

# Ibn al-Malāḥimī on the Human Soul

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In his *Gift to the Theologians in Refutation of the Philosophers* Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d. 536/1141) devoted a chapter to the theory of the human soul (*nafs*).<sup>1</sup> In concord with late Mu'tazilī doctrine in general, Ibn al-Malāḥimī denied any duality of body and soul in human beings and the existence of an immaterial self-subsistent soul that could survive the death of the body.<sup>2</sup> In his view man consisted of the aggregate (*jumla*) of the human body having a specific structure (*binya makḥṣūṣa*) and mixture (*mizāj*) of elements. The seat of life was in the heart. The restoration (*i'āda*) of any human individual after death required the restoration of the specific structure of its body.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī begins his description of the views of the philosophers on the soul, quoting from the *Kitāb al-Mā'ād*, a book on the hereafter, by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Jadīdī. The author of this book is otherwise unknown, and the reading of his *nisba* as al-Jadīdī must be considered tentative. If it is correct, it is likely to refer to al-Jadīd, a town quarter in Bukhārā according to al-Sam'ānī.<sup>3</sup> Al-Jadīdī described and criticized the views of dualists, Zoroastrians, Ṣābians and other religions as well as of the philosophers about the soul and physical resurrection. The book was most likely available to Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, in whose *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, written around the year 300/912, the name of the author appears as al-Ḥarīrī or al-Jarīrī.<sup>4</sup> The author thus must have been a contemporary of al-Ash'arī and of the philosopher Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī (d. 313/925), whose views he criticizes. Ibn al-Malāḥimī quotes al-Jadīdī as stating that some of the philosophers held that the soul

<sup>1</sup> Rukn al-Dīn b. al-Malāḥimī al-Khwārazmī, *Tuhfat al-mutakallimīn fi l-radd 'alā l-falāsifa*, ed. Hassan Ansari and Wilferd Madelung (Tehran: Iranian Institute of Philosophy; Berlin: Institute of Islamic Studies, Free University of Berlin, 2008), *Bāb al-kalām fi l-nafs*, 154–68.

<sup>2</sup> The view of early Mu'tazilī theologians on the human soul was not entirely uniform. Al-Nazzām envisaged a spiritual human soul. See Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jabrbundert Hidschra* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991–1997), IV, 513–20.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Sam'ānī, *al-Ansāb*, ed. 'Abdur Rahmān b. Yaḥyā al-Mu'allim al-Yamānī, *Dairatu'l-Ma'ārifi'* (Hyderabad: Osmania University Press, 1962–1982), III, 220.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul: Franz Steiner, 1929–1931), 337; van Ess, *Theologie*, VI, 275.

was in the body like the form in matter. It was a substance (*jawhar*) in the meaning of form, not in the meaning of matter or in the meaning of a compound of matter and form. Aristotle called the soul a substantial quality (*kayfiyya jawhariyya*) by which the body becomes alive, like heat in fire or like sight in the eye. Ya'qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī described the soul as the intellectual form of the living being (*ṣūrat al-ḥayy al-'aqliyya*).

Next Ibn al-Malāḥimī quotes Ibn Sīnā's well-known definition of the human soul as the first perfection of a natural instrumental body (*kamāl auwal li-jism tabī'ī ālī*) and Ibn Sīnā's explanation of it at length. Ibn al-Malāḥimī names Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-Nafs* as his source, but it is uncertain which of his several works known under that title is meant.<sup>5</sup> The contents of the quotation, however, match Ibn Sīnā's teaching in general. Ibn al-Malāḥimī then comments that this definition of the reality of the soul does not distinguish it from the doctrine of the opponents of the philosophers, for "we say about the reality of the human being having a *nafs*, namely the heart, that it has a specific structure and a moderate mixture between humidity, dryness, heat and cold which constitute a single living being, even though it is composed of portions and parts". The opponents thus can explicitly attribute to this moderate mixture what the philosophers attribute to the soul, stating that it is the intellectual form of the human being and that it is the first perfection of a natural instrumental body. He goes on to criticize Ibn Sīnā's definition which ought to have included mention of the intellect (*'aql*) as being the first perfection of the natural body, since according to him it was indeed the intellect that turned the soul into the perfection of the human species.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī then formulates his basic objection to the philosophers' doctrine of an immaterial soul ruling the human body. It is firmly established in the human mind that the living rational agent is the visible body endowed with a specific structure. If this is immediate knowledge, then the philosophers' theory must be considered specious arguments (*shubah*) contradicting what is established in the mind and as such does not require a reply, just like the specious arguments of the sophists which counter what is known by necessity. The modern philosophers who assert that the soul is not impressed in the body, does not dwell in it or envelop it, may then be asked how the human acts can be attributed to a soul that is not in the body? They claim that the human body is merely an instrument that the soul employs by means of the human and animal faculties (*quwā*) of the body. Ibn al-Malāḥimī then describes Ibn Sīnā's theory of various animal and human faculties in detail and notes that in that theory the soul is the agent, not the body which is merely its instrument. All rational people, however, know by necessity that it is this physical whole (*jumla*) which is skilled and performs human crafts. They know that it is this body who deserves blame for its evil acts and praise for doing good. If the body were merely the tool for action, blame would have to be addressed to someone else. Rational people do not approve of blaming the spell (*ukhdha*) employed by the sorcerer in his evil practice of magic, but approve of blaming the sorcerer. Likewise they approve

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. J. Janssens has kindly suggested to me that the quotation is most likely from the first chapter of Ibn Sīnā's *K. Aḥwāl al-nafs*.

of ordering or forbidding this body to practice its crafts, to praise it for its knowledge, to describe the sharpness of its perception, and they cover themselves from its sight and forbid it to look at their women. Thus it is evident that all these acts occur by this body and that their attribution to anything else is false. If the philosophers then argue that rational people see this body as clearly apparent and witness the appearance of knowledge and acts by it with their eyes, while they can recognize the soul only by obscure analogies, and that only for this reason they approve of attributing these things to the body, they should be told that if this were the case, people's immediate knowledge and their approval of ordering and forbidding, praising and blaming this body would constitute ignorance. Their false knowledge would be evil, yet there is no knowledge more evident to rational people than this. If the philosophers allow this to be ignorance, then they must allow that everything known by evident knowledge is ignorance, so that all immediate and derived knowledge may be suspected to be corrupt.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī then quotes the argument of Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī, the founder of the Mu'tazilī school doctrine promoted by him, against the existence of an immaterial soul. Abū l-Ḥusayn noted that the identity (*nafs*) of the human agent must be the whole of the body, neither something in it nor something external. This is so because whenever the physical mixture of the body is properly moderate and healthy, the human being is able to perceive, to learn and to act, and whenever the proper mixture of the body and its health are corrupt, the human is incapable of all this. Since proper mixture and health are attributes of the body, the body must be the living and thinking individual capable of acting. Ibn al-Malāḥimī observes that this argument is based on the principle that the effector (*mu'aththir*) of any effect must be presumed to be the thing in whose presence the effect is invariably present and in whose absence the effect is invariably absent. Any claim that there is some other effector vitiates the theory of causality.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī goes on to argue that if the soul were not imprinted in a particular body or present in it, it could not have a special relationship to it. Thus either a single soul would have to employ all bodies equally as its tool or none at all. This is so since the soul according to the philosophers is not a freely choosing agent, but rather produces its acts through the body by necessity, unlike God in the view of the theologians, who is a freely choosing agent. Those philosophers who hold that the soul descends upon the body from its world and inheres in it, must be asked why the soul would choose this particular body rather than another. When they assert that the soul prefers a particular body out of love for it, they must explain why the soul should love one body rather than all others. This argument holds even in regard to those philosophers who, like Aristotle, maintain that the soul arises together with the body and therefore has a special relationship with it. Ibn al-Malāḥimī notes that numerous bodies arise at the same time. Why should a particular soul then be related to a particular body?

Ibn al-Malāḥimī now turns to the proofs of the philosophers. He begins, evidently quoting al-Jadīdī's book, with arguments of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī against the view that the soul could arise out of the mixture of the body. Al-Rāzī pointed out that if living beings were constituted by a mixture of natures, this mixture obviously could not be exactly the

same for all of them, but would have to fall within a certain range of mixtures. Some of the mixtures found among animals, however, are clearly harmful and destructive to others, such as the poisons produced by snakes and scorpions. How could mutually destructive mixtures constitute living beings?

Al-Jadīdī answered this argument, suggesting that it did not indicate that the soul was not the mixture or arose out of the mixture. The naturalists were agreed that all bodies and substances were affected by the impact of others only insofar as they were prepared for it, like wood, wax and oil accept the impact of fire to burn, unlike stones and water. Why should not the mixture constitute the organism (*bay'a*) that accepts the soul, which is merely an accident? Ibn al-Malāḥimī contests al-Rāzī's claim that the mixtures of different living beings may be contrary and destructive of each other. The poison of snakes and scorpions is not part of their mixture, but is employed by them as a weapon. Humans can consume the meat of snakes and scorpions without being harmed by it. He notes further that some philosophers do not consider animals to have souls. Why should the theologians not maintain that human actions require a specific mixture which differs from the mixture of other animals?

Another argument of Abū Bakr al-Rāzī was based on the observation that single species like wheat and barley unmixed with anything else generate only their own kind and nothing else. Only when two species are mixed may they generate something different, like vinegar and honey (generating oxymel). We find that man is composed of coarse earthen and watery parts which by their nature move towards the centre.<sup>6</sup> How then does the voluntary motion of the body in all directions occur if there is nothing besides it? There must be some other substance which compels the body to move in other directions than its natural one. The soul cannot be generated by this natural motion, for in that case it would be both preserving and not preserving the natural attributes of the body.

Al-Jadīdī objects that the bodies of animals comprise both coarse and subtle constituents. Their specific mixture constitutes the organism (*bay'a*) that is capable of the voluntary motion compelling the body to move contrary to its natural movement. Why should this specific mixture not be identified with what is called *naḥs*? Ibn al-Malāḥimī supports this argument and refers to such special properties of some composite bodies as the magnetic stone attracting metal and scammony (*saqamūniyā*) relieving constipation.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī then takes up the proofs of the later philosophers, Ibn Sīnā and his school, for the existence of a self-subsistent immaterial soul.<sup>7</sup> They argue that points of rational knowledge were finite, and there were single ones. Single points are not subject to division. If their locus in man were the divisible human body, the points of knowledge

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<sup>6</sup> The text in the manuscript reads from (*an*) the centre. Presumably *ilā* should be read.

<sup>7</sup> The seven proofs of Ibn Sīnā and his school quoted and refuted here by Ibn al-Malāḥimī correspond to proofs 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10 of the ten proofs mentioned and refuted by al-Ghazālī in his *Tabāḥiṭ al-Falāsifa*. See Al-Ghazālī: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. and transl. Michael C. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 186–204.

also would have to be divisible, which is impossible. Their locus in which they inhere must thus be a spiritual, indivisible substance. This proof, they claimed, rested on two self-evident premises, that everything that inheres in a divisible thing must be divisible and that a single point of knowledge is indivisible. Ibn al-Malāḥimī counters that neither of these premises is self-evident and both can in fact be disproved. A single indivisible attribute can inhere in a divisible body and, according to the philosophers, even a dot is divisible into parts.

The philosophers also asserted that if knowledge were seated in a part of the heart, it would be possible for ignorance to be seated in another part, just as blackness and whiteness may be found in different parts of the heart. The human thus could at once be knowing and ignorant about the same matter, which is absurd. Ibn al-Malāḥimī replies that whoever holds that knowledge and ignorance inhere in the heart considers the heart a single locus. Knowledge and ignorance being contraries, they can inhere in it only successively. Whoever considers knowledge to be a relation (*idāfa*) between the heart and the object of knowledge likewise holds that a single matter cannot produce contrary effects at the same time, and whoever views knowledge and ignorance as states (*ḥāla*) of the living being holds that contrary states can only succeed each other.

A further argument of the philosophers was that if the intellect cognized its objects through a corporeal tool, it would be incapable of cognizing itself. The intellect, however, cognizes itself. Ibn al-Malāḥimī answers that the philosophers built this argument on principles not accepted by the *kalām* theologians. These hold that the intellect does not cognize anything, but rather the living being cognizes objects through the intellect, which is the tool of the living being. The tool does not cognize anything. The philosophers further maintained that corporeal tools such as sight and hearing were incapable of perceiving themselves. Ibn al-Malāḥimī questions why the intellect should not be different in that respect since the identity of everything, including the intellect, can in principle be cognized, while sight in itself is invisible.

Another argument of the philosophers was that the perceptive faculties of human beings which employ corporeal tools like sight and hearing are subject to fatigue and exhaustion by continuous use or by major stress. Tremendous noise or extremely bright light may even damage and destroy the sense of hearing or seeing so that much more moderate sound and visible things are no longer perceived. The rational faculty, in contrast, becomes ever more powerful by continuous use and solving difficult rational problems and then will grasp minor questions more easily. When the rational faculty occasionally is affected by fatigue, it is because it has employed the imaginative faculty, which serves the rational faculty and may be weakened by heavy use. Ibn al-Malāḥimī again protests that it is not the intellect that perceives anything, but rather the living person employing the intellect, and observes that people are fatigued by prolonged rational investigation just as they are fatigued by prolonged use of their other perceptive faculties. When rational investigators are exhausted by long exertion, they seek the company of the masses of common people in order to think about other matters. Humans, moreover, differ in respect to the speed with which they perceive intelligibles, some being

slower than others. If the perception of intelligibles were not dependent on corporeal tools, this would not be the case, since this difference cannot be caused by the intellect.

The next argument of the philosophers is related to the previous one. They asserted that the strength of all parts of the body declined after the age of forty, yet the rational faculty strengthened in most cases after that age. If the rational faculty were present in the body, it would invariably have to weaken together with the rest of the body. The reason that it does sometimes decline is that the soul may be preoccupied with the concerns of the body, such as sense perception, imagination, lust, anger, fear, grief, and pain which detract from the power of reasoning. Ibn al-Malāḥimī objects that these facts do not indicate that the soul is not present in the body and self-subsistent. The intellect may inhere in the heart and not weaken together with the other tools of the body after the age of forty because the mixture of the heart differs from other mixtures. This is indeed more reasonable than the claim of the philosophers that the soul is self-subsistent, for in that case it would not need the body for its acts and could not be distracted from them by any disease of the body.

We find, moreover, that the minds which strengthen after the age of forty are those constantly occupied with rational investigation and the acquisition of knowledge. Otiose minds, especially those of villagers and vagabonds, become dull after the age of forty. We similarly find that beasts of burden regularly employed by us in work remain strong in their action in old age. The philosophers in their argument thus ought to attribute self-subsistent souls to beasts of burden as they attribute them to humans.

The philosophers also question how the human being can be identified with its body which is subject to constant change. The body ever grows and disintegrates and is altered by nourishment. How can this totally changed body be considered as exactly the same individual? What remains of the individual from childhood to old age is only its knowledge. This indicates that the soul must have an existence separate from the body and that the body is merely its tool. Ibn al-Malāḥimī replies that the identity of the present Zayd with the Zayd of many years ago is primary knowledge accepted by all reasonable people. The philosophers here abandon obvious fact for sophistry. Their argument is easily countered by noting that a particular human body has certain essential parts which are basic for his identity and cannot be changed, and other, superfluous parts which are subject to change. If the philosophers assert that the visible changes of the body by nourishment require the existence of a self-subsistent soul, they must attribute such a soul also to all animals.

The final argument of the philosophers mentioned by Ibn al-Malāḥimī is that the rational faculty perceives the universals of intelligibles stripped from particular material circumstances. Thus it comprehends absolute man even while perceiving a specific individual human conditioned in time and space. It is then able to retain the abstract reality of man even in the absence of any particular human being. Only the soul as an immaterial being and intellect is capable of such perception of universals, not the body with its sense perception. Ibn al-Malāḥimī counters that immaterial forms of material composites can equally be perceived by the mirror and by eyesight and does not require

the perceiver to be immaterial. Universals of composite beings like man, moreover, cannot be perceived or remembered entirely bare of all circumstantial properties such as position and measure.

Ibn al-Malāḥimī's chapter on the human soul is a preliminary to his critical discussion of the philosophers' views on the hereafter and the survival of the soul. He considered their denial of the physical resurrection of the dead and physical reward and punishment in paradise and hell as entirely incompatible with the teaching of Islam. Thus he vigorously refuted Ibn Sīnā's emanationist assertion that restoration (*i'āda*) of something that had vanished or been annihilated is absurd and insisted that the eschatology envisaged in the Qur'ān is rationally possible. Underlying the debate was the conflict between the freely acting Creator God of the theologians and the eternal Necessitating Cause of the philosophers.