

Tommaso Alpina. *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul*. De Gruyter, Scientia Graeco-Arabica, 2021. 266 pages. ISBN: 9783110706550.

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Among the works in the monumental philosophical encyclopedia that is Avicenna's *Shifā*, his *Kitāb al-Nafs* [Book of the Soul] has an important place due to two endeavors: First, like the whole Avicennan corpus, *Kitāb al-Nafs* is an attempt to rewrite the Greek philosophical heritage in Arabic, synthesizing the tradition of Aristotelian and Greek commentaries. In this first retrospective sense, Avicenna's work appeared as the first *summa* to have rearranged knowledge in the domain of psychology up to his day. Secondly, Avicenna created an independent science of the soul in this work by way of rearranging this Greek philosophical-scientific knowledge and putting it in contact with other sciences within his own classification. In this second prospective sense, this text has had a massive effect both on Islamic and Christian philosophical traditions with its philosophical intension and theological extension.

Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs* was translated into Latin as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and remained an efficient source for the Latin scholastics, along with his *al-Ilāhiyyāt* [Metaphysics]. The Arabic text as well as its Latin translation, *Liber de Anima*, received an enormous dissemination. While the critical edition of the Latin medieval translation of *Kitāb al-Nafs* was published by Simone van Riet (in 1968/1972), we are not that fortunate in regard to the critical edition of the Arabic text. Although edited many times (by Jan Bakoš in 1956, Fazlur Rahman in 1959, Anawati & Zayed in 1975, and al-Āmulī in 1996) a complete critical edition is still a long way away. As for the modern non-classical languages, today's scholar is surprisingly left only with the Persian translation by Akbar Dānāsarasht, which dates as old as 1929; the French translation published by Jan Bakoš in 1956, which unfortunately provides poor readability; and the Russian translation by L. Xromov from 1980. Compared

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to the impact that *Kitāb al-Nafs* has had in the history of philosophy, the current situation regarding its critical edition and translations is astoundingly scarce. In line with this negative circumstance, the integrated studies that have embarked on an analysis of Avicenna's psychology as a whole fall below the mark.

This is the context in which Tommaso Alpina's recent book *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul* stands out as a remarkable source regarding Avicenna's theory of the soul. The book is a revised version of Alpina's doctoral dissertation supervised by A. Bertolacci and defended in Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa in 2016. It was published in January 2021 in the prestigious series *Scientia Graeco-Arabica* from De Gruyter edited by M. Rashed.

In this study, Alpina in his own words investigates the "reception" and "reworking" of Aristotle's theory of the soul expounded in *De Anima* [*Peri Psychês/On the Soul*] in Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs* [Book of the Soul] (1). To that end, the author carries out both a historical and doctrinal research. On the one hand, he tries to frame Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs* historically in dialogue with the Aristotelian, the late antique and early Islamic philosophy from the perspective of reception. On the other hand, he draws attention to the doctrinal consequences of Avicenna having reworked this science. As such, Alpina successfully provides a comparative approach to the science of the soul with regard to Avicenna in a manner that I would describe as a dialectic of identity and difference. He seeks for the identities and differences (i.e., sameness, and originality) of Avicenna's science of the soul.

The author rightfully claims that previous studies had focused mostly on three things: the doctrine of internal senses, the theory of human intellection, and a metaphysics of the rational soul that deals with the afterlife (3). Different from those previous studies, Alpina's investigation aims at a methodological and epistemological issue; his research questions are to determine the status of psychology within the sciences and to determine the unity of the science in Avicenna's philosophy. The subtitle of the book already implies this intention: *Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul*. Thus, the book in itself does not simply search for the theory of the soul in Avicennan terms, it searches for the science of the soul; the distinction between the two is no small matter and brings certain advantages as well as limitations to the study.

As for the title of the book *Subject, Definition, Activity*, subject refers to the soul (*nafs*), the ground or the subject-matter of the science in question. Definition refers to the perfection (*kamāl*) of the body, which is used in the definition of the soul and provides unity to Avicenna's psychology according to Alpina. Finally, activity refers to the proper activity of the soul as the theoretical intellect or theoretical faculty (*aql nazari/quwwa nazariyya*; 1–2). The architecture of the book relies on these three

terms that will be exposed under the various chapters; their Aristotelian equivalents are known as: *hypokeimenon* [subject], *entelekheia* [perfection], and *ergon* [activity].

The book contains six chapters and an appendix. In the first chapter which considers the nature, content, and the sources after indicating the place *Nafs* has among the natural philosophy in *Shifā*, Alpina considers the relationship between Aristotle and Avicenna. He proclaims Avicenna's adherence to Aristotelianism as "genuine without being slavish" (8) which consists of two complementary attitudes: assimilation and critical sensibility. The chapter also provides a table in which the reader can compare the content of *Kitāb al-Nafs* with that from *De Anima*. For the author, Avicenna generally contributes to Aristotle's *De Anima* in two ways: by expanding the Aristotelian treatment of the soul (such as in the case of the cardiac pneuma as the primary vehicle of psychic faculties) and integrating other forms of knowledge related to religious belief such as the prophecy and the immortality of the soul.

As for Avicenna's sources, Alpina discusses the case of the Arabic translation of *De Anima* and its Greek commentaries, *Parva Naturalia* (known in Arabic as *Kitāb al-Hiss wa-l-mahsūs*), Galenic writings, the debates of the theologians concerning the essence of the man and the nature of the soul, and Fārābī's considerations (15–24). Next, the author talks briefly about the impressive number of manuscripts (130) and five printed editions of Avicenna's *Nafs*.

The second chapter of the book deals with the difficulties regarding the science of the soul and its context. Aristotle intended to grasp the essence of the soul for all living beings and its *per se* properties, thus he defined the soul as the formal principle of all organic living bodies. Nevertheless, says Alpina, the inclusion of *nous* [intellect] in the discussion of the human soul within the program of *De Anima* poses a problem and breaks the unity of its subject (36). As such, Alpina tries to show the difficulty that the intellect (*nous*) brings, comparing it with the *nous* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Book XII, Chs. 7 and 9, which confirms to be a *pros hen* predication for Aristotle. The fact that *nous* has a proper name but is still a part of the soul poses the difficulty in defining the soul, and that construes the exact reason for all the exegetes' struggles for a special treatment of theoretical intellect within the Aristotelian naturalistic account (40). For this purpose, Late Ancient and Early Arabic exegeses consider *De Anima* in three different aspects (42–56): (a) *De Anima* as an entirely physical work maintained by Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius (b) *De Anima* as a work that completes the corpus on natural philosophy and psychology and protruding at the same time into metaphysics (a view held by Alexandrian commentators such as Ammonius, Philoponus, and Olympiodorus and acknowledged among Islamic

philosophers by al-Fārābī, and (c) *De Anima* as a treatise taking a middle path between natural philosophy and metaphysics, a position defended by Ps. Simplicius and later on by al-Kindī. These vicissitudes regarding the soul constitute the starting point for Avicenna's science of the soul according to Alpina.

The third chapter deals with the subject from the title of the book and is thus the central chapter concerning the subject matter of the science of the soul. Related to the difficulty mentioned in the previous chapter, the author claims that *Kitāb al-Nafs* contains two parallel investigations: a) the investigation of the soul as a *relational* entity with respect to the body and b) the investigation of the human soul *in itself* (59).

Alpina then reminds us about Avicenna's project of reestablishing and rearranging Aristotelian science into a hierarchical system with metaphysics at the top, as outlined in *Ilahiyāt 1,1-3* (60). According to this system, each science takes for granted the existence and quiddity of its subject matter. Metaphysics solely investigates the existent *qua* existent, while the other particular sciences investigate the states of the existent. Nevertheless, the outcome of the Flying Man Argument in *Nafs* according to Alpina is to affirm the existence of the essence of the human soul as something different from the body (70). The first version of the Flying Man in *Nafs*, I, 1 affirms the existence of the soul based on its *relation* to the body, whereas *Nafs*, I, 3 ascertains its quiddity to be a sublunary soul (75); lastly the second version of the Flying Man in *Nafs*, V, 2 aims at demonstrating that the human rational soul is an immaterial substance (79). Because the psychology deals with the existence and essence of its subject matter (i.e., the soul), Alpina says it goes beyond the prerogatives of a particular science (185). The science of the soul therefore converges on metaphysics, showing a two-fold aspect. Alpina dubs this division in terms of *psychologia generalis* and *psychologia specialis*, a cleavage inherent in Avicenna's science of the soul. *Psychologia generalis* is to give a general account of the soul as shared by all sublunary souls (i.e., a physical investigation), whereas *psychologia specialis* is the focus on the soul in itself (i.e., the human rational soul), a less physical investigation.

In Chapter 4, Alpina accounts for the definition of the soul (second term in the present book's title) in Avicenna's thinking as perfection (*kamāl*) by also summarizing the term's genealogy. For the author, Avicenna's preference of perfection over form lays in the concept of separability. Nevertheless, according to Alpina, Avicenna's own definition of the soul seems to be different from being a first perfection (*kamāl awwal*). This is because Alpina considers the definition of the soul by perfection to not be an essential definition that Avicenna would prefer to provide and on which he could build his science of the soul; it is rather a definition with respect to the body (107). According to the author, the definition by perfection seems to contain only

subterrestrial souls (i.e., vegetative, animal, and human soul) because it is relational to the body; furthermore perfection may very well be an accident. For Alpina, it is in *Nafs*, I, 3 that we encounter Avicenna's own definition by way of refinement of the Flying Man experiment's conclusion. There, Avicenna ascertains the substantiality of the soul in itself and states the soul to be perfection as substance. Consequently, Alpina thinks that, for Avicenna, "The soul is not a substance because it is a perfection; rather the soul is a perfection as substance" (117). This understanding of Avicenna is also what gives the science of the soul its unitary character among natural philosophy: "It investigates the sublunary soul qua principle and cause of activities in bodies, and provides a glimpse of its essence" (117).

According to Alpina, after investigating the definition and essence of the soul, Avicenna moved on to investigating the faculties. For the author, Avicenna's psychology is a faculty psychology like Aristotle's, but the three faculties regarding the plant, animal, and human correspond to three kinds of soul arranged according to the degree of perfection. Avicenna goes on to discuss the soul-body relationship at the epistemological and metaphysical levels (121). At this point, the individuation of the soul stays problematic because it may risk thinking about the soul as impressed into the body by putting the body as the principle of individuation. For this reason, Avicenna referred to the concept of configuration (*hay'a*) and thinks of the relationship between the body and the soul as a relation. Alpina formulates this relation as follows: "Once the soul comes into being together with the coming into being of a certain bodily temperament, it acquires an individualizing *hay'a*" (125). Thus, the soul's individuation is not dependent on its being impressed into the body but on a certain configuration belonging to the soul (p. 126). For Alpina, Avicenna unites the natural aspect of the soul by understanding the perfection in terms of substance, then by focusing on the faculties; he succeeds in disclosing the peculiarities of the different instances of soul (187).

The author uses tightrope walker as a metaphor for describing Avicenna's attitude in *Nafs*. For him, Avicenna walks between two extremes: "form (*ṣūra*) and perfection (*kamāl*); reception (*qubūl*) and relation (*nisba*); being inseparable (*ḡayr mufāriq*) and being separable (*mufāriq*)" (128). Alpina considers these extremes to be the cornerstones of Avicenna's interpretations of Aristotle's *De Anima*. Alpina sees these extremes as the result of Aristotelian globalizing approach to all sublunary souls and Plato and his followers' exclusive approach which takes on the human soul. Avicenna wants to keep both extremes in a unitary framework.

Chapter 5 is about the proper activity of the rational soul: intellection with respect to the title's third term of activity. After mentioning an upward and downward

movement of the human intellect, Alpina identifies a reducing and downplaying interpretation regarding Avicenna's noetics (131–38). The question weaves around the Active intellect, which results in an emanationist or abstractionist approach to the role of the abstractive process of human intellection. Alpina mentions Etienne Gilson as the first reductionist interpretation, for he reduces the movement of the soul downwards (abstraction) to its movement upwards (emanation), thus rendering the rational soul entirely receptive. The *Augustinisme Avicennisant* pronounced by Gilson concludes a mystical interpretation that Fazlur Rahman and Herbert Davidson follow but Dimitri Gutas and his followers deny. For the author, who discusses at length the different interpretations in his book, both sides have their own deficiencies. For Alpina, Avicenna has two objects of intellectual knowledge and two different ways of apprehending them; immaterial forms are apprehended from above by emanation with no need for abstraction and material forms are apprehended by abstraction from imaginative particulars (144). However, Avicenna only considers the apprehension of the material forms through bodily faculties and disregards the process of apprehension of the immaterial forms (139, 144) Alpina also explains the functioning at stake in terms of the first acquisition of an intelligible form by apprehension and the recovery of an intellectual form already acquired through the Active intellect. In this process, the Active intellect has an epistemological role as the source of intelligibility of any intellectual form in the sublunary realm and an ontological role as the collector of intellectual forms (157). This also confirms for the writer the amphibious status of the human soul, its dependence on the body, its independence from the body, and its place in between physics and metaphysics.

In the sixth chapter, Alpina also takes into consideration the psychological sections of Avicenna's other *summae* such as *'Uyūn al-Hikma* or *Kitāb al-Najāt*. For each case, he provides a table of the *summa*'s contents and its corresponding chapters in *Nafs*. Here Alpina's aim is to evaluate the development of the philosopher's thoughts in a diachronic perspective. Among this rich intertextual comparison, the inclusion of a section discussing *Avicenna's Marginal Glosses on De Anima (al-Ta'liqāt 'alā havāshi Kitāb al-Nafs li-Aristūtālis)* would have completed the picture.

The appendix to the book contains Alpina's careful translations and annotations of selected sections from Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Nafs*. Alpina based these translations, which provide the reader with textual evidence, on the Arabic text edited by Fazlur Rahman in 1959.

In summary, Alpina's investigation of Avicenna's science of the soul is a remarkable study that masterfully uses the primary Greek, Arabic, and Western sources. The tension at the heart of the science (i.e., the soul itself) weaves around inseparability

and separability, immanence and transcendence, and physics and metaphysics. This problematic is skillfully dealt with in the book around the terms of subject, definition, and activity.

Framing the science of the soul as opposed to its theory is also a useful and intelligent methodological strategy. It helps Alpina succeed in providing an integrative and unified picture of the science of the soul while staying fragmented along other sciences and other philosophers such as Aristotle. Thus, Alpina's own methodological approach to Avicenna in the book echoes Avicenna's approach to the soul. I believe that this constitutes a *mise en abyme* successfully played.

Despite dealing with a very subtle and complicated subject, Alpina manages to bring off the tone of his writing. In particular, the subsections' titles reflect a witty style built upon equivoques such as asking the reader "which one they side with" while discussing abstraction and emanation in Avicennan noetics. Reformulations of philosophers' research questions in such way have at least two benefits: they keep readers' interest alive and make them smile in all seriousness.

Moreover, the scrupulous footnotes and detailed examination of secondary literature are highly helpful for interested scholars. But as modern academicians dealing with a large secondary literature, we should be vigilant with the footnotes for two reasons: First, with a huge number of footnotes lies the risk of turning the book into a guide (or a map) due to the vast secondary literature of today, and that leads to corrupting the reading experience. Secondly, the risk exists of being relieved to have given the reference; this draws on a secondary-level communication instead of discussing what is at stake philosophically in the main text of the book. In both cases, this situation really makes the reader's job more difficult. Readers sometimes may feel like they are reading two books, one in the main text and another one with the footnotes; this is a bifurcated experience. Certainly, what I am underlining as a caveat is not specific to the present book, it is something that we all have to think about it, especially within the domain of the history of philosophy.

Another difficulty may occur in relation to the question of the footnotes: meddling of first- and second-order problems (i.e., first- and second-degree literature). Sometimes the secondary literature's ghosts are so haunting that we fight with them in the footnotes and forget the real doctrinal challenge needing to be faced in the presence of the primary author. This also constitutes another issue to reflect on as academicians dealing with the history of philosophy.