

The Status of Imagination in Avicenna's Political Philosophy

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, Avicenna is one of the most outstanding intellectual and cultural characters in the Islamic civilization. Though the stand of Avicenna is somehow clear in areas such as metaphysics, natural sciences, logic and other disciplines, there is little consent regarding his political philosophy. The present study aims to observe his reflections on politics from a new perspective, i.e. studying Avicenna's political thought in the context of his oriental (or eastern) philosophy. To do so, the paper demonstrated that instead of following Peripatetic philosophers who regard politics as a subcategory of practical wisdom, he intended to derive his political thought under the subjects of prophethood. This was the reason that the subjects such as speculation (Hads) and imagination in Avicenna's political philosophy drew significant attention. Hence, we can say that in his extensive framework the political philosophy is converted from a rational-civic knowledge to a cosmic imagination-based wisdom. From this perspective, we can assume that not only he was the precursor of Sohrevardi but also influenced a significant portion of Iranian intellectual history based on a unique system of wisdom.

Introduction

Avicenna helped wisdom reach its pick in Islamic civilization and compile. Accepting the Peripatetic classification of philosophy to practical and theoretical, and division of each of them to three subcategories and setting this classification as the base for authoring his philosophical encyclopedias, Avicenna initiated an evolution in composing philosophical compilations influencing the whole history of Islamic philosophy afterword. Avicenna's encyclopedias, including *Shifa*, *Isharat*, *Nijat*, *'Uyun al-Hikma*, and *Alaei Encyclopedia* lack a part allocated to the practical wisdom. On the other hand, he has authored short treatises some of them may include political implications. However, there is no independent political treatise left from him that the ascription of which is certain. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the philosophical reflection of Avicenna doesn't miss implicit political implications, on the contrary, consideration of which, especially around the investigation of so-called Oriental Wisdom, is stressed. The main concern of Avicenna just like many other thinkers and authors of his era is making reconciliation between the classic philosophical tradition and revelatory teachings. Such a concern manifests itself in Avicenna's political writings, and that is because just like Farabi, he established a firm connection between politics and prophethood while implicitly trying to avoid some of the obstacles that Farabi was facing as a result of his philosophical reflection, and coming up with solution.

One can view the political subjects raised in Avicenna's compilations from different perspectives and derive different results appropriate with the methodological approach. The present study addresses some of the aspects of political philosophy in Avicenna's compilation from a specific point of view. Here, we strive to stress the place of Avicenna in the history of Islamic-political philosophy in which discussion of imagination is the focus. The scheme for compiling the prophetic philosophy initiated by Farabi who also attempted to explain the phenomenon of prophethood and its relation with philosophy and politics by extending the functions of imaginative faculty, especially in his well-known book, the *Opinions of the Citizens of*

the Ideal City. The present study claims that Avicenna's reflections should be viewed within the framework that Farabi established, and after Avicenna, Sohrawardi continued with compiling illuminationist Philosophy. Avicenna's role as a philosopher who extended Farabi's reflections and addressed two important subjects of "speculation" (hads) and "imagination of celestial souls" (nufus-e falaki) is of great importance. As such, he paved the way for Illuminationist philosophy whose the "imaginal world" was a pivotal concept.

Therefore, in the present research, we investigate the place of imagination in the Islamic-political philosophy by stressing the role of Avicenna and his venerable position. Our main question is that: "what role and position Avicenna's thought plays in the history of political philosophy in the Islamic world and especially in Iran?" This question is of great importance due to the reason that many have found Avicenna without any political stand, or they have softened his political image assuming it as an imitation of Farabi's reflections. From the perspective of the present study, the answer to this question is that Avicenna's political reflections should be studied as a subdivision of his theology and prophetology. His most important involvement in the history of political thought was studying on metaphysics of imagination which started by Farabi and reached its point by Sohrawardi. Meanwhile, Avicenna has played an important role in the continuation of oriental wisdom. Since political philosophy in Islamic civilization focuses on revelation and prophethood, the concept of imagination has had clear political manifestations in the Islamic intellectual history.

The present study is based on a phenomenological approach and especially a narrative that Henry Corbin gives on this school of thought in the sense that he addresses the phenomenology of imagination in Islamic civilization. However, it is worth noting that it is fundamentally different from the attitude of Corbin from the perspective of the political dimensions of prophethood and imagination. That is because Henry Corbin pays little attention to the political and civic dimensions of imagination and concerns himself with the internal logic of evolution and ways of its extension in the

Islamic civilization (Wasserstorm, 1999). Nevertheless, the present study pays special attention to the political results and requirements of the metaphysics of imagination. Muslim philosophers from Farabi to Mulla Sadra have all been involved in continuing the scheme which could be considered as a passage through Greek philosophy and compiling a kind of oriental wisdom. According to the phenomenological viewpoint of Corbin, from the era of Farabi forward, this scheme has become richer and the dependency of Iranian philosophers to Greek philosophy has lessened. This way, Farabi extends the discussion of imagination though limited to Aristotelian Islamic psychology, and adds new tasks to it. Setting forth the discussion of the imagination of celestial souls, Avicenna takes another step towards extending metaphysic of imagination, and ultimately, Sohrevardi completes this pattern by proposing the discussion of imaginal world. The present study aims to put Avicenna's discussion of imagination within Farabi and Sohrevardi's perspective. To derive important political results from that, we investigate in more details, Avicenna's role in the history of political thought in Iran.

In this paper, first, it will be discussed the place of politics in Avicenna's view and his classification of wisdom. I will also demonstrate how gradually Avicenna establishes a special position for prophethood and Sharia as independent political discipline while reviewing and revises the Greek classifications in this regard. Then, I will focus on the discussion of prophethood and imagination by Avicenna. In the end, I investigate some of the political results of the discussion of oriental philosophy set forth by Avicenna.

The Position of Politics in the Science Classification

Classification of wisdom into two subcategories of theoretical and practical and maintaining secondary branches of mathematics, natural sciences and metaphysics for theoretical wisdom and ethics, economics (household), and politics for practical wisdom was a peripatetic teaching, influenced by Aristotle's writings which could be seen in the compilations of philosophers

such as Farabi and Miskawayh Razi. But Avicenna established it and made it the base for authoring his philosophical encyclopedias. He maintains politics into two subcategories of monarchy and prophethood after pointing to this classification in the treatise *fi aqşam al-ulum al-aqliyah* (Ibn Sina, 1989). Although Farabi stressed Sharia, he never considered it as a branch of political knowledge. Rather, he classified it in the books such as *Kitab al-Milla* under the category of political knowledge or civics. From this perspective, we can say that Avicenna was more influenced by Abulhassan Ameri who recognized political leadership consisting of two principles one of which addresses prophethood and the other concerns monarchy (Ameri, 1989). Here Avicenna, as scholars such as Leo Strauss (1995) *nomoi* as expressed by Greeks. This perception is fully addressed in the book *The Oriental Logic* in which an independent discipline is specified for Sharia while dividing the practical sciences into four sorts of knowledge, instead of three (Ibn Sina, 1982).

Hence, for the first time, Avicenna adds *tashri'* (religious jurisprudence) to the triple practical sciences, recognizing it as science from God. Although Avicenna and Farabi have different ideas in this regard, they share political conception of prophethood which is an important result of what has been called "prophetic philosophy". In Avicenna's opinion, the prophet should rule all creatures because he is the best of them (Ibn Sina, 1989). Sharia plays a fundamental role in the political-prophetic philosophy, yet there exist diverse opinions among researchers about the nature of Avicenna's political perspective regarding the concept of Sharia. Some believe that his political perspective is influenced by Twelver Shi'a (Seyyed Rizvan, 1984). On the contrary, another group regards him as a theoretician of the Islamic caliphate and political theology of Sunni Muslims (Murad, 1999). These groups both investigate "Sharia" within Islamic scholastic theology (Kalam) and jurisprudence (Fiqh) and seek to find its roots in one of the Islamic denominations. Among all, Mohsen Mahdi's interpretation which is influenced by Leo Strauss shares a specific conception of Sharia in connection with the political perspective of Muslim philosophers. Strauss and Mahdi argue that these philosophers

perceived Sharia within the framework of Platonic principles in a way that authors of Sharia (who followed Caliphate) believed and not in its literal meaning. Avicenna argues that the advantage of civic wisdom lies in the awareness about the practice of the involvement among individuals for cooperation in the secular interests (مصالح الابدان) and in the ones associated with survival of mankind (Ibn Sina, 1989). This argument is consistent with the Greek old definition of politics and different from Farabi's definition which stresses attaining virtues and taking the right path to permanent happiness (paradise). That is why some researchers put realism of Avicenna in front of Farabi's idealism (Galston, 1979). According to Muhsin Mahdi, Avicenna here combined an Aristotelian teaching with Islamic Sharia. He believed that human wisdom can only deal with incorporeal entities, while politics is not the arena of wisdom. In the temporal life of humans, the soul is intermingled with the body and secular obsessions and as a result, tendencies of the soul such as passions, emotions, and fantasies play a crucial role in politics. Muhsin Mahdi believes that in Avicenna's view, Sharia takes charge of circumspection of all the factors affecting soul (self) and takes care of the fact that soul and body are associated and intermingled (Mahdi, 1998). Classification of politics under the category of Sharia which is specified in some of Avicenna's writings should be understood within this framework and based on that one can explain some of the contradictions in Avicenna's political thought. However, this interpretation still leaves an unanswered question that why Avicenna has addressed political subjects within the domain of and as a subcategory of theology (in theoretical philosophy), rather than practical wisdom (Ibn Sina, 1984b). That is why some scholars argue that Avicenna has paved the way for the demise of political philosophy in the Islamic world by raising the political subjects within the domain of theology and theoretical wisdom (see: Tabatabaei, 2005).

Imagination and Prophecy

Farabi struggled to come up with a philosophical explanation of prophecy and its relation to ideal city in his various political treatises. The brief

explanation of Farabi in his book *Ideal City* created the notion that he considered the position of philosophy higher than that of prophethood since a prophet associated with active intellect through his imaginative faculty while a philosopher associated with it through his rational faculty. From the perspective of Peripatetic philosophers, the rational faculty enjoys a higher position in the hierarchy of faculties of soul. Avicenna has struggled to solve this problem in his study of prophecy and present a different philosophical explanation of revelation. Farabi regards the *mustafad* (acquired) intellect as the highest rank of human faculties, using which the philosopher can connect with the active intellect and receive the intelligible truths (Farabi, 2003).

As such, Avicenna argues that prophecy is connected not only with the rational faculty, but also with its highest rank, to the active intellect and hence the prophet has been distinguished from all human beings and found supremacy over them. To explain the features of this faculty, Avicenna deals with the concept of *hads* or speculation, for the first time. "Speculation" is the highest rank of the human knowledge and the evolution of which is the prerequisite for the sacred intellect. Avicenna argues that speculation is a matter finding out about the middle term of the syllogism, without education and in a short time, the reason for which is the extraordinary readiness of mind to connect to the active intellect (Ibn Sina, 1985). Some scholars argue that this concept is derived from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (Ziaei, 2006). Before Avicenna, Farabi recognized speculation as one of the characteristics of the ideal ruler (Farabi, 2003). However, Avicenna believes that *hads* is the most important characteristic of the first ruler and not one of his traits. Here, the point is that according to Avicenna, *hads* enjoys degrees and ups and downs, and humans make different uses of it, given that the sacred intellect takes the highest rank of it (Ibn Sina, 1990). This point leads us to one of the most important teachings of Avicenna which is of significant importance for studying the intellectual history in Iran. Unlike Farabi and his Peripatetic precedents, Avicenna perceived that connection to the active intellect is possible for all of the humans (Morris, 1992). Avicenna explains that humans connect with intelligible worlds according to their intellectual ranks and their

speculation. As such, unlike Farabi, he argues that connection with the active intellect is not limited to prophets and philosophers. This theory includes a kind of connection between the human and intelligible world as well as a belief about a kind of universal wisdom which affects ulterior intellectual doctrines and especially mystical thinking.

However, prophet possesses two other features besides speculation: the ability to capture the nature and perfection in imaginative faculty (Ibn Sina, 1985). Avicenna stressed the first one for the first time as a feature of the prophet to explain their miracles. Nevertheless, discussion about the imaginative power of the prophet draws more attention in the present paper and we should investigate it more closely. Prophet, in Avicenna's view, possesses perfection in both faculties of reason and imagination. It is due to the faculty of imagination that the prophet reveals the absent and missing things with details just the way that veridical dreams connect with this faculty. Before addressing this subject, we should refer to the study of soul in Avicenna's chapters devoted to nafs (human soul) in his well-known *Physics of Shifa*. Avicenna's conception is somehow consistent with Aristotelian psychology according to which, the spiritual faculties of soul, among which imagination, are common between humans and animals. In the psychology of Avicenna, imagination has two primary functions, maintaining the sensible forms and manipulating them. However, like Farabi, Avicenna designates some tasks to this faculty that Aristotelian psychology doesn't approve of them. For this reason, some researchers have discussed a kind of bifurcation and ambivalence in Avicenna's conception of activities of imagination (Jambet, 1983).

Avicenna argues that if soul is released from sensory obsessions, it will go beyond itself and its bounds. In this manner, sometimes the imagination takes sensible forms from intellect and makes them consistent with common sense in a sensible form and this is another function of imagination which is the same as illustration and imitation. This way, the rational faculty receives the truth from the active intellect and transfers them to the imagination. While sleeping, since human is released from the senses, the imaginative faculty transcends, and this is why veridical dreams occur for the individual.

However, the imagination of some people is so powerful that they can receive these forms and details even when they are awake. That is the quality or level that Avicenna refers to as prophecy specific to the imaginative faculty.

However, it seems that Avicenna sought to explain the process of prophethood, not only in imagination, but also in the rational faculty at least for resolving the ambiguity in Farabi's work regarding the superiority of philosopher over prophet. He did not, however, dismiss the rational faculty, regarding it as an important trait of the prophet with this explanation that unlike Farabi, he realized it was directly connected with the active intellect. One of the deficiencies to Farabi's study of prophecy was that he believed in a connection between imagination and the active intellect, though there was no significant relationship between them. Avicenna solved this problem from the point that he believed that prophecy was connected to the sacred reason with imagination serving it. Connecting to the active reason, the prophet receives general truths through his rational faculty. Also, he receives details through his imagination by connecting to the celestial souls. Avicenna's theory, however, suffers from some deficiencies in explaining the prophecy. These deficiencies have resulted from the lack of consistency of Aristotelian and Peripatetic principles with the prophetic wisdom. That is because the functions of imagination in Aristotelian philosophy cannot account for prophecy and revelation. Avicenna, however, states that prophet possesses the knowledge of general truths (through the sacred reason and fair speculation) and the knowledge of details of present and future (through connection with the celestial souls).

The important point here is the emphasis on the celestial souls. According to old physics, every minor event in nature is subject to the effects of the changes in celestial objects. The celestial souls have their own imaginative faculty, and therefore they perceive details. Assuming imagination for celestial objects is the idea of Avicenna which was not proposed before him. For instance, Farabi believed that celestial objects only had rational faculty (Farabi, 1996). Avicenna argues that all the minor events of the past and the

future are consistent with the celestial souls (Ghazali, 1985) and if human soul is relieved from worldly obsessions it can connect with it when sleeping or awake (in the case of prophecy) and be aware of the details. This perception of Avicenna influences his prophetic philosophy and political thought. That is when the foundation of an “Iranian” philosophy is provided by Avicenna, as Henry Corbin mentioned (Corbin, 1991). That is a philosophical system appropriate with the Islamic-Iranian civilization and based on a radical criticism over the Greek philosophy. Devising the Illuminationist wisdom by Sohrawardi, which was the revival of Iranian ancient wisdom of light, reached its highest quality, changing the trend of the history of the Islamic philosophy.

Oriental Philosophy and Illuminationist Wisdom

One can sense from Avicenna’s work that he sought to compile a new philosophical system which has been called “Oriental” Philosophy or wisdom. The most important evidence in this regard is the pioneering introduction of Avicenna in the book *The Oriental Logic* that some researchers believe it was part of a more detailed treatise. In this introduction, he expressed that he has authored most of his work for “the ignorant of philosophy that were fond of Peripatetic philosophers” and insisted on Aristotle’s failures. He argues that it is not far from reality that sciences have come to us from non-Greeks (Ibn Sina, 1984a). In the case of this oriental wisdom and its nature, no consent exists among scholars and sometimes different interpretations are proposed. In the Western Islamology, this topic was stressed especially with the article (published in 1925) authored by Nalino, an Italian orientalist. Nalino demonstrates in his detailed article that Avicenna attends the geographical east rather than the symbolic and spiritual east as intended in Sohrawardi’s Illuminationism (Nalino, 1980). Contrary to this argument, Henry Corbin believes that the oriental wisdom should not be investigated in its geographical meaning. Corbin states: “Avicenna and Sohrawardi’s perceptions of east share common features in a way that both perceive it in its real meaning which is a metaphysic phenomenon and not

geographical one” (Corbin, 1971, p. 29). Corbin also believes that “undoubtedly, Avicenna was the first who intended to compile the oriental teachings which were different from Peripatetic philosophy. However, since he didn't have access to the original principles, he failed to realize his scheme.” (Corbin, 1971, p. 28). He maintains that Avicenna's most important works in wisdom are his symbolic (or allegorical) treatises. Referring to some of Avicenna's works assigned to Orientalists, Sohrevardi himself does not recognize him as an Oriental philosopher (Sohrevardi, 2002). Those who proclaim that Avicenna recognized east in its geographical meaning, maintain different opinions about east and west. However, there are implications in Avicenna's work which approve of both geographical and conceptual perceptions of the east (Gardet, 1951). There is no doubt that the oriental wisdom that Avicenna discusses is different from the one maintained by the contemporary Peripatetic scholars. It associates with a scheme that Iranian scholars followed to review and criticize the Greek philosophy. The most important part of this scheme is emphasis on imagination and its extension. We can also investigate Avicenna's oriental wisdom in the same framework. His oriental wisdom which can be considered “prophetic wisdom” is based on a new perception of imagination. The scope of Aristotle's psychology and the quality of the imaginative faculty didn't allow Avicenna and Farabi to explain prophecy and religious-spiritual phenomena as they should. Hence, Avicenna stepped further to take out imagination from the monopoly of the human's faculty and extended its boundaries to include celestial souls. In the light of this fundamental evolution, the phenomena such as the prophet's knowledge of future details and seeing the angel of revelation find an appropriate explanation. Some of the ancient philosophers like Ibn Rushd have also found oriental philosophy associated with Avicenna's opinion of the souls of celestial objects (Ibn Rushd, 1965).

Hence, to better understand the political implications of oriental wisdom, one should resort to the history of Iranian thought and its evolution path. From two distinct points of view, the implications made by two contemporary scholars who had investigated the subject with different

backgrounds are worthwhile. First, we should refer to Henry Corbin who intends to regard Avicenna's oriental wisdom associated with Sohrawardi's Illuminationist wisdom, and refers to its key concept as "imaginal world". All Avicenna's recitals take place in this world; therefore, in this regard, he is the precursor of Sohrawardi (Corbin, 1954). Corbin, however, based on Sohrawardi's evaluation, specifies that if Avicenna had access to the oriental origin as well as the perspective of Khosrawani wisdom, his oriental wisdom would be more complete. Corbin is the most outstanding scholar who stressed the Iranian dimensions of Avicenna's thought. Though his discussion as mentioned before, doesn't address the political dimensions or implications of this intellectual system, it is of importance in other aspects. Corbin argues that Iranian identity has continued throughout the history by resorting to the imaginal world as the most important factor. Meanwhile, Avicenna plays an important role. He presents a philosophical explanation of imagination and narrates his experience of involvement in this world in his recital treatises in a symbolic format. Hence, according to Corbin, Avicenna is undoubtedly the base for the Iranian thought and identity which later appeared in the works of Iranian great mystics and poets such as Hafiz, Attar and Einoqozat.

Nevertheless, Mohammed Abed al-Jaberi, the contemporary Arab thinker, presented a new interpretation of the oriental philosophy of Avicenna. He investigates the oriental philosophy in a much more extensive way than other researchers, regarding almost all Avicenna's treatises devoted to it. He argues that the oriental philosophy in Iran is influenced by Avicenna's specific attitude to the souls of the celestial objects, which are assumed to have sense and imagination. According to al-Jaberi, unlike Farabi who was the philosopher of reason, Avicenna is the philosopher of spirit and soul seeking to make a connection between human spirits and divine world. This connection takes place only with the help of celestial spirits. Therefore, human happiness is bound to the connection between celestial souls. al-Jaberi writes that:

The point that the celestial objects assume sense and imagination in

addition to rational faculty- as Avicenna argued so means that they are a mediator between God and the world below. They affect us by the imaginative faculty, meaning that they constantly connect with us and express their love towards God by their rational faculty, consistently being connected to him (al-Jaberi, 1993, p. 166).

al-Jaberi argues that with this idea, Avicenna paved the way for spiritual conception of philosophy- the way that Sohrevardi discovered which was led to Hikmat al-Ishraq. He observed that Iranian scholars were seeking a system of wisdom that was on the one hand in line with the teachings of Muslim theologians and on the other hand different from the Greek philosophy. This oriental wisdom that imagination is a pivotal element of which is intermingled with Iranians' historical consciousness. al-Jaberi called this a kind of "ethnic ideology" which reflected the Iranian "unhappy consciousness." However, he believes that this ideology is concealed in Avicenna's philosophical system and one cannot easily perceive its political intentions. In al-Jaberi's view, this ideology is rooted in Iranian irrationalism and ethnicity which is latent in the philosophical activities. He even believes that the irrationalism in the late Islamic civilization is the result of Avicenna's philosophy and not Ghazali's attacks to rationality.

It is true that Farabi, Avicenna, and Sohrevardi established the same scheme in which imagination is a fundamental element. This scheme was the product of criticizing and reviewing Greek philosophical foundations and establishing a new spiritual system of wisdom. The important point that both above-mentioned scholars agree on despite their differences in principles and results is the Iranian nature of Avicenna's oriental wisdom. al-Jaberi's attitude in assigning the ethnic ideology to Avicenna is just an exaggeration. However, it seems that at least he has accepted Avicenna's role in shaping the Iranian identity. Therefore, we should assume this ruling system with important political results. The first important result is the continuation of prophethood in a philosophical and mystical form which was discussed in some of Avicenna's treatises. Since prophethood is assumed to have political

features in Islam, and the Islamic political philosophy has been a sub-category of the topic of prophethood, one cannot be indifferent to political implications of Iranian oriental wisdom.

Conclusion

The present study investigates the role of imagination in the history of Islamic political philosophy stressing Avicenna's thought. Unlike Greeks who paid little attention to imagination assuming it only limited to literature and art, Muslim scholars had distinctive care for it. Islamic philosophy, as demonstrated by some of the researchers, was a kind of prophetic wisdom in which imagination took a significant place because it explained the process of revelation and the connection of the ideal ruler with superior worlds. In other words, the same role that the world of ideas played for Plato's ideal city, the world of imagination played for the Muslim philosophers' political wisdom. Therefore, we can suppose imagination as one of the most important subjects in the Islamic-political philosophy. Farabi is the first philosopher who took measures in theoretically compiling on the area of political imagination. However, Farabi had more or less accepted Aristotelian psychology, based on which, imagination, firstly, was a material faculty and secondly in quality lower than reason, and this psychology didn't allow imaginative faculty such extent of development. Hence, Avicenna dealt with devising the concepts of "sacred intellect" and "speculation" to resolve the obstacles that Farabi's prophetology faced. In Avicenna's perspective, also imagination is regarded as a political subject due to the political perception of prophecy.

We should seek his most important innovation in his assumption of celestial souls having imagination. According to his epistemological theory, humans get to know the generalities and details by connecting to the active intellect and celestial spirits, respectively. The point here is that unlike Farabi, he didn't suppose connection to superior worlds limited to prophet or philosopher. In Avicenna's view, celestial souls acted like mediators

between the sensible world and intelligible entities. As such, Avicenna paved the way for ontology of imagination in Sohrevardi's Illuminationist wisdom, making oriental wisdom to take a significant step forward. This conception holds extensive political dimensions marking a significant part of the history of political thought in the late Islamic civilization, especially in Iran.

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