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A Translation of Ṭūsī's Three Philosophical Questions

Naṣīr ad-Dīn Ṭūsī (1201-1274)

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Introduction

The following is a translation of three philosophical questions raised by Ṭūsī (Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, 1201–1274)¹ in his letter to Khusrawshāhī (Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Khusrawshāhī, 1184-1254)². These critical questions are related to three main fields of philosophy: Philosophy of Nature, Philosophical Psychology (or Philosophy of the Soul) and Philosophical Theology which is traditionally subsumed as one of the proper subtopics of Metaphysics. Although Ṭūsī did not receive any recorded response from Khusrawshāhī, his short letter attracted considerable scholarly attention and received some remarkable responses, in later Islamic philosophy³ and thus provided an exemplar of the traditional technique of debating by way of “question-answer” correspondence.⁴

Translation⁵

First Question

Since it is impossible for a motion to exist without being at some definite speed, [then] the speed must have a certain role in the existence of the individual motions⁶, inasmuch as they are individual. [On the other hand], the quiddity⁷ of the speed is not realized except by time; therefore, time enters into the causality of the individual motions. Then, how is it possible that a particular motion⁸ is assigned the cause of the

existence of time?⁹ It cannot be said [in response] that:

“The motion, inasmuch as it is [an absolute] motion, is the cause of time, and, inasmuch as it is a certain motion is individualized by time -- Just as the form, inasmuch as it is [an absolute] form, precedes the matter¹⁰, and, inasmuch as it is a certain form, is individualized by it.”¹¹

Because the motion, inasmuch as it is [an absolute] motion, is not the cause of time; otherwise, all motions would have some role in the causation of time. [Rather], the motion is the cause of time, only inasmuch as it is a certain particular motion in the external [world]. So, what is the way to resolve this problem?

Second Question¹²

Why those who claim that “what has no bearer (or locus) of the possibility of its existence and its privation, then it is not possible for it to come into existence after nonexistence or cease to exist after existing,” have judged that the human soul has come to be [in time], whereas they refused to accept the possibility of its annihilation [after death]? Now, if they made the [human]body the bearer of the possibility of [the soul's] existence, then why they have not also made it the bearer of its privation?¹³ And, if they made the human soul -- due to its separateness from that in which it inheres -- not having the bearer of the possibility of [its] privation, and hence it is not possible to cease to exist after existing; then why they have not made the human soul, for the same reason, not having the bearer of the possibility of [its] existence so that its existence after the original privation would be impossible?

[On the other hand], how could it be permissible for them to make a material body the bearer of the possibility of [existence of] a separate substance distinct in essence from it? Now, if they make the human soul -- insofar as it is the

principle of a certain species form belonging to that [material] body -- to be the bearer of the possibility of existence, then why they have not made it, from the same standpoint, the bearer of the possibility of privation? In short, what is the difference between the two in the equality of relations?

Third Question

If the reason of the procession of the multiple from one and the same cause [namely, the First Cause] inheres in the essence of the first effect -- like necessity, contingency¹⁴ and intellection, as was said¹⁵ -- then where did that multiplicity come from? If they proceeded from the cause, so either they proceeded simultaneously [all at once] or according to some order. If they proceeded simultaneously, the reason of the procession of the multiple from the First Cause would not be a certain multiplicity inherent in the essence of the first effect. If they proceeded according to some order, the first effect would not be the first effect. And if they did not proceed from the First Cause, then it is possible that there exists some multiplicity without any dependence upon the First Cause; whereas all of these options are absurd. So, what is the way out of these difficulties?

Notes:

¹ For an introduction to Ṭūsī's life and works see: Morewedge, Parviz, "Ṭūsī, Naṣir al-Dīn al-," in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science and Technology in Islam*. Editor-in-Chief, Ibrahim Kalin. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Volume II. pp. 386-390.

² For a very brief introduction to Khusrawshāhī see: Anawati, G. C., "Abd-Al-Hamid B. Isa," in: *Encyclopedia Iranica*," I/1, an updated online version at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abd-al-hamid-b-isa> (accessed on 12 January 2014).

³ All these questions have been responded to and discussed in detail by Ṣadrā (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirāzī, 1571–1635) in his treatise: *Ajwiba al-masā'il al-Nasīriyya* (see below).

⁴ For more on this technique in the medieval Islamic milieu, cf. Daiber, H. “Masā'il wa-Adjwiba (Questions and Answers),” in: *The Encyclopedia of Islam (New Edition)*. Edited by C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, B. Lewis and CH. Pellat. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991. Volume VI, pp. 636–639.

⁵ My translation is based on a recent critical edition of Ṭūsī's letter to Khusrawshāhī, which is published in Ṣadrā's treatise: *Ajwiba al-masā'il al-Nasīriyya*, edited by Abdullah Shakiba together with some other Sadra's treatises in a collection under the title: *Risāla fi al-Qutb wa al-Mintaqa and Ajwiba al-masā'il*, Tehran: Bunyād-i Hikmat-i Islāmi-yi Ṣadrā [Sadra Islamic Philosophy Research Institute], AH 1378.

⁶ An individual motion (*al-ḥaraka al-shakhsīyya*; pl. *al-ḥarakāt al-shakhsīyya*) means *this* or *that* particular motion which is individualized in the natural world.

⁷ *Māhiyya*; literally means “whatness” and might be rendered as “essence”, as well.

⁸ This particular motion is the circular motion of the outermost celestial sphere (*al-falak al-aqsā*). Traditionally, it was maintained, time results from the universal westward motion of this sphere.

⁹ Ṭūsī's point is that, here, an apparent circularity in causal dependence would result--which is absurd.

¹⁰ *Hayūlā*; a transliteration of the Greek word *hulē*. It has been translated by some scholars as “prime matter” or “first matter”, for example in: A.-M. Goichon, *Lexique de la langue philosophique d'Ibn Sina* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1938), p.413. But, as Avicenna points out in his *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd (Book of Definitions)*, *hayūlā* has two distinct meanings. The first one is “matter” in its strictest sense which truly deserves to be called “prime matter”. In this sense, “prime matter” is the most fundamental sort of matter, lacking all positive determinations of forms, which explains a thing's pure potentiality and which is the absolute stratum for all physical change; in words of Avicenna, it “does not have, in itself, any form particularizing it, except in the sense of potentiality.” Cf. Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Ḥudūd (Book of Definitions)* published with an English translation by Kiki Kennedy-Day, in: Kennedy-Day, Kiki, *Books on Definition in Islamic Philosophy: The Limits of Words*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003. p. 105 (English translation), p.166 (Arabic text).

In some Arabic texts, “prime matter” is expressed as *al-hayūlā al-ūlā* or *al-hayūlā al-muṭlaqa* (literally: absolute matter). The second meaning of the term *hayūlā* (as indicated, for example, by Avicenna in the above-

mentioned source; *Ibid.*) is not restricted to the featureless prime matter. In this broad sense, the terminology of “matter” is also applicable to some underlying stuff which is an informed (i.e. a thing that has received formation from some form) proximate matter, such as one of the four elements in natural objects, or the clay, iron or wax of which artifacts are formed. So I reserve the expression “prime matter” for *al-hayūlā al-ūlā* and I prefer to translate *hayūlā* as “matter” with no further qualification.

¹¹ In *Metaphysics (Ilāhiyyāt)* of *Shifāʾ (Kitāb al-Shifāʾ, “Metaphysics,”* II.4), Avicenna argues, among other things, for (1) the ontological priority of the form to the matter, and for (2) their very close relationship and mutual dependence, so that they cannot exist apart from each other. In this picture, the actual existence or subsistence of the matter is caused by the presence of the form as the active principle. In speaking of matter as the principle of individuation, we are referring to matter that has entered into composition with a form and that functions as the individuating factor that distinguishes one member of a species from another.

¹² Ṭūsī’s criticism, in this question, is directed against a famous argument for immortality of the human intellect (soul) which has been presented by Avicenna in his major philosophical works. See, for example: *Psychology or De Anima (Nafs)* of *Shifāʾ (Kitāb al-Shifāʾ, “Psychology”* V.4). Herbert Davidson summarized this argument as follows:

“Avicenna’s second and more general argument for immortality reasoned that objects actually existing yet subject to destruction contain two distinct characteristics, the actuality of continued existence and the possibility of being destroyed.; two distinct factors in the object must be responsible for the two characteristics; but the soul, a noncomposite substance, cannot contain distinct factors, and consequently cannot have the possibility of being destroyed.” (Davidson, Herbert, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. p.153

¹³ To put this in other words, Ṭūsī asks why Avicenna and his followers do not allow the human body to be the bearer or substratum of the potentiality (or possibility) of “being perished”? Why they, in their discussion of the temporal origination (coming-to-be) of the human soul, did allow the human body to be the bearer of its potentiality of origination? For Ṭūsī, there is no justification for this difference.

¹⁴ *Imkān*, I think, in this context, “contingency” (rather than “possibility”) would be a more appropriate translation. I am grateful to Parviz Morewedge for this point.

¹⁵ According to the Avicennian theory of emanation/creation, the only effect which is immediately and directly produced by God (the Necessary Existent, the First Cause) is the highest separate entity, the first Intellect

(or the “first effect”). This is based on the principle that “from the one, insofar as it is absolutely one in all respects, only one effect can proceed without any mediation.” If this is so, how can the First Cause produce a multiplicity of effects, the World? The answer is that it is created through the intermediary of the first Intellect, and this, in accordance with the above-mentioned principle (i.e. “from one only one proceeds”), would be to introduce some kind of multiplicity in the first Intellect. This multiplicity, according to Avicenna in *Metaphysics of Shīfā* (“Metaphysics,” IX.4) and as indicated by Ṭusī in the above passage, consists of several aspects (or dimensions) in the first Intellect/effect, including: 1) its necessary existence through the cause, 2) its being possible of existence (or contingent) in itself, and 3) its intellection (or, intellectual apprehension) of itself as well as of its cause.

Glossary of Arabic -English Terms

possibility, contingency	امكان
human soul	انسانية
body	بدن
intellection	تعقل
body	جسم
material body	- مادي
substance	جوهر
separate substance	- مفارق
bearer, locus	حامل
coming-to-be	حدوث
motion	حركة
individual motion	- شخصية
time	زمان
speed	سرعة و بطؤ
proceeding	صدور
form	صورة
species form	- نوعية
privation, nonexistence	عدم
cause	علة
First Cause	- اولى
causation	علية
multiplicity	كثرة
multiple	كثير
matter	مادة
prime matter	- اولى
quiddity, essence, whatness	ماهية

absurd	محال
effect	معلول
first effect	- اوّل
soul	نفس
necessity	وجوب
existence	وجود