

ARABIC THOUGHT AND ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

Aziz Al-Azmeh

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AZIZ AL-AZMEH

Volume 1

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1986

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-64437-2 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-07906-5 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-83072-0 (Volume 1)

eISBN: 978-0-203-38146-5 (Volume 1)

Publisher's Note

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Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies

EXETER ARABIC AND ISLAMIC SERIES

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Aziz Al-Azmeh

ARABIC THOUGHT and ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

AZIZ AL-AZMEH



CROOM HELM

London • Sydney • Dover, New Hampshire

© 1986 Aziz Al-Azmeh

Croom Helm Ltd, Provident House, Burrell Row,
Beckenham, Kent BR3 1AT

Croom Helm Australia Pty Ltd, Suite 4, 6th Floor,
64-76 Kippax Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010, Australia

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Al-Azmeh, Aziz

Arabic thought and Islamic societies.

1. Arab countries — Intellectual life

I. Title

181'.9 DS36.85

ISBN 0-7099-0584-X

Croom Helm, 51 Washington Street, Dover,
New Hampshire 03820, USA

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Al-Azmeh, Aziz

Arabic thought and Islamic societies.

Bibliography: p.

Includes Index.

1. Islamic empire — intellectual life. 2. Islam —
doctrines. I. Title.

DS36.855.A96 1986 909'.097671 86-6229

ISBN 0-7099-0584-X

Filmset by Mayhew Typesetting, Bristol, England

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

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Preface

It would clearly have been impossible to immerse oneself fully in the medium of Arabic scientific discourse in the Middle Ages. In a book on Arabic libraries quoted elsewhere, Youssef Eche estimated the number of works written in Arabic until the beginning of the fourteenth century A.D. to have been not less than 900,000. Most of these were ephemeral, and of the few that outlived their moment and were of epochal significance, I have had the privilege of sampling works, both major and minor, which cover almost the entire range of scientific activity conducted in the medium of Arabic. But though this sampling may not have been exhaustive, it was deliberately intended to be conceptually comprehensive, especially as one of the assumptions on which this book rests is one of historical closure and internal integration, in which it would not be theoretically impossible to start from virtually any one point and arrive at the others, on the condition that the structural features of the ensemble had been made manifest. The present work is an exploratory synthesis of material based on these samples, and is, by the very nature of things, a synthetic survey, one that is deliberately designed to detect openings, delimit conceptions, identify problems and orient further research.

The book opens with an attempt to identify and describe a number of distinctive features which compose the elementary principles of Arabic thought in the Middle Ages. From these distinctive features are generated, by various permutations, the various positions, theses, ideas, polemic thrusts and other ideational units whose ensemble is Arabic thought in the Middle Ages. These distinctive features are also the technical conditions of possibility of these individual ideas, their conformation in schools and tendencies of thought and of the over-all historical and intellectual order which is their ultimate historical outcome.

Not unnaturally, these distinctive features are of the nature of primary metaphysical principles in the widest sense of the term, and constitute the rough equivalent of, say, the metaphysical foundations of modern natural science as investigated by scholars such as Burtt and Koyré. They

provide profiles according to which things are described and related. Thus hierarchy, opposition, sympathy, potency and their correlatives are principles investigated *in situ*, and an attempt is made to show how they and their associated notions underlie conceptualisations of all fields of investigation to which the attention of medieval Arabic thought was directed. To arrive at these distinctive features, scientific discourse from a variety of fields was decomposed and then reconstituted in terms of these implicitly or explicitly structuring elements. Metaphysical and natural-scientific texts were of paramount importance here. It is in such texts that these general distinctive features were articulated in their most explicit forms, not to speak of their most accentuated and pronounced expression, which renders the metaphysical and natural-scientific redaction of these elementary principles their most widely encompassing of forms, so that the normal and 'average' expression of these same principles could be construed and generated from these encompassing forms. It is this general form, in accentuated expression, which unravels the conceptual concordances which a purely doctrinal and idea-historical approach would occlude and obfuscate.

Thus it can be shown that there is a fundamental equivalence between, say, philosophical and dogmatic theological conceptions of composition, despite the cat-and-dog antagonism which often related philosophers and dogmatic theologians. Similarly, from the same fund of notions relating to the idea of composition are derived elemental composites and the forms of composition that characterise the political and ethical orders; whereas texts relating to natural composition are primarily used to unravel these fundamental notions, it will be seen that the generation of notions of political composition from these fundamental principles appears almost natural. Not only does this involve extrapolation, for this in itself is inadequate; it involves primarily the re-establishment, or the elicitation, of these underlying principles in political discourse with the heuristic guidance of findings from metaphysics and natural science. These elementary principles, therefore, are established in the discursive context where they are most explicitly developed, and then seen to be valorised in other discursive contexts. It will be observed that an author or a school of thought might employ a certain notion in a particular context, and vehemently deny it in another. A case in point is the rejection of the concept of nature and of the four elements by an Ash'arite physician in metaphysics and dogmatic theology, and his use of the same notion in his professional activity; another would be Ibn Sīnā's rejection of the possibility of alchemy and Ṭuḡhrā'ī's demonstration of its possibility on the basis of Avicennan premisses. Such matters belie neither contradiction

nor worse. They simply indicate that concepts are distinct from doctrines, and that contradiction is not a particularly relevant point of investigation, but is one which finds its bearings in wider, extra-discursive contexts.

The book then tackles the question of signification in Chapter 3. It sees this as a particular relation among others that had been studied earlier, not as a notion with particular privileges which makes it anything over and above being a relation. The modes of signification are studied with the aim of describing the manners in which knowledge is elicited and constructed, and the discursive and extra-discursive principles underlying this elicitation and construction. In this, as in previous discussions, emphasis is placed on the isolation of elementary conceptual parameters, and then on aspects of their valorisation in varying contexts.

After the elementary principles have been described, the book moves on to another, historical, plane, that of the paradigmatic configurations which are the sciences of Arabic thought. It must be stressed here that 'science' is employed in the most general of terms, the equivalent perhaps of *Wissenschaft*, to indicate any historically-recognised and self-perpetuating body of investigation concerning a particular object. Arabic paradigmatic formations, which utilised the elementary principles described in the first half of the book, are briefly described and then directed towards their doctrinal being, that is to say their institution in society and polity through the educational and pedagogic systems. It is these which are seen as the repositories and guarantors of continuity and tradition, provided tradition is regarded not as an inert being, but as a continuous elaboration of themes and ideas which are only putatively original. Finally, an attempt is made to weave together the conceptual, doctrinal and social aspects of the previous investigation in a way which suggests the manner in which they were correlative and integrated into an historico-cultural unity.

The historical epoch which is regarded, for the purposes of this book, as closed — i.e. as complete and self-impelling — is roughly that beginning in the fourth/tenth century and ending with the work of Suyūṭī, who died in 911/1505. Use has occasionally been made of work antedating or following this roughly delimited period, but such work is seen to be conceptually integral to works in our period. It would be pointless pedantry to set definite dates that might serve the main purpose of this book, which is the description of Arabic thought in its finished and consummated form. Any such attempt would have to decide what body of statements it was that represented the first consummate instance of, say, theology or law; the proposition is absurd. The works employed here

are integrated according to the manners suggested in the body of this book, and it is the modes of their integration, not their beginning in calendar time, that guarantees their integration, realised for us today by virtue of the very fact that it could viably be taken for the unitary object of analysis. It goes without saying that the elements integrated could viably, if singly, be integrated in other contexts: medieval Christian, pagan or other contexts, and indeed, the similarities between many topical and conceptual features of Arabic and other contexts of thought are striking. But the mode of integration and realisation studied here is specific to the closed system of Arabic thought in the Middle Ages.

The integration across the epoch indicated extends geographically to encompass societies which had an officially Islamic polity in the period under review. The book treats of thought expressed in Arabic, much as one writes on Latin culture in the European Middle Ages and in late antiquity. Arabic was the sole or at least the principal language of learning. It is in this sense that the thought studied in this book is Arabic thought, and in this sense it incorporates work generated by Christians, Jews and Sabaeans, to which reference is made. One might also surmise that Syriac thought in the Middle Ages could not have been conceptually distinct from that described here. Not only did they share a common patrimony which goes very far beyond the ostensible Qur'ānic and other scriptural 'origins' of Arabic thought, but they were both part of a common cultural experience. It is not by hazard or by a freak of a circumstance that the metrical structures, for instance, of Hebrew and of Persian poetry in the epoch under review were closely modelled on that of Arabic. All these languages, and the religions to which they were sometimes correlated, formed part of one unified culture, and the description of societies in this book as 'Islamic' is a political one and, equally important, carries a macro-cultural sense indicating an essential high-cultural, categorical and structural scholarly unity. Another matter of related relevance is that, as the reader will note, only scant attention is given to Shī'ite works, with the exception of Ismā'īlī works, which have a particular distinctiveness. The reason for this is that it carried out separate and independent careers before it cohered under the Safavid aegis, and was not generically different from Sunnite thought.

* * *

Studies of Arabic thought in the Middle Ages have generally borne the

full burden of the orientalist tradition. Two primary elements constituted this tradition in its original form and ethos, both of which have shown a strange resistance to advances in the human sciences and to changing circumstances in the past one and a half centuries. The orientalist tradition was fashioned from the confluence of a positivist philology on the one hand, and a field to which this philology was applied, a field to which the oriental philologist was related by various cadences, grades and forms of antipathy, ultimately reducible to political and cultural antagonism shared by the oriental philologist and his wider milieu. Implicit or (less so nowadays) explicit antagonism was articulated in terms of tropes and *topoi* in terms of which oriental societies, histories and matters generally were expressed, analysed, typified, thought and identified, and which informed matters oriental within the bounds of a fantastic specificity and otherness. It is perhaps this very conception of impermeable otherness which prevented oriental philology from deriving benefit or advancement from refinements and conceptual developments achieved in the philological study of rather more normal languages and histories, as in the context of classical and romance studies, not to speak of historical, sociological and linguistic sciences in general. The present work intends to revise the present state of scholarship on medieval Arabic thought by tackling both components: it proposes to incorporate what has become the common stock of historical and other social and human sciences into the field, and to shed the topical repertoire of orientalism.

Positivist philology rests on a number of simple assumptions which are as misleading as they appear self-evident. It is assumed that a text — any text — is endowed, almost by force of nature herself, with an intrinsic and finite objectivity of meaning. It is, moreover, assumed that this meaning is immediately accessible with simple reference to the lexicon and to the immediate and identifiable historical origin in which the reality of this lexicon is thought to reside, so that the intellectual effort expended in this search for reality is one for which the scholar is deemed prepared and duly qualified with his or her acquisition of the standard techniques of library use. Underlying this matter is the assumption that 'reality' and discourse are in direct and immediate communion, with words being the direct transcript of discrete things. Correlatively, a rather elementary form of historicism operates as the diachronic context of such investigations, a historicism expressed in terms of the categories of origin, influence, originality and decline. Historicism normally rests on a teleology, and the teleology animating orientalist historicism has two termini. The first is the normal terminus of historical development, the bourgeois-capitalist epoch which is employed as the yardstick of normalcy

so that other societies are regarded as its mirror image, the antonym of its components. This oriental societies, in orientalist discourse, have in common with other societies, such as those of medieval Europe or of 'aboriginal' peoples, and leads to the construal of these societies in terms of contrastive pairs relative to modern Western societies; thus if normal societies are characterised by reason, then oriental societies should be bound to irrational belief, and if normal societies be distinguished by order, oriental societies fail to find a mean between disorder and tyranny. To this ideological terminus of orientalist historicism, from which the topics according to which the orient is apprehended are derived, is added one derived from an inverted historicism. The second terminus, which is the methodological component of orientalist philology, locates the essence of things oriental not at the end, but in the beginning, the most accomplished state of these things oriental whose history is one of decline and of a betrayal of this beginning. Thus the Qur'ān, for instance, becomes not only the ostensible fount of all things Islamic, but also their explanatory principle. Things are thus, as a matter of principle and of methodological inevitability, reduced to their origins, either to explain them, or to measure their degree of authenticity, or both. 'In-authentic' matters are then attributed to extra-Islamic influences which involve a greater degree of spirituality or rationality, and this constitutes their 'explanation'.

By contrast, this book does not seek originality, nor does it chase wild hares in the search for lines of filiation and charters of authenticity binding one text or statement to another. Neither does this book seek doctrines as such, nor does it, as philological historians of Arabic thought have generally done, seek to commune exclusively with genius. The authenticity of a particular view is not a concern of this study, neither are singular statements the primary units of the present investigation. What are being sought are matters which, in important ways, are anti-thetical to the topical and other concerns of traditional orientalist philology. While philological groundwork is undoubtedly essential, it is so in the same sense as common literacy is essential to intellectual endeavour in general, and is by no means the end of the affair nor the accomplishment of scholarly work. What discussions this book offers of discrete historical-philological matters, usually in footnotes, such as the discussion of the connection between Arabic thought and Stoicism or Hermeticism, are intended to contribute to the philological wherewithall of the field, not to underline the intrinsic importance of such matters nor to service an eccentric antiquarianism.

Instead of seeking originality, matters such as regularity have been

investigated. Instead of influence, continuity according to principles underlying both antecedent and consequent, a continuity of which the events in ostensible filiation are instances. Instead of the ultimately ethical conception of authenticity which relates an event to an ostensible origin, this book seeks historicity and discursive reality. In other words, the universe of scientific ideas is regarded as a field of regularity, of constant motifs, categories and relations which describe a unified epochal unit — Arabic thought in the Middle Ages — and of which particular ideas are instances generated from the particular transformation of this anterior field of possibilities. In terms of the history of ideas, which only truly exists in terms of the history of scientific formations as in this book, or of ideological and cultural structures, these unified epochal units represent the logical and scientific integration of an epoch, a correlative of the cultural and historical unity of an historical period.

An historical period does not manifest what it takes for normalcy, and therefore for regularity and 'authenticity', in its outstanding examples. Genius is therefore not the true expression of the historical unity of an epochal phenomenon, but is rather the tolerably anomalous elaboration of its motifs and categories. Epochal tendencies are rather manifested in the common run of ideas, the primary grey matter which carries it, just as oriental philology is manifested less by its outstanding examples and advances than by the oral instruction which carries over its normalcy from generation to generation in university faculties. This is why an attempt has been made in this book to seek out lesser writers in addition to the more celebrated ones; the former may have a less proprietary claim to current ideas, but they are in fact their medium, the occasion for their daily occurrence and are therefore the truer indices of the vitality and of the scientific and cultural relevance of such ideas and categories.

In conceptual terms, only the common patrimony of contemporary human sciences has been brought to bear. There has been, for instance, no thorough employment of what is commonly termed 'deconstruction', although this is not absent. Most of the analytical procedures employed will be familiar to readers acquainted with historical and philological research outside the bounds of orientalism, particularly in the history of sciences and discursive formations, in the political and social aspects of knowledge, in the theory of discourse and in the vast fields of intellectual history in the widest of senses. One very important impulse derived from the sciences of man is the refusal to impute to Arabic thought in the Middle Ages divisions that correspond to the current departmental specialisations in European universities. Thus there has been no urge to see an economic science, for instance, in Arabic thought; phenomena

which correspond to what is today termed 'economics' are treated in their own context — in this case, theological and metaphysical. Correlatively, there has been no reservation about treating matters which may be anathema today as conceptually central. Such for instance was alchemy; it was not an insinuation on the part of irrationality, but a location where a number of very central concepts were developed. Arabic thought in the Middle Ages, like medieval European thought or Greek thought properly studied, and indeed like the conceptual systems of 'aboriginal' peoples, is utterly other and foreign today. It is this difference which is underlined, not the continuity of a mythological Islamic essence, for history is the domain of discontinuity in addition to harbouring regularities. This assumption is a cardinal precondition for studying our object as one which is self-sufficient, independent of us and our presumptions of an apocalyptic objectivity, and thus one which can be made to yield itself to us without us having to conjure it up to ourselves in the form of our antithesis or our incomplete self. Only then will it be possible to conceive of Arabic thought as something other than the series of absences and inadequacies which much modern scholarship makes of it: absence of reason except under seige, absence of form, absence of creativity, absence of spirituality. The difference between medieval Arabic and modern thought is a real and determinate difference; Arabic thought in the Middle Ages is not simply the domain of utter or simply antithetical otherness, but of an otherness which is comprehensible in terms of the social and human sciences, whose proper task it is to unravel social and human topics, wherever they may be. It is indeed the generality which modern historical sciences can generate which permits the scholar to study fields on which no sufficient monographic work exists, as is the case with many topics addressed in the present work. Given this situation, it is perhaps not surprising that the conceptual tools used are not as finely tuned and as thoroughly employed as the author would have wished; but such is the hazard of all exploratory work, that it cannot be as consummated as it ought to be, and that it provokes sanctimonious territorialist instincts especially as the field has so far been fragmentarily studied and researched.

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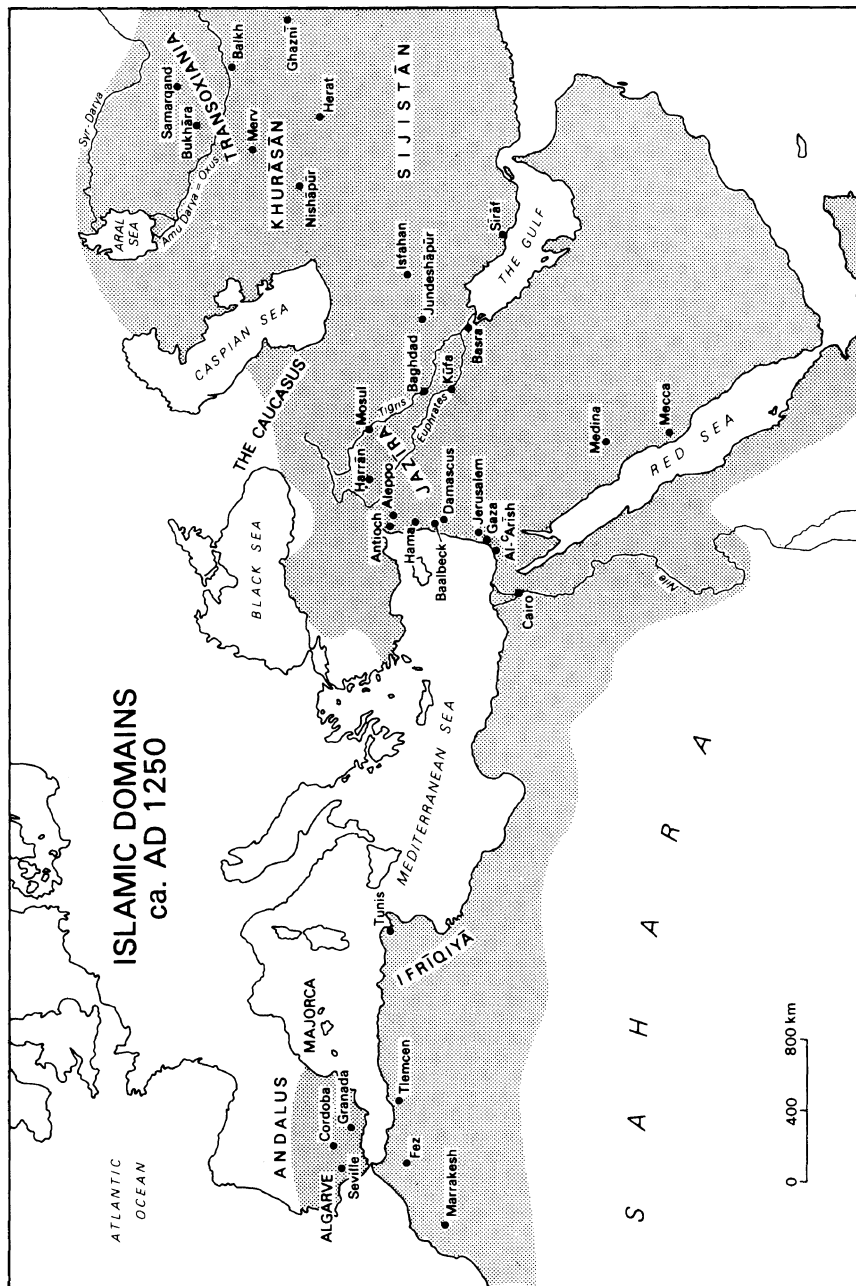
I owe a debt of gratitude to libraries which particularly facilitated research on this book over many years: that of the American University of Beirut,

the British Library, the Exeter University Library, the Institut Français des Etudes Arabes in Damascus, the Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft in Beirut and the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. The Librarian and staff of the Faculty of Letters Library at Kuwait University treated me as an honoured guest and accorded me such privileges and unfailing help as are unique, and I am particularly grateful to them. I should also like to thank M.A. Cook for reading the typescript of this book and for making helpful suggestions. I.R. Netton has been an exemplary colleague, having read the various chapters of this book as they emerged with sympathy and encouragement. M.A. Shaban availed me of his constant friendship, which made possible the writing of this book in very difficult circumstances. The contribution of K. Sen to the fashioning of this book has been inimitable, at once unique and in no need for public announcement. D. Croom is unique amongst publishers for his good sense and energy, both of which qualities, along with the staff of Croom Helm, gave the present work smooth passage. I should also like to thank R. Fry for preparing the map, and P. Auchterlonie for the preparation of the index.

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Abbreviations

<i>BEO</i>	Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales
<i>BSOAS</i>	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
<i>DA</i>	Dirāsāt 'Arabiyya
<i>EI</i>	Encyclopedia of Islam, new edn, (Leiden-London, 1960 ff. (in progress))
<i>IBLA</i>	Institut des belles lettres arabes
<i>IJMES</i>	International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies
<i>JESHO</i>	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
<i>JRAS</i>	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
<i>MIDEO</i>	Mémoires de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales
<i>REI</i>	Revue d'Etudes Islamiques
<i>SI</i>	Studia Islamica
<i>ZDMG</i>	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft



Chapter One

Metaphysical Foundations of Arabic Thought, 1: Hierarchy, Substance and Combination

Arabic thought in the Middle Ages reclaimed a very ancient metaphysical repertoire in its conception of both terrestrial and extraterrestrial beings. This repertoire is rehearsed explicitly in works of metaphysics, in pronouncements of metaphysical whimsy scattered throughout Arabic *Schriřtium*, in speculative and sagely reflections of a literary and scientific type as well as in political and social writings, concerned as they are with notions of order and rectitude. We also find it implicit in several other textual locations which will become explicit in the course of the following pages. At the heart of the conception of order that derives from this ancient repertoire is the idea of hierarchy, for the world of men, along with that of inanimate substances and that of incorporeal beings, is bound to the location to which it is assigned in an hierarchical order of things within which everything has its station. Just as there seems to be a natural priority of foodstuffs over one another, one reflected in the order in which food is served to guests (fruit first, followed by meat and ending with water),¹ there is a system of hierarchical precedence by means of which all things are con-joined in a system of order. Things descend along this chain of being² from God down through the heavenly spheres and other incorporeals to the human soul, where they meet an ascendant hierarchy which takes things from the four elements through inanimate minerals, plants, animals and humankind. And within each of these stations, things are again arranged in an hierarchy of excellence, worth and honour constituting, as it were, the imprint of macrocosmic hierarchy in microcosm. Thus foods are so arranged, as are the elements of language in which nouns precede verbs and particles,³ while the forms of the syllogism are arranged not only in a deductive order, but correlatively in an order of honour⁴ where simpler forms precede inferior and more mediate ones.

The Great Chain of Being

The chain of being assembles all beings in a comprehensive association which specifies every particular being with the attribution of a relative, at once and indifferently ethical and ontological, position with respect to other beings. This assembly is a scale bounded by its extremities, the topmost of which is endowed with absolute value and the lowest of which is somewhat like the obverse of the first and its mirror image. The topmost point of the scale, which is occupied by God, is the one in possession of normative positivity in its absolute fullness, positively as ethical norm and as ontological value. All that is not God is regarded according to the neo-Platonic scheme of things: as degrees of privation. Full existence, absolute goodness and eternity (as distinct from sempiternity), are attributable solely to God; apart from Him, existence and value are relative matters. This is the meaning of the saying which Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. after 400/1009) attributes to Abū Sulaimān al-Sijistānī (d. after 391/1001), that ‘evil is nothingness . . . while good is being’,⁵ a saying that seems to duplicate many others of the same import. Evil, according to another, is ‘the privation of essence, or rather, the imperfection of essence’⁶ — for at issue here is not, as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) pointed out, a simple opposition between good and evil, but one in which ‘good is the realisation of perfection . . . while evil is the lack of such perfection’.⁷ Similarly, things that exist either exist utterly and absolutely (‘al-wujūd al-ḥaqq’), or else exist relatively and merely by virtue of perfect existence.⁸ The hierarchy binding the eternal God with sempiternal and corruptible, perishable creation is a pyramid constituted by its apex, at once its metaphysical and political generator.

The apex of the chain of being dictates its very primacy as the condition of all that does not belong to its essence, so that other things are not only derivative in the normative sense, but are so in a demiurgical sense, regardless of whether this involved creation in time. Things are ranged along the chain of being in a manner that is purely linear, the distance from the apex being the determinant factor in allocating the value of the thing in question. Things are thus ranged on a sliding scale of ontological and ethical value along which are placed things of a decreasing value and reality and an increasing degeneration, ending with a moral indifference, absurdity and depravity of existence. Throughout, the arrangement of things in this cosmic assembly is along the lines of primacy, ontological and normative primacy implying potency, just as terrestrial political assembly starts with the head who is also the most perfect, in addition to being the most puissant, and slides down the line of

imperfection and dependence until we reach creatures whose entire being and actions are dependent upon, and in the service of, superior beings.⁹ The political and cosmic orders are recapitulated in, among other locations, the faculties of the human soul and their arrangement whereby the baser ones, the appetitive and reproductive, are in the service of the higher faculties, the intellectual, with their multifarious functions which are themselves hierarchically arranged.¹⁰ That which is primary is antecedent and relatively perfect in relation to that which is baser, just as the heart is the primary organ in the body, ruling its functions and coming into existence first in the process of embryo formation, thus effectively causing the body to be.¹¹

Thus things constitute two fundamental classes, that of created and that of uncreated beings, both being relative matters, for angels or celestial spheres can be said to be less created than corruptible things, being closer in essence, in being and in value to the creator. To this distinction corresponds the classification of things between eternal and non-eternal, between that which is *sui generis* and that which is not so, between the simple and composite.¹² In all cases, hierarchy is a system of metonymic correspondences between various articulations of value, ontological, ethical, temporal. But such a system was imperfect. Thus Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) found it difficult to decide precisely what order governed the arrangement of the heavenly spheres and why the saturnine sphere should, by common belief, come second, as the heavenly spheres can be normatively arranged according to various criteria involving honour, none of which has a conclusive claim to superiority.¹³ Similarly, a bitter critic of Ibn Sīnā (d. 438/1037) charged that the philosopher was proceeding counter to the exigencies of the nature of incorporeals when he maintained that the lowest of the spheres (the lunar) was solely responsible for the emanation of forms destined for the world. This assertion depended on imputing considerations of spatial distance amongst incorporeals, where there is in fact no space and where there should be nothing to stop direct emanations from the First Intellect reaching the world.¹⁴

The differential potency of members of the chain of being is perhaps the most essential constituent of the chain. Apart from the Active Intellect, the philosopher-king of Fārābī's (d. 339/950) virtuous community is beholden to no one, but is the supreme component of the community¹⁵ just as God is the supreme component of all being. That which is superior is not only more excellent, but is also more potent, fuller of plenitude, self-sufficiency and completeness. After the Philonic moment of Platonism, it seems that providence became, *de rigeur*, creation¹⁶ and

the demiurgical providence required by monotheistic divinity¹⁷ recapitulated and absorbed philosophical notions of primacy in its religious purview. For in creation were encapsulated all the senses of anteriority and precedence that were known to Arabic thought: temporal, precedence in rank conceived as relative distance from the apex of the hierarchy, precedence involving honour as the precedence of Abū Bakr over ‘Umar, natural precedence as in the precedence of the number one over two and essential precedence as expressed in causal anteriority and differential plenitude.¹⁸ The idea of dramatic creation by a creator-preserver, essential to myths of creation as those philosophically or narratively expressed in Arabic thought, is never, and could not have been, eschewed, as can be seen for instance in Ibn Sīnā’s importation of temporal elements into the philosophy of perpetual creativity.¹⁹ The assertions of an Ibn Rushd, for instance, on the eternity of the world, are philosophical assertions concerning the sempiternity of the world, not implying it to be coeval with God, for time does not figure in the realm of the philosophical language of causality and is irrelevant to, and does not necessarily contradict, creation *ex nihilo* and in time.²⁰ Both the philosophical and the more explicitly mythical tales of creation involve the five types of primacy that we have just seen; and all but time are relevant to the chain of being and its hierarchical order: rank, honour, nature, causality. In addition to time, these matters not only distinguish lower things from higher ones, but also contribute to the sense of absolute priority, of the higher being the absolute ground for the lower, both according to the nature of the mind, which sees essential priority as that which conjoins natural and causal priority.²¹ Thus the chain of being is an hierarchy of grounds, stretching from the sublimity of the ground of all grounds to the most abject creatures as exist wholly on account of others.

Self-sufficiency in an hierarchy of grounds is the criterion according to which the station of everything is determined, from that of plants to that of nouns in the hierarchy of parts of speech (noun, verb, particle) — this, according to the grammarian Ibn Jinnī (d. 392/1002), is headed by nouns because of their independence of the other two, for a noun can convey a meaning without recourse to verbs or to particles, which particles and verbs cannot accomplish.²² Anteriority, in an hierarchical world, is the correlative of self-sufficiency,²³ and dependence in such a world is wholly unilateral, with the higher transmitting down to the baser whatever is under scrutiny: existence, goodness or wealth as in Ibn Khaldūn’s (d. 808/1406) characterisation of the relation between social estates, which he shared with his culture.²⁴ In all cases, the

superior is the purer, the less adulterated with external causality, with participation in another essence, with contingency.²⁵ The apex of this scale, the creator, according to a theologian, 'is self-subsistent, that is, by virtue of His existence, He dispenses with a creator to Create Him, and with a substrate to occupy'.²⁶ Similarly, the number one is the principle, origin and ground of all numbers in that they would all vanish if it were removed, whereas the one will never cease to be with the absence of other numbers²⁷ — or beings.²⁸

The superior terminus of the chain of being is therefore the ground, at various removes of immediacy, of all its members. It is their causal and normative ground. Equally, it is their final cause, to use an Aristotelian term which well conveys the sense with which the anteriority of this beginning is infused, but which not all discourse on the chain of being would deem doctrinally fit to utilise. This superior terminus is not only the generative cause of all being, but the ultimate purpose for which creation took place. It is the beginning and the end; it is the *telos* of all creation. This much flows directly from the structure of superordination and subordination which constitutes the chain of being. For that which is sublime cannot have existed for the sake of baser stuff, otherwise the order of things will have been confounded; rather, things work in the opposite sense, so that it is not possible to conceive of that which was caused as the cause of its cause, or as the final cause of the efficient cause.²⁹ Indeed, all causes are of a fuller grade of being than that which they cause to be,³⁰ and this applies not only to ontological fullness, but to its parallel normative fullness as well. Truth, according to Fārābī, runs parallel to existence, and actuality may run parallel to it as well. For the truth of something is the existence appropriate to it.³¹ This appropriateness is fully relative and utterly dependent on the only value which truly structures all other values and acts as their absolute measure, that of the ultimate superordinate which dictates the ontological and other values of all creatures in accordance with the distance from this ultimate apex established by their position on the chain of being. No creature is intrinsically necessary, for all but the creator is contingent; its existence is fully dictated and comprehended by its dependence upon, and subordination to, the creator, which is the sole, and the absolute, value. The created is an auxiliary constituted by its privation in comparison with an absolute fullness. And indeed, all beings are, correlatively with other classifications, divisible into the necessary, and therefore ultimately self-generating, and the contingent, and therefore ontologically dependent on an external and prior creative act.³² Contingency itself has been construed as a privative nature,³³ although the question of

necessity and contingency was a highly complex one.³⁴

It is this hierarchical dependence which dictates the appurtenance of things and their very nature, which flows from their appurtenance. It is a unilaterally prescriptive hierarchy of this type which, among other things, animates the recursive conception of all things, from genealogies to beliefs, stripping them of all that is not directly imparted by their ground and origin, and maintains that any doubts concerning the ground of things is one cast about those things themselves.³⁵ Yet this continuity between absolute perfection and absolute imperfection is not, except for the advocates of pantheistic monism, the continuity of an invariant essence. It is not the continuity of a substrate inhabited by the multifarious avatars of a continuous substance, but is truly structured by a duality. At issue is not only metaphysical discourse, but a matter that is firmly allied with religion, and no thought connected with religion, except pantheistic monism, can feel comfortable with the absence of irreligion. No religious outlook can sustain itself in a situation where evil, the devil or privation are not, at least temporarily, a match for God. Evil and privative existence are effectively, if not explicitly in metaphysical and religious discourse, self-subsistent substances. They are even temporarily self-sufficient, active on their own behalf, endowed with a normativeness which can enter into a relation of competition, even of a contrary plenitude and generativeness, with the analogous properties of divinity. Indeed, they act as an effective, if occasional anti-divinity, which infuses and therefore contaminates and possibly corrupts things in close contact with godliness. That is why Subkī (d. 771/1369) counselled his vizier to keep money wrongfully gained in the service of his sovereign apart from that legitimately acquired: apart they each maintain their normative purity; in the same hoard they both become illegitimate.³⁶ Evil adulterates absolutely.

The chain of being can thus be said to be composed of God and not-God, and the continuity it described can thus be said to be structured by an essential duality, a dyadic concomitance, cleft at the top, or towards the middle, depending on our perspective. We have, in the first place, God and His spiritual domain. This domain was variously conceived and named: God and the angels, associated with the angelical component of humankind (prophetic and saintly souls), according to trustees over religion generically dubbed the '*ulamā*'; the First Intellect from which the heavenly spheres emanate (and their number was the subject of some controversy) along with the fully accomplished and realised human souls, according to the philosophers; or again, the marriage of religious and metaphysical imagery that we witness in the esotericist tradition in

general,³⁷ and in Ismā'īlism in particular,³⁸ along with the narrative allegorisation of the intellects/spheres/angels conception by means of religious-mythological notions of the Pen that, before Creation, writes the writ of all that is to come, and associated notions.³⁹ This last tendency often describes the role of man in the kingdom of God either as a final release from the cycles of reincarnation as in Ismā'īli theory, or as his participation in the essence of divinity as is maintained by some mystics.

In the second place we have those components of the chain of being which cannot be included amongst the members of God's immediate kingdom whose members, in varying degrees, partake of His divinity. These compose the corporeal sensuous world, which starts with the four elements — fire, air, water, earth — of which minerals are alloyed, on through the plant kingdom, insects and reptiles, animals and finally, man in so far as he is a corporeal creature. The line of ascendance here is one towards growing autonomy and spirituality:⁴⁰ growing animation and growing differentiation in animate faculties, starting with movement, on to appetite of various descriptions, and forward to greater capacities for intellection and the receipt of divine emanations in the widest sense of the term. This line of progression differentiates inanimate substances from plants, plants from animals and ordinary animals from man, the one animal endowed with a soul and intellect. Yet the line is continuous, for each station — the inanimate, the plant and the animal — tends to shade off into the next and participate in its more primitive qualities. Thus plants are intermediate between minerals and animals in the sense that they are not quite as inanimate as the former, but do not possess the perfection of sense and movement appropriate to the latter, and therefore partake of the properties of both.⁴¹ The extremity of each station is contained, potentially, in superior stations, in the sense that superior stations comprehend inferior ones,⁴² just as man comprehends the properties of inferior beings and is distinguished from them by what he adds over and above his inferiors. A further naturalistic edge to this growing comprehensiveness is given by the Ikhwān al-Safā': the inferior is to the superior as its matter, as the matter of its form and the raw material of its body, interiorised by feeding.⁴³

We thus have, along the chain of being, movement in two senses, from the extremities towards the middle where man is located. The two domains, which some saw as mutually impermeable,⁴⁴ start from different premisses, the top half proceeding on a line of descent and the bottom ascending to the station of man.⁴⁵ The dyadic character of the chain of being is one which effects a specification and division amongst

classes of elements belonging to the chain, but this division is not absolute and does not sunder the essential generative unity, the unity of dependence and hierarchy, which fashions the chain. Man lies at the confluence of these two classes of things. He is body and soul: body in so far as he is the terminal point in the ascension of corporeals to higher stations, and soul in as much as he is the terminal point reached by incorporeal substances in their descent from the more absolute realms of sublimity. The two components of man and his dyadic structure are the edges of the two classes of creation, at the point where they meet and differentiate.

This generative continuity is uneven: for while 'the distinctive character of any divine order travels through all derivative existents and bestows itself upon all the inferior kinds',⁴⁶ this continuity traces its course of uneven passage through territory increasingly subject to deterioration, even degeneration. The base thus has no autonomous constitution independent of the sublime: the baser classes are, at one and the same time, the contrary and the result of the sublime. They are a drawing away from them at the same time as being an aspiration towards them, for their mobility is oriented towards the terminal point of the baser class of things, man, which partakes of, and shades into, incorporeal things. Bereft of any self-constitutive principles, the creatures, being creatures of a very particular creator, must derive their metaphysical constitution from whatever is bestowed upon them. And being ranged on an ontological continuum whose values are dictated by the absolute value which structures this continuum — the chain of being — they can find their definition only in terms of those that define the creator: as privation of a variety of properties. Creatures elicit their determinations relatively, with sole reference to the creator; these determinations thus serve, in the first place, to differentiate it from the creator. Creatures therefore subsist within the flow of what looks like a divine polemic, bent on pointing out that which is not Him, but with sole reference to Him and to that which he shares with his immediate entourage of angels, spheres and other spirits, and from which all else differs absolutely, i.e. in so far as it is a negativity.

Despite metaphysical exigency, this negativity is never fully realised, as the foregoing will have indicated. For despite the relation of opposition in which the only self-subsistent value is the positive one attributed to the ceiling of all things which is required by the metaphysics of Arabic thought, we are in fact registering an opposition that is not true to its theoretical requirements and that is not always fully realised. What is at issue in fact is not simply an opposition grounded in and

founded upon one value; it is rather a binomial dyad which is displayed, and the creature is not simply the negative of a positivity which is the creator, but is also one which carries a positive opposition to the creator, one in which the creature is a term *sui generis*, for just as there is no effective divinity without the devil, and no creature without a creator, there is no creator deserving of the name without creatures, dogmatic assertions notwithstanding. What holds true of the creator and the creature as positive terms in mutual active opposition also holds for their various differentiae, which meet in man. It is indeed possible to draw up a list of opposite terms which would comprehend the locations and terms in the context of which the conception of divine and profane things is constituted, and the subsequent pages will bring many of these terms into full view: humanity/divinity (*nāsūt/lāhūt*), truth/existence (*ḥaqq/khalq*), soul/matter, mind/sense, life/lifelessness, freedom/servitude, and other terms of opposition without which things cannot be comprehended or conceived. What should be stressed is that these oppositions duplicate the essential normative opposition of sacred and profane, which is likewise duplicated in the opposition between activity and passivity and their concomitants: simplicity/composition, necessity/contingency, and, by implication, the opposition between artifice on the one hand, and character or disposition (*sawīyya*) on the other.

The term *sawīyya*, here indifferently rendered as character and disposition, is used advisedly and in preference to 'nature' (*ṭab'*, *ṭabī'a*). To have used 'nature' would probably have committed some strands of medieval Arabic thought to much more than they would have been prepared to sustain, and would have imputed a number of senses which are absent. Nature, in any case, is not the unambiguous term that it is popularly taken to be; it has a very rich history, both as a term and as a concatenation of intersecting senses, and this state of affairs makes it almost inevitable that shifts of sense occur without the awareness of the user of this term.⁴⁷ Additionally, the term 'nature', and occasionally even *sawīyya*, imply a regularity which was strenuously refuted and zealously contested by parties to medieval Arabic thought, mainly Ash'arites bent on denying activity to all but God. Medieval scholars were well aware of this ambiguity. The grammarian Abū Sa'īd al-Sīrāfī (d. after 364/975) declared that 'nature' belonged to the class of 'equivocal nouns' (*al-asmā' al-mashūba*), an equivocation less marked in its analogues like 'norm', 'character', 'disposition' (*ḍarība, salīqa, sajiyya*).⁴⁸ Abū Sulaimān al-Sijistānī, the brilliant philosopher and acquaintance of Sīrāfī, saw it as 'a common noun',⁴⁹ and many authors have provided us with a wide variety of definitions of 'nature',⁵⁰ all of