"The Limitations of Knowledge According to Ibn Sina"

"Epistemological and theological aspects and the consequences"

Hans Daiber
University of Frankfurt/M., Germany

In his early fifties, around the year 1030, after decades of a fruitful life dedicated to philosophy, medicine and science, Ibn Sinå wrote a letter to his disciple Bahmanyår Ibn al-Marzubån in Rayy and encouraged him to engage in philosophical discussions, "because in them lies pleasure and benefit". He adds:
"Whatever I am able to bring to light I will do so either openly, or from behind a veil (hidjåb) which acts as a useful kind of stimulus and drill for it.
Whatever I am unable to do so, I will excuse myself and admit it, since what is known to mankind is limited". This passage has been interpreted as an allusion to Avicenna's method of pointers and indications as a didactic way for the philosopher, whereas the same method according to him has an obfuscatory function for the non-philosopher, the common people - because the indicative method should conceal knowledge from the unworthy who only can be addressed by symbols and allegories.
This interpretation of the texts, based on the assumption of an influence of Alexandrian Aristotelianism, is contradictory. How can the indicative method according to Ibn Sinå be a way to "remove the cover", "lift the veil" and "indicate the innermost ideas stored in the depth of books and withheld from explicit mention", as Ibn Sinå says in his "Treatise on the State of he Soul" or being applied for its didactic function and at the same time can have an obfuscatory function. In fact, the alleged obfuscatory method is based on an erroneous combination of the quoted passage from Ibn Sinå's letter to a disciple in Rayy with a passage in Ibn Sinå's "On the Nature of Prayer". On the contrary, Ibn Sinå's last major work, his "Pointers and Reminders" is written as an exposition of "fundamental principles and essential elements of philosophy" which can be used by the philosopher as a basis for the elaboration of "corollary principles" and of philosophical details.
This, however, is not yet the whole truth. When we leave aside the possibility that the term "pointer" or "indication" might have several meanings and might have been used even in the sense of an indicative summary - we should now have a look at the prehistory of the term Ishåra "pointer, indication".
Before Ibn Sinå, in the 9/10th century, the Iranian sufi Djunayd (died between 908 und 910) informs us in his treatise on the divinity: "What (I have said) is an indication of what I cannot explain further. Moreover, you can understand this in accordance with the indication, if you have reached the state of being (kawn), which precedes my description." To his colleague AbÂ Bakr al-Kiså'i he recommends: "Be careful with what you are saying and what your contemporaries know. Tell people only what they can recognize and keep them away from what they cannot understand". Djunaid developed his cryptical and esoteric seeming language not because he wanted conceal something before those who do not understand. On the contrary, he was aware of the difficulty to convey to others mystical experience with the means of language.
The look at Djunayd inspires us to take into consideration additional aspects of Ibn Sinå's own attitude against the praxis of philosophy - that is according to him actualization of knowledge of the celestial spheres in the human intellect - as he might

have been impressed not only from Alexandrian Aristotelianism; Ibn Sinå got acquainted with the doctrine of the Alexandrians through Fåråbi's "Prolegomena to the Study of Aristotle's philosophy" from which he learned that Aristotle used "an obscure way of expression", because only the suitable student and not the unworthy should learn philosophy; he should be tested and trained by this method of obscurity. This Alexandrian view might indeed be echoed in the already quoted saying of Ibn Sinå: "Whatever I am able to bring to light I will do so either openly, or from behind a veil, which acts as a useful kind of stimulus and drill for it". This, however, does not justify the interpretation of Ibn Sinå's use of ishåra as an obfuscatory way to conceal philosophical knowledge from the unworthy; there is no clear example for this in Ibn Sinå.

Here, we propose another interpretation of Ibn Sinå's use of ishåra "indication, pointer", which takes into account epistemological and theological aspects. For Djunaid the divine truth cannot be further explained; for Ibn Sinå primarily the metaphysics of the rational soul can only be discussed by the way of pointer. As the rational soul, the human intellect, is an imperfect mirror of the divine intellect and strives for its return to its divine origin through increasing knowledge, it must be content with mere indications of the divine truth.

This view we must substantiate now by a look at Ibn Sinå's treatise On the rational soul, his last philosophical work, and by a look at his doctrine of the divine active intellect, the first cause and prime mover; moreover by a look at his demonstrative method.

The rational soul is explained by Ibn Sinå as something substantial, subsisting in itself and only associated with the human body as long as it is alive.

At the beginning, the rational soul is material intellect only; subsequently it receives the forms of primary intelligibles through syllogism, learning, acquisition; after that the forms of secondary intelligibles through reflection that is through finding what results from the primary intelligibles; or intuition that is representation of the cause, the "middle term", which makes the existence or non-existence of a thing necessary either by search or initially, without search.

Through the acquired intelligibles the faculty of the soul is ready to call to presence the intelligibles whenever it wishes; in this state it is called the actual intellect.

And after the presence of the intelligibles in the faculty of the soul the faculty is called acquired intellect.

After this description of the development of the soul from material intellect to acquired intellect via actual intellect and its classification as substance associated with the human body but imperishable after the death of this body, Ibn Sinå continues to explain the perfection of the soul, of its "bliss" (saåda): it comes about by purification through increasing knowledge of God:

The soul is purified through knowledge of God, when it is ready to call the intelligibles to presence, when it wishes, namely in the state of the actual intellect. Ibn Sinå compares it with "a polished mirror upon which are reflected the forms of things as they are in themselves".

Perfection of the soul also comes about b) through acts for God by following reason and religious law and by having an excellent character. Here, Ibn Sinå stresses the ethical and religious aspects; to follow religious laws means the subjugation of the "bodily faculties of the soul, the appetitive and the irascible" to the rational soul, which is "at peace". The necessary predisposition is according to Ibn Sinå the balance of the Galenic four humours, which leads to a balanced temperament.

Man's involvement in opposites and not balanced mixture of the four elements hinders him to "receive the divine effluence" (qubÂl al-fayi al-ilåhi); Ibn Sinå explains this "divine effluence" as "inspiration (ilhåm) coming from the Lord, occurring all at once and revealing some intellectual truth (haqiqa min al-haqå'iq al-aqliyya)". He adds: "As long as the rational soul of man is associated with the human body, no corporeal entity (djirm) can be completely ready to receive the divine effluence or to have perfectly revealed to it all the intelligibles".

Increasing purification of the soul through increasing knowledge creates increasing propensity for contact with the divine effluence, I.e. with the medium of the divine effluence, the intellectual substance, also called "angel" in the language of Revelation and "active intellect" by philosophers. The result is "a certain similarity to the celestial bodies" which, different from the human body, are totally devoid of such opposites and therefore are perfectly receptive to the divine effluences. Therefore, only after its separation from the body the soul will receive the divine effluence completely and reach "a similarity with the abstract intellects which are the causes of beings" and to which "all the truths are revealed".

Ibn Sinå's explanations are based on the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanations from the divine One to the First Intellect, from which subsequently nine intellects emanate, which he identifies with the first heaven, followed by the sphere of the fixed stars, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury and Moon. A similar system can be found in Ibn Sinå's model Fåråbi; both philosophers were inspired, as Miklos Maroth has shown, by Plotinus' Enneads, of which the 5th book was known to the Arabs as Theologia Aristotelis, by Proclus' Institutio theologica, which was available to the Arabs in the redaction known as Liber de causis; by Aristotle's Metaphysics, book XII and Themistius' Commentary on it (lost in the Greek original and only preserved in an Arabic-Hebrew translation); finally by Alexander of Aphrodisias' treatise On the Principles of the Universe, which is only preserved in Syriac and Arabic.

The Greek Neoplatonic texts since Alexander of Aphrodisias assume an identity of the causing principle in Aristotle's De anima III 5 with the First Cause in Aristotle, Metaphysics XI and stress the role of the intellect as origin of the things through emanation, as their cause is primarily potentially and later actually. Because of these effluences, emanations, the intellect remains present as cause in all things, although they are different from each other. This statement means, as Maroth has worked out, the identity of intellect and things caused by the things, cause and caused things, because the universal intellect knows, through his self-knowledge, the plurality in itself, the universe. At the same time, there is a hierarchy from the knowledge of the highest genus (substance) - as Ibn Sinå says in his Kitåb ash-Shifå', book on the soul: by grasping the separate form independent from the material world - to the lowest species (homo).

This hierarchy of being is fundamental for Ibn Sinå's concept of causality. As in Proclus' Institutio theologica 25-30 the effect is to some respect identical with the cause and to some respect different. The similarity between cause and effect, between intellect and soul results in the desire of the soul to return to its divine cause. The beings participate in the divine intellect, which itself is the first effect of the divine One, the potentiality. This participation leads to the existence of the plurality from the unity through causal relation.

Therefore, the intellect knows itself, knows what is potentially in it and what will come. Proclus concluded from this causal interdependence of things the epistemological possibility to recognize things because of their cause; the cause can be concluded from the effect and the effect can be concluded from the cause.

The causality of cause and effect allows conclusions and is part of the syllogism. Or as Aristotle says in Analytica posteriora, a book which was highly influential in medieval Islamic philosophy (78a30-b3): things can be grasped by the syllogisms hoti and dioti, on "how" and "why". Aristotle had explained at the beginning of his Analytica posteriora the investigation as concentrated on facts, on the connection of a subject and a predicate, e.g. on how the sun diminishes (to hoti) and why this is so (to dioti), whereas the questions "ei estin" and "ti estin", "whether it is" and "what it is", are directed to the existence of a thing and its essence or definition. Every investigation is nothing else than the search for the middle term, with the aid of which the syllogism can be formulated, the demonstration of the answer by the conclusion.
For example the middle term, the meson "the planets are near" together with the premise "what is near, the light of that does not flicker" is the cause of what is included in the conclusion "the light of the planets does not flicker".
We cannot enter into details and modifications by later commentators and their impact on the theory of demonstration in Islamic philosophers from Fåråbi to Ibn Sinå and Ibn Rushd. This complex has been investigated by Miklos Maroth, who showed the influence of Aristotle's method of inquiry as described in Aristotle's Analytica posteriora and Topica and of his Neoplatonic commentators as mainly echoed in the "introductions" (eisagogai) to any science on the principles of demonstration and on the hierarchical classification of sciences (in the footsteps of the Tabula porphyriana) in Islamic culture. The mentioned Hungarian scholar also draws our attention to the attempt of Neoplatonic philosophers to harmonize the Aristotelian syllogism with the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanationism according to which every caused being originates from a preceding causing being and similar to that through mediating causes, the meson. The Neoplatonic causal relation is at the same time a demonstrative syllogism in the sense of Aristotle's hoti and dioti, of how and why is a thing. Here, it is important to notify that this syllogism appears to be modified according to the Neoplatonic hierarchy of major terms, which explain the essence, the why of the minor terms; because of this hierarchy the minor term necessarily leads to the existence of the major term; it does not, however, lead to the cause, the why of the major term.
This hierarchy of definition and argumentation implies an important change of the Greek commentators of Aristotle, which became decisive for the Arabic philosophers including Ibn Sinå. Different from Aristotle's interest in the middle term, the explaining principle, they search for the cause or the effect.
Accordingly, Proclus constructed, on the basis of Aristotle, syllogistic argumentations including conclusions from the general cause, the genus to the particular causes, the species, from that species to the more particular term, which compared with that species as genus forms another species and so on.
Therefore, Ibn Sinå draws the conclusion, that the differences, the fußÂl specialize the genus and create the species; the cause can be found in the differences. The peculiarities can be the causes of additional peculiarites. In the line of John Philoponus the causes are identical with the differences, the differentiae specificae and differentiae divisivae.
The Aristotelian analytic syllogism appears to be replaced by the syllogism drawn from the indication, by the syllogismos tekmeriodes, which does not allow the recognition of the cause, but only of the existence, the being of the upper things, not their why. The major terms explain the why of the minor terms, the minor terms, however, explain the existence, not the why of the major ones.

Syllogism is purely deductive and based on the hierarchy of the Neoplatonic Tabula Porphyriana. The causes as applied in the syllogism appear in the definition as differentiae specificae.

Our sketch has shown that Ibn Sinå modified Aristotle's syllogism by combining it in the tradition of Neoplatonic philosophers with the causes, the differentiae and definitions. Knowledge is based on syllogistic proof, classification and definition; it has its limits with regard to the syllogismos tekmeriodes, which can only be an indication of the existence, of the being of the upper things, of the causes, but not of their why. This presupposes, as we have seen, an hierarchic structure, which in the Neoplatonic tradition of the Tabula porphyriana is much more elaborated than in Aristotle's Analytica posteriora, where the principles are the most general principle and from which the increasing special theorems are derived. This was interpreted by the Neoplatonic commentators within the context of their doctrine of emanations:

from the "One", the most general being, the cause, the most general term, arises through emanations the existing, the caused, which in an increasing manner is specified, the caused. Accordingly, Ibn Sinå has emphasized that the principles must be "universal" (kulli), "essential" (dhåti) and primary (awwali).

Neoplatonism and Ibn Sinå assume a chain of theorems and concepts which via ultimate principles go back to the first axiom of metaphysics, the "One", the first cause, which cannot be proven. From the first principles of metaphysics the final theorems of the sciences can be derived through an endless chain of species and genera as described in the tabula prophyriana. An example is Ibn Sinå's "Treatise on the parts of the intellectual sciences" (Risåla fi aqsåm al-ulÂm al-aqliyya). It gives a stemma of sciences starting with metaphysics, which successively is followed by mathematics and physics.

Ibn S*nå mentions as parts of metaphysics prophecy and inspiration. As he explained in his treatise on the soul already quoted, purification of the soul through increasing knowledge and assimilation to the "active intellect" enables it to receive the divine effluence, the "inspiration coming from the Lord", "or to have perfectly revealed to it all the intelligibles". The active intellect has its cause in the divine "One", who is uncaused or in Aristotelian terms is the unmoved mover.

Language cannot define it and demonstration cannot rely on the syllogism of "how" and "why". Definition and demonstrative syllogism are confined to the subordinate subsequent causes and effects.

Human soul has access to the divine "active intellect" only through its "purification" by increasing knowledge; but because of its association with the body "no corporeal entity (jirm) can be completely ready to receive the divine effluence or to have perfectly revealed to it all the intelligibles". An exception - at least to some amount - is the prophet or the man who has intuition; the "inspiration coming from the Lord" "reveals" "some intellectual truth" only.

The rational soul, the human intellect, will always remain an imperfect mirror of the divine intellect and will remain striving after the return to its divine origin through increasing knowledge. It must be content with mere indications of the divine truth. This divine truth, as emanated to the divine intellect, cannot be object of demonstrative syllogism. The first cause cannot be explained by another cause. Here, knowledge, which as such is based on syllogistic proof and which is classification and definition, appears to be limited with regard to the syllogismos tekmeriodes. This syllogismos tekmeriodes can only be an indication of the existence, of the being of the highest principle, of the uncaused cause, but not of its why.

This highest principle is to some extent, however, conceivable in its effects, in the caused thing. This conceivability of the cause and its subsequent causes - I remind you of Ibn Sinå's First Intellect, from which subsequently nine intellects emanate - in their effects must be interpreted from the background of the history of the law of causal similarity in Aristotle and Neoplatonism.
Aristotle defended the similarity between cause and effect (anthropos anthropon genna "man begets man" Metaph. 1032a25) remained the model of Plotinus' and Proclus' concept of causality in its tension between immanence and transcendence. Proclus defends the idea that the effect has some resemblance to its cause (Institutio theologica, prop. 32; 36,6f.: Syndei de panta h„ hoimiot„s). The originally Aristotelian idea of similarity lead to the necessity of explaining differences in the universe, in the Neoplatonic doctrine it lead to the self-differentiation of the One, of Intellect and of Soul - and this, as we have already told, in the tradition of the tabula porphyriana.
The hierarchy of causes and effects as inspired by the tabula prophyriana explains that the first cause does not "precontain" its effects and, on the contrary, is identical with the effect in an "ontologically superior, because more unified, form". Consequently, the effects are identical with their causes in an ontologically inferior, less unified and more differentiated form.
Here, the Neoplatonic interpretators of Aristotle replaced Aristotle's "horizontal" explanation of the effect as something similar to the cause and developed in their emanationist cosmology a "vertical" cause-effect relationship, which includes both similarity and dissimilarity.
This assumption of difference between cause and effect in a vertical cause-effect relationship reappears in Ibn Sinå's concept of different modes of existence (esse, wudjÂd), with regard to priority and posteriority, self-sufficiency and need, necessity and possibility, of the superiority of cause over effect with regard to existence.
Accordingly, the cause, the Avicennian First Cause has more "truth" than the effect. It gives the existents their existence and truth.
Here, we detect an echo of Kindi's Aristotelian-Neoplatonic concept of truth, which appears to be identified in Ibn Sinå with existence, which has different modes. Ibn Sinå developed his doctrine of the incomparability of the divine primary being, the "only being" (anniyya faqaÝ), with the subsequent causes and their effects on the basis of the Neoplatonic denial of divine attributes.
According to Ibn Sinå properties are predicable of God only in an "ambiguous" (bi-l-tashkik) or analogous manner.
Following this Avicennian tradition Mullå Íadrå (ca. 979-80/1571-2 - 1050/1640) too emphasized that the transcendent unity of God cannot be known; it can only be known by intuition and remains "ambiguous" (bi-l-tashkik). The diversity of modes of existence is only a shadow of God's unity (wahda fi l-kathra wa-l-kathra fi l-wahda).
Ibn Sinå's awareness of the limitations of human knowledge and of the superiority of the divine One, who is uncaused and the unmoved prime mover, lead him to the formulation of a new way of demonstration, which in the tradition of Neoplatonic commentators of Aristotle's Analytica posteriora replaced Aristotle's syllogismos analytikos by the syllogismos tekmeriodes. This syllogismos tekmeriodes can only be an indication of the existence, of the being of the highest principle, of the uncaused cause, but not of its why. The Aristotelian syllogism of why remains restricted to the minor terms, the subsequent causes.
Here, Ibn Sinå's metaphysics reveals - in the hierarchy of being, in the differentiation between the most true One, the necessary being (wådjib al-wudjÂd) and his

emanations, who in the words of Mullå Íadrå, are the "shadow"(iill) of God - the limitations of knowledge and definition. The effects of causes, the existing contingent things, are - although emanating from the first cause - ontological inferior to the divine One. Therefore they cannot in reality completely mirror the true One, his essence. Because he was convinced of the limitations of knowledge, of demonstration and of definition with regard to God's transcendence and infiniteness, Ibn Sinå developed his well-known distinction between essence and existence. And because of the limitations of knowledge the science of metaphysics cannot define the highest principle, the divine One. Even the philosopher can talk about it only in the way of "pointers", of "indications".

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides (530-602/1135-1205) seems to be inspired from Ibn Sinå's agnostic attitude. He knew Ibn Sinå's Kitåb al-Ishåråt wa-l-tanbihåt and took over from it the simile of the lightning flashes: "Those who know", the årifÂn - according to Ibn Sinå the sufi mystics and the prophets – perceive something of the light of truth comparable to the lightning which flashes for a few moments only. With regard to "things separate from matter (al-umÂr al-mufåraqa)" Maimonides speaks of "hidden matters" (al-umÂr al-khafiyya) which the mind cannot grasp; according to him they remain "open to speculation (naiar) and research (baith)." Maimonides continues: "The proofs with regard to them are well-hidden, though correct; many doubts (shukÂk) arise with regard to them; the critic may well find in them objects for his criticism and the caviller objects for his cavilling". It is not difficult to detect here an echo of Ibn Sinå and his concept of pointer and indications, as it should be understood.