sense.

Few commentators have noted the far-reaching consequences of the understanding and interpretation of prophecy flowing from a careful investigation of what Avicenna actually says, taken in the broader context of his philosophic system. Within that system, his remarks imply that the truth or falsity and intended meaning of any prophetic utterance—at least regarding descriptions of reality, since commandments and prohibitions pose a more difficult problem—can be adequately judged only by the accomplished philosopher possessing demonstrative knowledge of the realities underlying those symbols. As striking as that claim is, Avicenna must have realized it was one few readers would test for themselves. For such intended meanings would be visible only to those thoroughly acquainted with logic; aware of the fundamental distinction between the multiplicity of human beliefs and opinions (and their manifold functions) and what can be demonstrated to be true; sufficiently learned in philosophy to make the necessary connection between these

brief allusions and related topics in epistemology, ontology, and cosmology; able to discern the full weight of what Avicenna leaves out and fails to mention or clarify; in short, to truly philosophic readers with the nature and readiness to devote their lives to such studies.

To save less ambitious readers such trouble, Avicenna wrote a number of highly influential shorter treatises offering a sort of shorthand scientific interpretation of familiar symbols in Islamic scriptures—showing how Quranic cosmology, for example, corresponded to the reality of things as demonstrated through his own philosophic writings. Many such correspondences between central Islamic religious symbols and his own philosophic system—e.g., the nature of the angels, the body's afterlife, proofs of divine unity, and our knowledge of God—concern points where earlier philosophers, especially students of Aristotle, had been reluctant to insist on the ability of philosophy to prove such prophetically established realities.

Now it is no secret to the observer of any polity grounded in reverence for the laws and teachings of a prophetic founder that attempts at directing the orientation or transformation of that polity must frequently take the form of interpretations of the prophet's legacy. Islamic history, whether at the level of political and ideological movements or in the actual development of the various Islamic sciences, offers abundant and dramatic illustrations of struggles to establish a particular interpretation as authoritative, sometimes with revolutionary consequences. From this perspective, and keeping in mind the unique historical circumstances discussed above, Avicenna's reformulation and practical application of political philosophy in such particularly Islamic terms may not reflect either a greater realism (which modern commentators have sometimes contrasted with al-Fārābī's apparent idealism)⁴ or a rejection of the universal principles

4. See, for example, M. Galston's "Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Po-

and considerations more visibly treated in al-Fārābī's political works. His treatment of the prophet as "inspired philosopher" contains the potential for significant reinterpretations of the prophetic legacy, depending on how one would then understand the contents and intentions of philosophy.

However, to make those political dimensions of his theory about the prophet-philosopher evident to potential philosophers and historically effective, Avicenna had to adopt two apparently conflicting rhetorical strategies. (The three historically conflicting interpretations of his writings outlined above flow from different readings of those rhetorical devices.) On the one hand, he had to make it apparent to a few careful and reflective readers (and especially to his disciples) that the contribution of philosophy to understanding the practical and the theoretical intentions of the Prophet was essential and went beyond what was provided by existing or competing schools of interpretation. Failing that, and seen as simply providing further theological demonstrations or justification of existing authoritative modes of interpretation (and praxis), the particular contributions of philosophy would be rejected or ignored in favor of those other Islamic alternatives.

This was, in fact, the eventual fate of ethical thinkers like Miskawayh and indicates how both Kalam theologians and Sufis later attempted to appropriate Avicenna's writings and concepts for their own ends. On the other hand, unless his theories of prophecy were accepted as a persuasive description⁵

litical Philosophy," *The Review of Politics*, 41 (1979): 561–577, as well as two related discussions of Avicenna's ethics by C. Butterworth cited in note 9 below.

5. The best example of this sort of rhetoric is the description of the prophetic "lawgiver" (*sānn*) and his succession at the end of the *Shifā'* (*Metaphysics* bk. 10, chaps. 2–5), with its parallels to the life and mission of Muhammad. See the English translation (unfortunately, without commentary) by

of existing views by a larger cross-section of Muslim intellectuals, the understanding of the philosophers would remain without any wider impact or audience in that community. One's prophet could be seen as a philosopher only by those first willing to envisage that possibility. And Avicenna, as we have already indicated (and as philosophic critics like Averroes even more heatedly observed), devotes a remarkable amount of time and energy, both in his many short popular treatises and in the more accessible condensed versions of his systematic philosophy, to convincing his public of the essential accord between their religious beliefs and practices and the conclusions of his philosophy. As outlined in the preceding section, the success of that effort can hardly be disputed.

Given this success, proponents of alternative understandings of the prophetic legacy (whether practical or theoretical), who recognized the implicit authority Avicenna's theory imparted to the philosophic interpreters of prophecy, found themselves in an embarrassing situation. They could either openly attack his philosophy, in which case they would appear to be doubting the supreme rationality of their prophet's inspired knowledge—and those, like Ibn Taymiyyah, bold enough to criticize this assumption openly were few—or they could philosophize. In this case, they were drawn into a debate largely on Avicenna's terms and, in some cases, even in his language and with texts of his choosing in which they had to bring out the implications of his theories for prophecy and religion, then justify their own disagreements and alternative conceptions. More important, discerning readers who, like al-Ghazālī, were initially attracted or puzzled by Avicenna's claims concerning the nature of prophecy and wished to grasp its implications for the proper understanding and interpretation of the prophetic legacy had to

M. Marmura, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. R. Lerner and M. Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 93–111.

begin with the study of theoretical philosophy as presented in his major works—above all, in the voluminous *Kitāb al-Shifā'* (*Book of Healing*). Only then would they be prepared to understand and interpret the prophet Avicenna had described.

Such readers would have to be extremely devoted and willing to “read between” not only lines, but often volumes of apparently unrelated material, for Avicenna scatters his rare explicit remarks about prophecy and related philosophic and practical sciences sparsely throughout the many volumes of the *Shifā'*. Moreover, he makes little effort to explain the internal connections between those disparate discussions or how readers should link them with the concrete issues of interpretation and understanding of Muhammad's teaching that arise at both the ethical and political level in any Islamic community. Given their practical importance—and the eagerness of competing interpretations of Islam to make them explicit—we may assume his silences and reticence are intentional and meant to speak.

The first, and most evocative, discussions of prophecy readers would encounter in the *Shifā'* are at the very beginning (in the *Madkhal* or Introduction of the *Logic*) and the very end (in the concluding chapters of the *Metaphysics*). Since those discussions of the relations between the practical and theoretical dimensions of prophecy raise essential issues underlying the alternative interpretations of Avicenna's own political philosophy, we may begin with them.

THE TWO FACES OF PROPHECY

Attentive readers of Avicenna's works touching on prophecy and religion cannot help but notice the recurrent distinction between religiously prescribed beliefs and actions, justified by their efficacy in promoting political or social aims, and religious beliefs or symbols corresponding to demonstrative truths estab-

lished by the philosophic sciences.⁶ This holds true for all his writing, both the more philosophic and universal books like the *Shifā'*, *al-Najāh*, and the *Ishārāt*, and the shorter treatises offering a philosophic interpretation of the wisdom underlying specifically Islamic beliefs and practices.

Moreover, in his longest, most comprehensive discussion of the prophetic lawgiver,⁷ Avicenna briefly distinguishes between two naturally different audiences for whom these two sorts of prophetic directives are intended: the "many" and the "few," the latter identified as "those who are prepared by their natural disposition for [philosophic] inquiry [*naẓar*]."⁸ Finally, he twice

6. For example, Avicenna constantly distinguishes between the philosophic truth of man's potential "intellectual bliss" and the religious *belief* in corporeal resurrection as an essential underpinning of popular adherence to the religious law. For the wider problems posed by such a distinction and their later interpretations, see J. Michot, *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination* (Louvain: Peeters, 1986).
7. Although the entire discussion of the "lawgiver" (*sānn*: a less common, religiously neutral term without any of the specifically religious connotations of *nabī*, "prophet" or *rasūl*, "messenger") in the *Shifā'*, *Metaphysics* bk. 10, is phrased so that most Muslim readers will apply it to Muhammad, critics like the theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī were quick to point out that the politics, practical wisdom, and laws Avicenna describes here do not seem restricted to prophetic communities or to the specific religious teachings and divine laws Muslim readers would ordinarily associate with prophecy. For an interesting illustration of al-Rāzī's point, see Roger Bacon's extended Catholic Christian reading of the same passages in the selections from his "Opus Maius: Moral Philosophy," in Lerner and Mahdi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 355–390.
8. See Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Shifā'*, *Ilāhiyyāt*, ed. G. Anawati and S. Zayid (Cairo: al-Hai'ah al-Āmmah li-Shu'ūn al-Maṭābī' al-Amīriyyah, 1960), bk. 10, chap. 2, 443:11–12. The other references to the few in book 10 are at 442:18, *al-qalīl minhum*, regarding the true understanding of the divine nature; 445:11–15, *al-khāṣṣah*, regarding the "reality of the Return"; and the concluding discussions of theoretical wisdom at the end of chap. 5, p. 455. Nothing is said of them or of their possible political role or specific function during the account of what "must" or "ought" to be

stresses that this much rarer theoretical wisdom (*ḥikmah nazariyyah*) is distinct from the practical wisdom embodied in the moral and civic virtues prescribed by the lawgiver for all citizens and intimately connected with human happiness, well-being, and attainment of perfection.⁹ Avicenna begins by enumerating the political and practical reasons for the lawgiver not to speak directly and in detail of such theoretical matters,¹⁰ but allows that "there is no harm if his speeches include symbols and allusions" encouraging the "naturally apt" to pursue "philosophic inquiry."

These fundamental distinctions and considerations are clearly reflected in the two sides of Avicenna's rhetorical strategy outlined in the preceding section. His writings about popular religious beliefs—including the so-called esoteric treatises, with their own creative symbols and allusions, and the puzzling *Ishārāt*—successfully imitated the sort of prophetic speeches just described and helped turn philosophically minded Muslim stu-

prescribed among the "general laws" (*sunan kulliyah*) establishing the city or household in chaps. 4 and 5. Avicenna only points out twice that their virtues are "other" than the generally prescribed moral and civic virtues concerning the public interests (*maṣāliḥ*) of "this world."

9. For a detailed summary of Avicenna's treatments of practical wisdom and the problems posed by its apparent separation from his accounts of man's theoretical or speculative perfection, see C. Butterworth, "Islamic Philosophy and Religious Ethics," in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* II (1983): 224–239, and "Medieval Islamic Philosophy and the Virtue of Ethics," in *Arabica* 34 (1987): 221–250, as well as Galston, "Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy."
10. The reasons he gives—the rarity of the necessary human aptitudes and the social disorders arising from disputes about theoretical issues among the untrained—were taken over and elaborated, often using the same illustrations of the nature of God's incorporeality and the afterlife, both by al-Ghazālī in the famous concluding chapter of his *Mizān al-'Amal* (translated and commented on in my "He who speaks does not know . . .": Some Remarks by Ghazālī," in *Studies in Mystical Literature* 5 [1985]: 1–20), and by Averroes in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* and the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*.

dents to the study of his scientific works, especially the *Shifā'*, for centuries to come.

Students acquainted with the works of al-Farābī will immediately recognize the fundamental importance of these basic distinctions, along with many related political assumptions, concepts, and rhetorical devices. But what is the curious reader to make of these distinctions—and the many problems they raise—simply by relying on the *Shifā'* and other works of Avicenna? To begin with, the term *nubuwwah* (loosely translated as prophecy) is used ambiguously to refer to at least two very different realities and activities.¹¹ The first sense, which seems to be the least descriptive and most innovative usage, is connected with human theoretical (*nazarī*) virtue. The reader is led to assume that this meaning will be adequately clarified in Avicenna's larger exposition of theoretical wisdom or philosophy, in the *Shifā'* and other scientific works. The second sense, apparently much closer to what would ordinarily be understood as the unique role of the divine lawgiving messenger¹² in the Islamic context, concerns the activities outlined in the final chapters of the *Shifā'*, *Metaphysics*. Presumably, the detailed exposition of that second subject and the possible relationships between these two different aspects of prophecy should be sought in the prac-

11. An ambiguity recognized by many of Avicenna's educated readers, since popular Sufi discussions of prophecy and "sainthood" (*wilāyah*) and earlier Shiite comparisons between Muhammad and the Imams offered familiar parallels.
12. *Rasūl* (or its abstract form: *risālah*); Avicenna's careful avoidance of this much more common Quranic (and popular Islamic) term for the specifically *lawgiving* religious prophets—and especially for Muhammad—throughout his works must have been obvious to his discerning Muslim readers. It is as striking as his related refusal—in marked contrast to contemporary philosophers like Miskawayh and others—to portray Islamic ethical teachings and religious practices as either necessary or sufficient to attain full human perfection.

tical philosophy mentioned briefly in the enumeration of the sciences at the very beginning of the *Shifā'*.

However, the brief summary one finds there is enigmatic and certainly fails to clarify those relationships.

Practical philosophy has to do either with teaching the opinions through the employment of which the general human association is ordered, and it is known as "governance of the city" and called "political science"; or with that by which the particular human association is ordered, and it is known as "governance of the household"; or with that by which the condition of a single individual is ordered with regard to the purification of his soul, and it is called the "science of ethics." All of that is realized as sound in its totality only by means of theoretical demonstration and the testimony of revelation; it is realized in detail and determinateness by means of the divine law.¹³

No doubt the vast majority of readers, if they even bothered to notice this intimate connection between the beginning and end of the *Shifā'*, would have been satisfied with the apparent link between this unspecified divine law (which they would take to be their own) and the description of the anonymous prophetic lawgiver (whom they would naturally take to be Muhammad). But those few inquisitive students who wanted to know more about practical philosophy or about the theoretical and demonstrative underpinnings of divine law and its relation to the teachings of Muhammad and their competing legal and political interpretations would find few answers in the *Shifā'* or in any of Avicenna's other writings. Unless such readers were highly inquisitive, they might conclude (as the majority must have done at the outset) that Avicenna had not bothered to set down an

13. See Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Shifā', al-Madkhal*, ed. G. Anawati, M. al-Khudairi, and F. al-Ahwānī (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-Amīriyyah, 1952), 14:11–16; and the studies cited at note 19 below.

exposition of practical philosophy because it was adequately handled by one or another of the existing versions of Islamic law, ethics, and politics. At best, a truly persistent student might eventually come across the slightly longer, but no less puzzling, discussion in Avicenna's *Epistle On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*.

This treatise—especially in its discussion of the science of the “governance of man . . . which is completed only through association”—explicitly raises several fundamental questions for the application and interpretation of any divine law: the relation between particular laws and their more general ends or purposes, the plurality of laws (or of interpretations of a revealed law) and the multiple ends governing their application, the distinction between virtuous and nonvirtuous cities or between divine and human laws, and the relation of all these points to differing concepts both of ethics (to the extent that it can be separated from political philosophy)¹⁴ and theoretical perfection. These issues were unavoidably faced by Avicenna and his more thoughtful readers both in their private conduct and in their public attitude toward the many contending interpretations of Islamic law, practice, and society.

Through this [third practical science] are known the types of political regimes and rulerships and civil associations, both virtuous and evil. And it makes known the way of fulfilling each one of them, the cause of its passing away, and the means of

14. Avicenna speaks of ethics in only a single sentence of this treatise, adding that “it is contained in Aristotle’s book on ethics”—a work he and his readers are likely to have known only through al-Fārābī’s commentaries, which were famous (or, in some quarters, notorious) for their open evocation of al-Fārābī’s comprehensive political perspective. In contrast, the types of ethical teachings popularized by the *adab*-philosophers of Avicenna’s time neither relied on nor cited the texts of Aristotle or Plato, and those authors typically took great pains to point out the close resemblances between their arguments and popular understandings of Islamic teachings.

transforming it [to the virtuous city]. That [part] of this which is connected with kingship is included in the book of Plato and Aristotle about politics.¹⁵ And that which is connected with prophecy [*nubuwwah*] and the *sharī'ah* is included in two books, both about the laws [*nawāmīs*].¹⁶ . . . And through this part of practical wisdom are known the existence of prophecy and the need the human species has of the *sharī'ah* for its existence, survival,¹⁷ and destiny.¹⁸ And through it is known some of the

15. The term *politics* (*al-siyāṣah*) also serves as the Arabic title of the shorter, late Hellenistic paraphrase of Plato's *Republic* known to Islamic philosophers and of Aristotle's *Politics*. It is unlikely, however, that a complete translation of either work was available to Avicenna or his readers. Note that he speaks only of one book here and of two in the next phrase.
16. Literally, "two books, the two of them" (*kitābān humā*). But there is no indication of the authors intended. Translators have tended to assume that Avicenna must still be referring to Plato and Aristotle. Though al-Fārābī's "summary" of Plato's *Laws* (*Talkhīṣ al-Nawāmīs*) was known, no Arabic translation of Plato's work has survived.
17. These two things—i.e., the simple existence of *nubuwwah* and the need of the species for some sort of law (*sharī'ah* or *sunnah*) to assure its survival through social cooperation and partnership—are precisely what Avicenna shows in his argument for the providential necessity of a lawgiver and law at *Shifā'*, *Metaphysics* bk. 10, chap. 2. See also Avicenna, *Risālah fī Ithbāt al-Nubuwwāt* (*Treatise on the Proof of Prophecies*), ed. M. Marmura (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1968), along with Marmura's close textual analysis in the introduction and in "Avicenna's Psychological Proof of Prophecy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1963): 49–56. Here, Avicenna does not discuss the particular character or ends of the lawgiver, law, or regime. Nor does he insist that such philosophically inspired prophecy is identical to the "divine" sort of prophecy mentioned at the end of this passage, whose possibility is discussed in the *Metaphysics* and *Psychology* of the *Shifā'*.
18. The term *munqalab* here is drawn from the Quran (26:227), where it refers generally to the "transformation" or "final return" or "overthrowing" of human realities and expectations at the "Last Day." Avicenna clearly expects his theologically minded readers to understand this Quranic term in the commonly accepted religious sense. But philosophic readers will recognize the term as alluding to the political "transformation" (*in-tiqāl*) mentioned a few lines earlier, much as Iranian religious leaders have

wisdom in the universal penalties common to laws [*sharā'i'*] and the penalties specific to each particular *sharī'ah* according to each particular people and time. And through it is known the difference between divine prophecy and all the futile claims.¹⁹

Given the vital significance of the many issues raised in this brief—indeed, almost hidden—description, Avicenna's silence about this unnamed science is truly astonishing. Though the structure of the treatise leads the reader to expect an outline of each of the three branches of practical wisdom, they are not mentioned again.²⁰ One finds no major independent work of Avicenna on this or on the other two branches of practical wisdom. There is no indication of such books being among his

adopted *inqilāb*, with its Quranic overtones, for their recent religious revolution.

19. Avicenna, *Fī Aqsām al-'Ulūm al-'Aqliyyah* (*Epistle on the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*), in *Tis' Rasā'il*, (Cairo: Maṭba'ah Hindiyyah, 1908), 107–108. Unfortunately, neither the two complete French translations of this treatise nor the French and English versions of small extracts clarify Avicenna's highly selective use of Islamic religious terms and illustrations; for bibliographic references, see C. Butterworth, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy Today" and "Appendix" in *Arabic Philosophy and the West*, ed. T.-A. Druart (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1988), 70–71 and nn. 20–21 and 123. For an indication of the philosophic import of this work (and the closely related passage from the *Madkhal* of the *Shifā'* quoted above) and its later use in scholastic thought, see H. Hugonnard-Roche, "La classification des sciences de Gundissalinus et l'influence d'Avicenne," and E. Wéber, "La classification des sciences selon Avicenne à Paris vers 1250," in *Etudes sur Avicenne*, ed. J. Jolivet (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), 41–75, 77–101.
20. This discussion of practical wisdom comes at the very beginning of the treatise, as part of Avicenna's preliminary outline of the divisions of philosophy or wisdom. It is followed by two further levels of subdivision and detailed explanation for each of the main divisions of the *theoretical* sciences, i.e., the major sciences themselves and their branches (*furū'*), as well as a similar detailed division of the parts of logic.

lost works. Finally, there are no more extensive references to these works of Plato and Aristotle among his surviving writings.

Now the only known source available to any of Avicenna's readers, or to Avicenna himself, for an adequate account of this practical philosophy, especially its political dimensions, was the Arabic commentaries and independent political works of al-Fārābī. Virtually any of al-Fārābī's political works quickly provides the essential links missing from Avicenna's writings. For al-Fārābī insists on theoretical perfection as providing the goal that orders the truly virtuous regime. As such, it explains how any given law or prophetic legacy can be transformed into a "divine" polity and emphasizes that this project is necessarily the philosopher's.

Moreover, the reasons for Avicenna's silence concerning practical philosophy become clear only after one has examined the alternatives to al-Fārābī's perspectives that faced Avicenna and his contemporary readers, as well as later Muslim interpreters. On the political plane, there was the repeated failure of Shiite formulated attempts to create alternative Islamic political orders, as well as the clear challenge to the religious preconceptions and ambitions of the influential Sunni 'ulamā' in al-Fārābī's political works.²¹ Avicenna's rhetorical and political

21. In the *Epistle on the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*, 108:3–6, Avicenna alludes to this reason for not mentioning al-Fārābī more openly:

And the philosophers do not mean by law [*nāmūs*] what the many suppose—i.e., that the law is a subterfuge and a trick. No, indeed, for them the law is the Sunnah and the permanently subsisting archetype, and the descent of divine inspiration [*wahy*]. And the bedouin likewise call the angel descending with divine inspiration a *nāmūs*.

These lines capture the practical and political dilemmas leading to Avicenna's intentionally ambiguous theory of prophecy and its even more elaborate illustration in his many popular religious writings. Note that in this passage, *Sunnah* is a basic Islamic term ordinary readers would take to

strategy would have been fatally undermined by open reference to al-Fārābī.

None of the four alternative explanations suggested for this strange omission withstands scrutiny. One supposition is that Avicenna considered practical philosophy effectively realized, its function adequately fulfilled by the rulers and/or the '*ulamā*' and the associated traditional religious disciplines of his time so that potential philosophers were free to study the unrelated (and practically inoffensive) theoretical sciences. This implies that Avicenna considered the virtuous city to be more or less completely realized, a judgment difficult to justify given what we know of his turbulent times and the criteria set forth in the account of political philosophy we have just read. But it draws our attention to the practical problems those historical realities posed for Avicenna. In particular, such historical considerations help explain the particular exoteric orientations of his writing. The detailed religious formulations in those works, like his silence concerning political science, are designed to give an inoffensive impression, as though the process of accomplishing the virtuous city could take place exclusively on the theoretical plane where the authority of the competing interpretations of the prophetic legacy was less firmly established.

Second, there is the hypothesis that Avicenna, so involved in the theoretical sciences and their relation to Islamic theology, was simply unconcerned with the mundane, practical dimensions of philosophy. This viewpoint is likewise plausible only if one assumes that the place of that political science outlined above was fulfilled by the existing rulers and interpreters of Islam or by some influential group of them. But this is where the political dimensions of Avicenna's concern with religious

refer to Muhammad's tradition recorded in the hadith, and *archetype* (i.e., *al-mithāl*) is another basic Quranic term; by the term *bedouin* here, Avicenna means merely the original speakers of Arabic.

issues and his historical influence on the relations of religious and philosophic education become so obvious: one has only to compare his writings and their lasting effects with the activities and political positions of his contemporaries, such as al-Bīrūnī and the Aristotelian commentators of Baghdad. And it is only in contrast with such approaches that we can begin to grasp the active political vision underlying Avicenna's expression of his philosophic theory of prophecy and related issues. Moreover, the supposition of Avicenna's indifference to the active life is difficult to reconcile with his practice as a court physician and preoccupation with state administration throughout his adult life.

Third, there is the argument that Avicenna was either ignorant of al-Fārābī's understanding of political philosophy or in fundamental disagreement with it. As we have already indicated, Avicenna was thoroughly acquainted with his predecessor's writings and commentaries and cites them (most often approvingly) in many other areas. Nor, given his habit of drawing attention to his own innovations and discoveries and criticizing earlier thinkers or contemporaries with whom he disagrees, is it likely that he would have hesitated to express major criticisms of al-Fārābī. Instead, as we have already indicated, he remains silent precisely where open reference to al-Fārābī would draw attention to the inner logic and intentions of his elaborate strategy for encouraging the pursuit of philosophy in the interpretation and elaboration of the symbols and institutions of Islam. Its historical success depended on the wider body of nonphilosophic readers continuing to overlook the real distance between opinion and knowledge and the distinctions between philosophy and religion.

Finally, there is the hypothesis—apparently spawned by the creative use of a few key passages from Avicenna by later Muslim mystics—that he considered political science's role to be fulfilled by the science of ethics (or by some particular ethical

interpretation of Islamic teachings). The popular version of this understanding is well conveyed in the apocryphal story of an encounter between Avicenna and the celebrated Khurasani mystic Abū Sa'īd Ibn Abī Khayr (358/967–441/1049). The Sufi is supposed to have claimed: "What I see, he knows"; to which Avicenna happily replied: "What I know, he sees." While this tale circulated widely in Sufi circles, where it was taken to indicate the futility of the long, painful process of philosophical and logical studies, it fits with nothing we know about Avicenna's life and work, the careers and writings of his immediate disciples, or the long Peripatetic tradition of students devoted to the rigorous study of his philosophic works (especially the *Shifā'*).

In fact, this tale and the hypothesis it is meant to illustrate focus on a few famous ambiguous remarks in the *Shifā'* and at the end of his *Ishārāt* concerning the relation of the soul's ethical purification to the ultimate perfection of the theoretical intellect.²² The hypothesis assumes (1) that the proper ethical activity, given the necessary natural predisposition (*isti'dād*), is sufficient to bring about the soul's intellectual perfection; (2) that this process of perfection is purely individual, so that the polity (and the civic virtues and prescriptions of the lawgivers) are ultimately irrelevant to this higher perfection, except insofar as they may be needed to guarantee a minimum level of social order and cooperation; and (3) that ethical guidance toward this perfection is already available in a particular historical (presumably Islamic) set of religio-legal prescriptions.

22. See Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Shifā'*, *Metaphysics* bk. 10, chaps. 3 and 5, and *Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa al-Tanbīhāt* (*Book of Directives and Remarks*), ed. J. Forget (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892), pt. 2, chaps. 9–10, 198–222. See also the excellent summary of those brief discussions, which emphasizes what I take to be the intentional vagueness and incompleteness of Avicenna's hints about the connections between practical and theoretical reason, in the two articles by C. Butterworth cited in note 9 above.

Yet, given the massive efforts he devoted throughout his life to the study of earlier philosophers and scientists, to his own research, and to extensive teaching and writing designed to convey the knowledge and understanding he had acquired, it seems highly unlikely that Avicenna believed in the sufficiency of ethical purification for ensuring the contemplative perfection even of those rare souls with the requisite natural aptitude. In the famous passage at the end of the *Ishārāt* distinguishing the *zāhid* (ascetic), *‘ābid* (pious devotee), and *‘ārif* (enlightened knower), Avicenna emphasizes that ethical preparations must be supplemented by elements of individual orientation and intention that necessarily bring into play additional decisive political and cultural factors. And for those seekers who want to become knowers (*‘urafā*), he urges that those other essential factors are provided by the entirety of that book and the much larger body of philosophic writing and study necessary for its adequate comprehension.

In fact, Avicenna's recourse to ambiguous language in these contexts reflects, not a dismissal or ignorance of the central issues of political philosophy, but an acute awareness of those problems as they were manifest in his time and a carefully elaborated response to them within his specific historical situation. Thus the supposedly mystical passages at the end of the *Shifā* and *Ishārāt* (or in his commentary on the *Theology of "Aristotle"*) can be read philosophically—as they were by such later Muslim thinkers as al-Ṭūsī and Ibn Khaldūn—as pointing to the indispensable role of philosophy in separating demonstrative truths from the growing profusion of claims to revealed mystical insights asserting a special authority to interpret the legacy of the Prophet. In this way, Avicenna aimed to attract philosophic natures toward a more reliable (if more demanding) sort of enlightenment, while pointing out to his larger community the manifold dangers, both ethical and political, that flow from the spells of the wrong sort of visionaries.

The second, individualist assumption is even more difficult to reconcile with Avicenna's lifelong efforts to strengthen and transform the teaching and presentation of philosophy in his own community, as illustrated by his discussions of prophecy analyzed in the following section. In addition, it ignores the obvious fragility and rarity of the conditions necessary for philosophic pursuit in any polity. In fact, as we saw above in "The Historical Context," Avicenna's apologetic efforts to portray a sort of intellectual inspiration as the intended culmination—and indeed the original source—of the guiding religious symbols of his society implicitly constituted a thorough polemic against a wide range of hostile or potentially critical ideological alternatives.

Finally, the third assumption, that of the adequacy of existing Islamic ethics for attaining human perfection, is hardly illustrated by Avicenna's own teaching. Unlike such contemporaries as Miskawayh or al-ʿĀmirī, he refused to identify the forms or means of ethical purification necessary for the soul's perfection with any particular interpretation of the vast body of legal and moral prescriptions brought by the Prophet. Thus, far from eliminating the need for recourse to political philosophy, his remarks actually raise quite boldly the fundamental questions: who has the proper authority and discernment to realize and interpret the true intentions underlying this prophetic law at its various levels of function, including that relating specifically to the ultimate human perfection? And how is that authority to be recognized within a given set of historical circumstances? It is no accident that these thought-provoking, unresolved discussions come at the very end of the *Shifāʾ*, marking the necessary transition from theoretical to practical wisdom, to the actualization of the revealed law in light of a transformed insight into its ultimate (and too often unrealized) divine aims and foundations.

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF PROPHECY

Rarely in the history of philosophy have so few words had such remarkably widespread, long-lasting, and controversial effects as Avicenna's brief allusions to the links between his philosophic psychology and certain features of prophecy. As discussed above in "Interpretation and Authority: Avicenna's Strategy," the wider success of those remarks would have been unimaginable without Avicenna's elaborate efforts to portray a concordance between popular religious beliefs and the principles of his philosophic system. The same rhetorical strategy appears in the contrast between his treatment of prophetic qualities in his shorter, popular works and his detailed discussion of philosophic psychology in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* section of the *Shifā'*. Here, as with the accounts of prophecy and lawgiving just discussed, the political philosophy of al-Fārābī provides the missing link.

Apologetic and Critical Readings

Avicenna's concern with the essential connections between prophecy and his philosophic psychology seems to have been present from the beginning of his mature philosophic writing. In virtually all his systematic works, from the relatively early *Kitāb al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ād* to the later *Ishārāt*, one finds allusions to three "distinctive characteristics of prophecy" (*kha-wāṣṣ al-nubuwwah*); they are presented as rational proof or scientific justification of popular belief in prophetic revelation and the prophetic role of Muhammad. His later writings connecting those epistemological theories with Sufi discussions of "direct vision" (*mushāhadah*) are closely integrated in the same threefold schema.

Casual readers would be unlikely to locate and piece together those three prophetic qualities in Avicenna's treatises. The more inquisitive reader, who managed to put together the relevant passages, would be likely to conclude—as did many later Islamic interpreters—that Avicenna had set out to provide a coherent rational metaphysical and epistemological framework for explaining the possibility of (1) prophetic inspiration directly from the Active Intellect; (2) the “revelation”²³ and perception of that inspiration, through the imagination, in sensible form; and (3) the miracles, predictions of particular future events, and other wonders performed by prophets and saints. Most people would also assume that in each case, Avicenna must be referring to and describing their own prophet. From this point of view, his arguments about these three aspects of prophecy might not appear very different from more familiar theological defenses and justifications of prophecy in Mu'tazilite kalam or Ismaili and Imami Shiite traditions. Moreover, his arguments offer a more solid, scientifically grounded defense of the reality and necessity of Muhammad's prophecy drawn from no particular sectarian milieu and thus appeal to a broad cross-section of Muslim intellectuals. (To that end, Avicenna ensures that the difference between his positive philosophic defense of prophecy and the notorious doubts and ambiguities of earlier rationalist philosophers not escape even the most superficial reader.) He thereby opens the door—as al-Ghazālī was soon to complain—

23. This English term suggests a basic ambiguity that plays an important role in Avicenna's discussion of the intellectual and imaginal aspects of prophetic activity. It can refer to a prophet's own awareness of an inspiration coming from above or to his public presentation of it. Avicenna is careful not to mention this second aspect openly but applies it throughout all his writings.

to wider public consideration of the rest of his philosophic system.

Only in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* of the *Shifā'* does he allude more openly to another, inherently critical—and potentially creative and liberating—way of understanding these three particular attributes of prophecy. But this dimension of Avicenna's prophethology demands a basic shift in the reader's own perspective, a willingness to put back together what the author has carefully separated and then to apply that unified vision to the existing conflicts of prophetic interpretation and their political implications.

First, there is his separate treatment of each prophetic characteristic so as to conceal the essential connections between them, above all the problematic relationships between the peculiar type of intellectual inspiration he describes and its imaginal representations in the symbolic forms of religious prophecy. Second, his schematic treatment of each quality in the abstract context of philosophic psychology avoids all but the most ambiguous references to the activities of historical prophets and the disputes among their contemporary interpreters. Third, his discussion fails to make any explicit connection between his account here of the philosophic inspiration characterizing certain prophets (those possessing the generic quality of *nubuwwah*) and the much wider range of political and lawgiving functions conferred on the prophetic messengers (*rusul*) to whom he alludes at the very end of the *Shifā'*.

In this section of the *Shifā'*, then, Avicenna is silent about the practical philosophic sciences, particularly political philosophy. But his approach here differs from that in his shorter, more exoteric works in three fundamental respects. First, this treatment presupposes the full epistemological and ontological framework of his understanding of scientific knowledge, of what

can be known and of what it means truly to know something (as opposed to opinion, belief, or imagination). Thus anyone approaching his claim that *true* prophecy is based on that particular sort of philosophic knowing cannot help but recognize the theoretical problems involved in connecting existing revelations with such knowledge and also the substantial inadequacies in many existing claims to such understanding as well as in the types of activities (and corresponding shifts of authority and forms of education) that would be necessary to move others toward true knowledge. Second, all three prophetic qualities are discussed in the context of recurrent complicating factors and phenomena—the distinction between inspired images accepted on the basis of *taqlīd* and realities known through understanding their causes; the endless illusory powers of imagination (*ta'wīl* versus *ta'bīr*); or the miracles of sorcerers and the predictions of mediums and astrologers—that clearly raise the unavoidable interpretive challenges posed by all claims to prophetic or mystical revelation.

Finally, it is Avicenna's juxtaposition of this abstract discussion of problems of interpretation with the Islamic language and illustrations employed in his more popular works that most clearly reveals the full extent of his political concern with actual interpretations of Muhammad's revelation and suggests the wider practical implications of his philosophy. To take one famous example of this teaching method, when his celebrated remarks about "direct vision" (*mushāhadah*) as a source of knowledge at the end of the *Ishārāt* and in his commentary on the *Theology of "Aristotle"* are compared with the more complete account of true knowledge and intuition in the *Shifā'*, it turns out that he is concerned primarily not with the unique feelings associated with such experiences, but with the more fundamental problem of how one can tell which inspirations are *true* and which are not.²⁴

24. See Avicenna's ironic commentary on the famous "ecstasy" passage in the

Prophecy and the Intellect

Avicenna's famous allusion to the "sacred intellect" in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* of the *Shifā'*²⁵ beautifully illustrates the preceding points. Prophecy—in the unique technical sense Avicenna develops here—turns out to be the common, ongoing source of

Theology of "Aristotle," corresponding to Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.8.i (Arabic text in *Aristū 'inda al-'Arab*, ed. A. Badawī [Cairo: Dār al-Nahḍah al-'Arabiyyah, 1947], 44; French trans. by G. Vajda, in "Les notes d'Avicenne sur la 'Théologie d'Aristote,'" *Revue Thomiste* 51 [1951]: 360–361). This autobiographical section of the *Theology* was frequently cited by Islamic mystics, before and after Avicenna, as an illustration of the type of enlightenment they understood to mirror the prophetic illuminations of Muhammad, and Avicenna's outwardly approving language here is typical of the rhetorical strategy followed in virtually all his mature works.

Avicenna's commentary completely ignores the actual description of Plotinus' ecstasy and focuses on the mystic's remark (added in the *Theology*) that "when I enter the world of direct vision, thought [or reflection: *fikrah*] veils that light and splendor from me." Avicenna begins by reversing the movement described here, insisting on the necessary role of reflection (*fikrah*) in ascending to knowledge of particular intelligible principles: "True direct vision [*mushāhadah haqqah*] follows [intellectual] perception [*idrāk*]." He goes on to explain that what distinguishes this "direct vision" is a special "feeling [*shu'ūr*] about the thing perceived"—"along with the [intellectual] perception." In other words, he reiterates, there are all sorts of "pleasures" and "inner states" (*ahwāl*) associated with direct visions, as with all other personal experiences. But what determines "true direct vision" (the repeated qualifier *haqqah* is crucial) is the familiar rational, verifiable processes of thought and (intellectual) perception which must both precede and accompany any such subjective "feelings."

25. See Avicenna *De Anima, Being the Psychological Part of the Kitāb al-Shifā'*, ed. Fazlur Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), *Maqālah* 5, chap. 6, 248:9–249:3, 249:18–250:4. The passages translated here immediately follow Avicenna's discussion of the "acquired intellect" (*al-'aql al-mustafād*) or the knowledge individuals gain of various universals through the ongoing process of thinking, learning, and momentary "conjunction" (*ittiṣāl*) with the Active Intellect.

all theoretical discoveries, including the existing rational sciences and philosophy:

Among those who learn is the person who is closer to the conception [of the intelligible form of something] because his preparedness [to receive that form] . . . is stronger. So if a human being should have that strong preparedness in what is between him and his soul, this is called "intuition" [*ḥads*]. And this preparedness may be more intense in certain people, so that he does not need a great deal [of mental effort] or of explanation and instruction in order to come into contact with the Active Intellect. Rather [such a person] is powerfully prepared for that [conjunction], as though he possessed the second preparedness [acquired through earlier learning]. Indeed, it is as though he knew each thing by himself.

Now this is the highest of the degrees of this preparedness, and this state of the material intellect ought to be called the "sacred intellect" [*ʿaql qudsī*]. It is something belonging to the type of the intellect in habitus, except that it is quite exalted and not something in which all people participate.

And it is not inconceivable that some of those acts attributed to the Holy Spirit, because of its power and superiority, might overflow onto the imaginative faculty in such a way that the imagination also imitates them with sensible likenesses and audible ones in speech, in the manner alluded to previously.²⁶

In the following lines Avicenna suggests that "among the things that verify 'this,'²⁷ as is well known" is the central role of

26. See *ibid.*, *Maqālah* 4, chap. 2, on the prophetic aspects of the imagination, discussed below in "Prophecy and the Imagination."

27. The pious or unsuspecting reader would tend to read the word "this" as a further confirmation of Avicenna's preceding "justification" of prophecy, whereas the long intervening section actually identifies the "intuitions" in question as being only of particular "middle terms" that can lead to true knowledge—of scientifically demonstrable matters—only in the context of

"intuition" in the acquisition of "intelligible things." And he concludes, in an interesting twist on an old Ismaili Shiite argument for prophecy, that "things inevitably go back to intuitions extracted by the masters of those intuitions; then they passed them on to those who learn."

So it is therefore possible that a particular person among the people might have a soul so "supported" by the intensity of its purity and its connection with the intelligible principles that it would light up with intuition. I mean, in receiving [those intelligible principles] from the Active Intellect concerning each thing and having the forms which are in the Active Intellect traced in [that soul] either all at once or almost immediately—with a tracing not through blind imitation, but rather with the ordering [of the causes] that includes the middle terms. For things accepted blindly in matters which can only be known through their causes are not [known] with certainty and intellected. And this is a sort of prophecy—indeed, the highest of the powers of prophecy—and it is most fitting that this power should be called a "sacred power," and it is the highest of the ranks of the human powers.

To begin with, Avicenna does not attempt to separate the "sacred intellect" in nature from the intuition and conjunction with the Active Intellect that characterizes all human understanding and intellectual discovery: the "highest prophetic power" is also the highest "human" one. Stressing the observable diversity of intensity and preparedness with respect to this

rational demonstration (*qiyās*). The "this" actually verified here is that true inspiration (i.e., of rational principles) is rationally verifiable and can be considered as knowledge only when it is actually known and grasped in its syllogistic, demonstrable scientific form. Thus the touchstone of such true "inspiration," according to Avicenna, involves both rational demonstration and the ongoing ability to teach and reproduce the whole scientific structure of demonstrations.

faculty, he notes that such quick-witted ability to grasp middle terms without explicit teaching is widespread. Elsewhere he denies the possibility of a universality or totality of particular knowledge that might be taken to distinguish prophets from ordinary mortals.²⁸ More important, given our earlier arguments concerning the potential political role of philosophy in relation to questions of religious authority and interpretation, Avicenna does not mention here—or elsewhere—the existence of a higher class of objects of intellection that differ from or transcend the rational principles of observable natural orders discussed by philosophers, natural scientists, and mathematicians. Even in the shorter discussions of this natural preparedness and intuition in his more popular works, he is always careful to stress that it merely consists in a more rapid and apt functioning of the common human intellect. Finally, there is no indication at all here that the objects of this sort of intellection might include an intelligible body of universally objective ethical principles or values accessible only to prophets. Yet Avicenna, like his students and later interpreters, would certainly have been eager to draw attention to such things—both here and in his classifications of the sciences—if he thought they actually existed.

The link Avicenna establishes here between the “highest prophetic power”—given its connections with the lawgiving, public dimensions of prophecy discussed in “The Two Faces of Prophecy” above—and its possible imaginative reception is highly significant. His insistence that the person who knows through this sort of intellectual inspiration must retain an

28. See *Shifāʾ*, *Metaphysics* bk. 10, chap. 1. This critical discussion occurs in his treatment of astrology, where religiously minded readers (often suspicious of astrological claims) would not suspect its applicability to their own assumptions and beliefs about the omniscience of prophets.

awareness of the middle terms and causes he has perceived (corresponding to the logical and demonstrative structure of the particular science in question)—lest his inspiration be indistinguishable from *taqlīd* and even from illusion and falsehood—makes the accomplished philosopher the only qualified interpreter of the images and symbols of the prophetic legacy, at least insofar as true knowledge and understanding are concerned. Thus readers seeking that theoretical virtue and ultimate human perfection mentioned at the very end of the *Shifā'* would recognize the practical and inherently political significance of Avicenna's emphasis on teaching here.

In short, what Avicenna says about this particular sort of intellectual inspiration, in the *Shifā'* or elsewhere, is more obviously applicable to scientific or mathematical geniuses than to those popularly esteemed as religious prophets. It is not surprising that his disciple Bahmanyār (d. 458/1066), in the corresponding section of his *Kitāb al-Taḥṣīl*, openly refers to his master as the most recent exemplar of this particular sort of philosopher-prophet. After stressing Avicenna's insistence that "true certainty as such is [only] through the representation of the middle term,"²⁹ Bahmanyār, using his master's reworking of religious vocabulary, goes on to insist that

it may be true that there exists a person with a natural, material intellectual aptitude [*fiṭrah*] close to the [acquired] intellect in habitus, [such that] he perceives the intelligibles [immediately] through intuition without needing lengthy thinking and learning.

29. See *Kitāb al-Taḥṣīl*, ed. M. Mutahhari (Teheran: Teheran University Press, 1349/1970), 816:15–817:7. It is important to note that Bahmanyār's primary concern here is to avoid any possible mystical misinterpretation of what Avicenna meant by direct vision (*mushāhadah*) of particular rational principles, going so far as to insist explicitly that "direct vision of [all] the intelligibles does not even exist for the human soul in this life."

And we have actually seen someone whose state was like this, and he was the author of this book [i.e., the *Shifā'*]. For he had already attained the sciences of wisdom in his first bloom of youth, in a very short period of time, despite the disorganization of science in that time. But even if these sciences had been [properly] organized in this order [i.e., as instituted by Avicenna], his perceiving them in that [brief] time would still have been a miracle [*mu'jizah*]. And what may indicate for you the truth of that is what is to be found in his writings, [considering] the age which we mentioned [when he began composing them] and [the circumstances of] his country and his upbringing.

This perspective was already reflected in Avicenna's autobiographical remarks in the passage corresponding to this in his Persian summary of his teaching. After describing true prophetic inspiration and stating that "it is essential that the principle of instruction given to people come from this person," he continues:³⁰

And this should not be surprising, because we ourselves have seen a person . . . who was freed from great effort by his power of intuition. His intuition corresponded in most things to what is in books, so that he was not obliged to study books very much. Now this person, at the age of 18 or 19, had understood all the philosophic sciences [*'ulūm-i hikmat*]³⁰—including logic, natural science, metaphysics, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music, medicine, and many other difficult sciences—to such an extent

30. See Avicenna, *Dānish-Nāmeh*, at the very end of the *Tabī'iyāt*, ed. S. M. Meshkāt (reprint of 1331/1953 edition; Teheran: Dehkhudā, 1353/1974), 144:2–145:3; this corresponds to *Le livre de science*, trans. M. Achena and H. Massé (revised version of 1955–58 translation; Paris: Les Belles Lettres/ UNESCO, 1986), 2:89. Note the similarity between these remarks and those in Avicenna's autobiography, *The Life of Ibn Sina*, ed. and trans. W. E. Gohlman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1974), 35–39.

that we saw no one else like him. After that, he remained many years without adding anything more to that initial state, although it is known that learning each one of these sciences [ordinarily] takes years.

Avicenna's students needed no other writings on practical philosophy to recognize that his primary purpose in the above discussions is less a description or justification of a particular historical prophet than the implicit establishment of philosophy as the qualified judge between competing claims to the truth underlying (or aimed at by) the prophetic symbols. From that perspective, Avicenna's philosophic writings alert the properly prepared reader to the ends, effects, and limitations of the other widespread opinions that claim to be knowledge in their regime and to the appropriate political and educational means for transforming that regime into one that better reflects the aims of the highest and truly divine prophets.

Prophecy and the Imagination

The perennial need for philosophy to understand the historically established forms of prophecy is brought out most forcefully in Avicenna's lengthy account of the imagination in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* of the *Shifā'*.³¹ That chapter, which deals at length with

31. See Avicenna, *Kitāb al-Nafs, Maqālah* 4, chap. 2, 169–182. Imagination here refers broadly to the two closely related Avicennan faculties discussed throughout this section: “the representational faculty [*al-quwwah al-muṣawwirah*] which is imagination [*al-khiyāl*],” 169:10–11; and the “imaginal faculty” itself [*al-quwwah al-mutakhayyilah*], 171:17 ff. This section corresponds to *Dānish-Nāmeḥ, Ṭabīʿiyyāt*, 131–139 (Achena/Massé trans., 2:81–86). The *Ishārāt*, 209–218 (trans. A.-M. Goichon, *Ibn Sīnā, Livre des Directives et Remarques* [Beirut/Paris: UNESCO/Vrin, 1951], 506–519) focuses on the special powers of the mystical knowers (*ʿurafāʾ*) and thus does not mention the applicability of these phenomena to pro-

the sources of error and illusion affecting the mental and practical activities involving the human imagination, is a masterpiece of Avicenna's typically ambiguous rhetoric. The "prophecy specifically connected with the imaginal faculty" is mentioned only once in this chapter, after a brief description of its outward manifestations in religious language intentionally evoking traditional descriptions of Muhammad's experiences of revelation:

Frequently it [the dream-like image] comes to them by means of their becoming unconscious of sensible things and being overcome by it, as in a trance. And frequently that is not the case: frequently they see the thing in its [true] state; frequently they imagine its likeness, for the [same] reason the dreamer imagines its likeness, as we shall indicate later; frequently a phantasm is represented for them, and they imagine that what they are perceiving is that phantasm addressing them with phrases they hear, which are remembered and recited.³²

The dominant tone and intention of this chapter is set a few lines earlier (173:4–8), however, when Avicenna describes outwardly indistinguishable types of visionary phenomena and experiences and claims that their deeply rooted, almost unavoidable psychological causes are typical of "the phantasms seen by people who are insane, anxious and fearful, weakened, and asleep." Nonetheless, these "forms and imaginations vanish . . . when the discernment and intellect are restored" and the imaginal faculty returned to its properly subordinate role. Though

phets. Nor is any link between this aspect of the soul and prophecy drawn in the psychology of the *Najāh*, which accords the imagination and inner senses only a few lines.

32. See *Kitāb al-Nafs*, 173:15–20. The last of these instances evokes the traditional description of Gabriel in transmitting and verifying the contents of the Quran, while the first mirrors the hadith accounts of Muhammad's initial revelatory experiences.

there is a decisive difference between those two groups and the "data" given by their outwardly similar experiences, the ambiguous terms in which he first describes such experiences only underline how impossible it is to judge such matters from without or on the basis of popular opinions and judgments alone. His ironic remarks serve to highlight the fundamental need for reliable, rational criteria by which the fruits of such "revelatory" experiences can be judged, understood, and interpreted in an objective fashion.

It may happen by chance that a person is created with an extremely powerful imaginal faculty, so dominant that it is not controlled by the senses and that the representative [faculty] does not disobey it [as in the delusions mentioned above]; and his soul is also so powerful that its being directed towards the senses does not disturb its attention to the intellect and what the intellect receives: then this person would have while awake the state that others have while dreaming, which we shall inform you about below. This is the state in which the dreamer perceives hidden things by ascertaining them as they are or through likenesses of them. But things like this can happen to these people while they are awake.³³

Avicenna's basic point here is that the psychic processes underlying the acts of imagination (whether in sleep or wakefulness) as well as the sources of imaginal images and revelations—are shared by all human beings, prophets or not. Thus he begins his commentary on this decisive "characteristic of prophecy"

33. *Ibid.*, 173:9–15; the passage continues with the description of the prophetic states just quoted. It is essential to note that these hidden things are also "seen" in the waking state by the "insane, sick, and mentally disturbed" groups whose delusions were just described. Clearly, other criteria are needed to judge or interpret the fruits of such experiences.

by insisting “there is not a single person among the people who does not have a share in the matter of dream-vision and in the state of the perceptions that come while awake.”³⁴ Then, after describing the diversity and universality of such phenomena, he moves to the central problem of interpretation:

Most of the time these passing [mental images] result from causes that arise secretly in the soul. They are like vague allusions, so indeterminate that they are not remembered unless the soul surprises them with the “noble apprehension” [of the intellect]. But what they usually do is to disturb the imaginal [faculty] with a type [of mental activity] inappropriate to what it was [consciously] involved in doing.³⁵

The continuity between prophetic inspiration and human dream-vision assumed here was alluded to in a number of celebrated hadiths, some of which also raise the necessity of interpreting such visionary images—at least in the case of the non-prophetic examples of such experience. Thus Avicenna intends for the pious, religious-minded reader to view the chapter as an extended commentary on such well known hadiths as “a good dream from the pious man is one of forty-six parts of prophecy,” “true dream-vision is from God, while [ordinary] dreaming is from Satan,” and “nothing is left of prophecy but the ‘good tidings’”—the latter defined by Muhammad as “sound dream-vision.”³⁶

34. Ibid., 174:1–2. Avicenna goes on to point out that the types of perception that suddenly disturb our normal, waking mental processes include “passing thoughts” (*khawāṭir*), “intelligibles” (*ma‘qūlāt*), “warnings” or “predictions” of coming events (*indhārāt*), “poetry,” and all sorts of other images “depending on one’s preparedness, habits, and nature.”

35. Ibid., 174:7–10.

36. These hadiths are quoted from al-Bukhārī’s chapter on dream interpretation near the end of his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Ta‘bīr*, hadiths 2, 3, and 9; see

The remainder of this chapter (174:11–182:8) gives numerous reasons why none of the products of the imagination, taken by themselves, can be trusted to provide true knowledge rather than illusion. These points necessarily raise one highly significant problem for the more thoughtful reader: all the uncertainties Avicenna evokes there are also applicable to the symbolic legacy of the prophets—and even more so to those later Muslim mystics who often claimed a uniquely inspired ability to verify, or to supplement, the truthfulness and validity of the prophetic images as popularly understood. From this perspective, the chapter turns out to be both a devastating critique of the influential claims to some sort of mystical knowledge and insight going beyond what can be demonstrated by the human intellect³⁷ and an assertion of the central role of the philosophic sciences for discerning the true, objective contents of the imaginal symbols and visions provided by various claimants to prophetic insight. In short, what is fundamental in Avicenna's description of those disposed to this sort of philosophic prophecy—at least from the standpoint of understanding what they say—is not the power of their imaginations, but their rare ability

Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, trans. M. M. Khan (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1979), 91–142 (94–98 for the hadiths quoted here). The chapter also contains hadiths pertaining to Muhammad's initial experiences of revelation and to the Quranic account of Joseph's divinely inspired powers of symbolic interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

37. As such, this chapter complements the famous closing sections of the *Ishārāt* where Avicenna discusses the claims of the *'ārif* or (Sufi) "knower" to mystical inspiration. A closer look at those sections and at the corresponding passages in the *Theology of "Aristotle"* shows that his rhetoric in both cases intentionally focuses the naive reader's attention on the subjective experiences and feelings of pleasure popularly associated with such mystical visions, while briefly indicating to his more philosophic readers that such criteria leave aside the decisive question of their objective truth. See also note 24 above.

to “focus on the intellect and what it receives” (of the intelligibles from the Active Intellect). Readers who could connect these passages with the chapter on the “sacred intellect” would see that, for Avicenna, the true “knowers” and rightful “heirs of the prophets” are the accomplished philosophers.

Obscuring that connection here is the basic ambiguity in Avicenna’s reference to the mysterious “hidden things” that are “revealed” to prophets and dreamers alike in this domain. In the wider context of his scientific cosmology and ontology—alluded to here, but familiar only to his more philosophic readers—such “unseen” things could refer either to (a) particular details concerning future or physically absent events of this world, transmitted through the souls of the heavenly bodies; or (b) the intelligible realities underlying the manifest phenomena of this world, gradually discovered by the human intellect. The rhetoric of the chapter (e.g., its focus on dreams and nonprophetic modes of imaginal inspiration) is carefully designed to draw most readers’ attention to the more familiar phenomena from the first category, such as predictive dreams, premonitions, intuitions, mediums, and oracles, without openly raising the more sensitive religious and political issues connected with the second category.

To be sure, if the type of inspiration in question concerns symbolic knowledge of particular earthly events (past, present, or future), Avicenna offers no single obvious touchstone, perhaps because he felt the common-sense tests of consistency and reliability were quite sufficient. But he always emphasizes that such unusual powers, already present in normal human dreaming, are very widely shared by magicians, soothsayers, astrologers, and even the insane—thereby strongly suggesting that what is unique about prophets is not their simple possession of such psychic capacities, but the particular way or the purposes for which they use such powers.

The Miracle of Prophecy

Avicenna says so very little in the *Shifā'* about the third sort of specifically prophetic quality,³⁸ which is usually taken to be the rare psychic ability to influence sublunar physical phenomena without direct physical intervention, that later interpreters often relied on the longer hints at the end of the *Ishārāt*. Here his careful insistence on the essential natural limits and grounds of what is "possible" in this type of quality points to a similar potential role of philosophy (in this case, the sciences of nature) in helping to judge just what constitutes those limits, as well as the particular natural processes involved in each case. However, there is another, far more important, dimension of this discussion that commentators have usually passed over in silence. Virtually everything Avicenna has to say in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* of the *Shifā'* about the functions and importance of *wahm* and *ilhām* in *animal* behavior (*Maqālah* IV, chap. 3)—immediately following his treatment of the human imagination—can also be readily extended to the political dimensions of prophecy (grounded in what Avicenna pointedly insists are the animal dimensions of human souls) and the wider functions of symbols and the imagination in establishing every political regime. In this regard, it is important to note that the next chapter begins

38. The few lines explicitly about this attribute in the *Kitāb al-Nafs* occur in *Maqālah* 5, chap. 4, 200:11–201:9. The term *himmah* ("spiritual intention" or "force of will") that Avicenna uses to describe this characteristic of the soul was a common Sufi technical term, referring (among other things) to the psychic force underlying the prodigies attributed to the accomplished saints (*awliyā'*). The corresponding section of the *Ishārāt*, in which Avicenna's rhetoric more openly directs the reader toward the more common kind of saintly "miracle" (*karāmah*) is part 2, chap. 10, 219–221 (Goichon trans., 519–525). See also *Dānish-Nāmeḥ*, *Ṭabī'iyyāt*, 139–141 (Achena/Massé trans., 2:86–87).

natures will be destroyed and [other] natures strengthened, and that the elements [or peoples] will be transformed for it. Thus that which is not fire will become fire, and that which is not earth will become earth, and through the volition [*irādah*] of that soul will occur rains and abundance, just as eclipse and plague occur, each one according to what is rationally necessary. And in general, it is possible that its volition be followed by the existence of what is connected with the transformation of that matter [or people] . . . since by nature the matter [or people] obeys it [that soul] and what was [first] represented in its volition comes to be in it [the matter or people]. . . . And this is also one of the particular characteristics of the prophetic powers.⁴⁰

Similarly, observant readers would notice that Avicenna's powerful allusions to this eminently practical prophetic characteristic underlying the transformation of polities and civilizations concludes his account of the soul's animal qualities and leads directly into the first substantial account in the entire *Shifā'* of the political, associative, and educational nature of the settings in which human beings can achieve the specific perfection of the theoretical intellect that distinguishes them from the animals.⁴¹ Though this section does not mention these three key aspects of prophecy, their essential role having just been stated, it does provide an indispensable complement to the discussion of polities and lawgivers at the end of the *Shifā'*, i.e., *Metaphysics* X. Here Avicenna speaks openly and in detail of the ultimate goal and common human finality his own work is meant to realize in the Islamic setting and of the necessary ordering of its political and social preconditions. In a word, he explains what was meant and intended by the transformations he just alluded to in such evocative, eschatological language.

In conclusion, we may recall in this connection the judgment

40. *Kitāb al-Nafs, Maqālah* 4, chap. 4, 200:16–201:6.

41. See *ibid.*, *Maqālah* 5, chap. 1, 202–209.

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of Avicenna's own disciple Bahmanyār (cited at note 29, above) concerning the "miracle" constituted by his master's writings and his astonishingly effective establishment of the philosophic sciences in Islam. Thus, the long passage just cited from *Kitāb al-Nafs* describes something more than a particular prophetic power. It brings together the missing links in Avicenna's account of prophecy and its relation to political philosophy—between the intellective and imaginative dimensions of prophetic inspiration ("Prophecy and the Intellect" and "Prophecy and the Imagination" above), and between lawgivers in general and the rare possibility of divine prophetic laws ("The Two Faces of Prophecy" above)—in a way that reveals the perennial human challenge and project of transformation to which each of those different activities must contribute.

AVICENNA AS PROPHET: THE LIMITS OF SUCCESS

Whatever the intentions prompting Avicenna's lifelong reform of the prophetic legacy of Muhammad, the historical influence of his writings—as noted in "The Historical Context" above—has been subject to the same ironies that have affected other founding fathers. It may even be said that in some respects he achieved a Pyrrhic victory: his overwhelming historical success in presenting his philosophic writings as accomplished and sufficient wisdom seems to have resulted in a substantial loss, at least in certain Islamic intellectual traditions, of the political perspectives he assumed, based on his intimate acquaintance with al-Fārābī (and, through him, with Aristotle and Plato).

But this was no accident. If the (as yet unwritten) history of the subsequent millenium of Islamic thought, including speculative mysticism and theology, is a story of competing "Avicennas," that is largely because the breadth and continuity of his influence was closely tied to certain ambiguous contents and

specific formal features of his philosophy. The first of those features appears in his works as the systematic, apparently "complete" character of theoretical philosophy, especially if one compares his writings with those of either Plato or Aristotle. The second feature, so heartily criticized from very different points of view by Averroes and Ibn Taymiyyah, was Avicenna's theologized presentation of the theoretical sciences (in the topics, language, and primary role of his metaphysics), as well as his systematic presentation of popular religious equivalents of each of its conclusions. Finally, the third feature, and certainly one of the key explanations for the widespread use of Avicenna's writings and concepts by such otherwise disparate later interpreters, was the ostensible isolation of his written theoretical philosophy from any critical connection with concrete problems and concerns of the practical and political realm.

Here we have attempted to show, first, how each of these apparently theological features, in both Avicenna's popular and more scientific works, was an indispensable element of his elaborate rhetorical strategy, carried out through a lifetime of writing and teaching, for positioning the philosophic sciences as the rightful guides and interpreters of the prophetic legacy in his own Islamic society. If even parts of that larger argument are correct, scholars interested in discovering "what Avicenna really thought" may one day be led to rewrite accounts based on opinions now uncritically received. It is even more important to note that Avicenna's own disciples and philosophic successors, with rare exceptions, did not attempt such a revelatory rewriting of his exoteric theological framework—and that the handful of critical figures who eventually did so (such as al-Suhrawardī and Averroes) had a remarkably limited influence among Muslim readers, except to the degree that their novel insights were partially reintegrated into Avicennan language by later thinkers like Mullā Ṣadrā and Ibn Khaldūn. This is not to say that Avicenna's rhetoric somehow "fooled" a Bahmanyār,

a Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, or an Ibn Ṭufayl; nor that the above-mentioned features of his work eventually stifled philosophic inquiry, creative scientific investigation, and attempts at actualizing the wider political implications of his philosophy, as the accounts of later Islamic thought might suggest.

But if such critical and, in many cases, politically involved and active Islamic philosophers have so often chosen to maintain the public theological framework of Avicenna's writing, that may also reflect the troubling persistence of deeper cultural and political factors that self-confident modern outsiders, Muslim or not, have too often tended to ignore. Perhaps the most prominent and compelling of those factors is the phenomenon of prophecy, to which Avicenna devoted a lifetime of creative attention. Reflection on his reflections may still be a philosophic task.