

POSSIBILITY OF EQUATION BETWEEN REASON AND REVELATION:

WAS IBN SĪNĀ A DEIST?*

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Öz

Tanrı tasavvuru ile ilgili olarak din felsefesinde yapılan bir ayırım filozofların tanrısı ve dinin Tanrısı şeklindedir. Bununla ilişkili başka bir ayırım da akıl dini ve vahiy dini yahut da vahye dayanan din şeklindedir. Tanrı'nın ne olduğuna ve doğru dinî öğretilerin tamamen akılla bilinebileceğine, akli bilginin dışında ve ötesinde vahye dayanan öğretilerin bir yeri olmadığına inanmak deist bir anlayışı temsil etmektedir. Bu makalede ben, Gazâlî'nin bazı görüşlerini dikkate alarak küfürle suçladığı ortaçağdaki Müslüman filozoflardan İbn Sînâ'nın Tanrı ve dini öğretiler hakkındaki mevzisinin deist bir yaklaşım sayılıp sayılmayacağını ele alacağım. İbn Sînâ'nın deist sayılıp sayılmayacağı sorusuna cevap vermek için, onun vahiy ve dinî öğretilerin hususiyeti hakkında görüşlerini ifade ettikten sonra, onun görüşlerini kelimcilerin bu meseleye bakışı ile ilişkilendireceğim. İbn Sînâ'nın meseleye bakışında kelimcilerin bakışından önemli bir farklılık olsa da, onun mevzisinin deizm olarak görülmesinin yanıltıcı olacağını göstermeye çalışacağım.

Anahtar kelimeler: Deizm, İbn Sînâ, Gazâlî, akıl dini, Teizm.

Introduction

The relationship between natural theology and revealed theology has been an issue of debate in monotheistic religious communities, that is followers of Abrahamic religions, i.e., Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We have well known discussions among medieval philosophers and theologians regarding the scope and depth of religious knowledge based on reason and based on revelation. On certain issues, Muslim theologians and Muslim philosophers had harsh debates. For example, some Muslim philosophers, including Ibn Sînâ, were condemned for apostasy by al-Ghazâlî for their explanation of revelation and their understanding of religious teachings. On the one hand, Ibn Sînâ seems to have tried to give a positive explanation of the revelation assigning the highest intellectual status to revelation received by the prophet. It seems obvious that Ibn Sînâ considered himself as a Muslim, and engaged in explaining certain Islamic religious teachings and certain Qur'anic verses.¹ On the other hand, al-Ghazâlî accused him of not being a Muslim and of rejecting essential Islamic religious teachings. Although Ibn Sînâ apparently acknowledged the emergence of the prophet and the importance of the prophetic message, the way he explained the nature of revelation, the nature of religious texts and the status of the prophet regarding the institution of religion

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¹ Ibn Sînâ wrote commentaries on certain Qur'anic chapters. Ibn Sînâ, *al-Tafsîr al-Qur'ânî wa al-Lughâ al-Sūfiyyah fî Falsafa Ibn Sînâ*, Ed. Ḥasan 'Āṣî (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jāmi'iyya li al-Dirāsât wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzî, 1983).

were not quite welcomed by many medieval Muslim intellectuals. Among them, especially al-Ghazālī did not simply reject Ibn Sīnā's account to be unsuccessful or failing, but he took it as a sign of unbelief, or rejection of Islamic teachings.²

The question that comes to mind immediately is this: could it be justified to consider the position of a philosopher contrary to what he/she claims to be? Allen Wood, an expert on the thought of Immanuel Kant, made an example case in an interesting article. He argued that Immanuel Kant was a deist, even though Kant claimed to be a theist. The difference between their judgements may be traced back to using different criteria to identify who is a theist and who is a deist.³ On Kant's criterion the deist understands by the concept of God "merely a blindly working eternal nature as the root of all things, an original being or supreme cause of the world"⁴. A deist may say God is simple, supremely perfect cause of the universe. But a theist attributes God not only properties derived from a priori concepts, but also the properties reflecting human experience, such as knowing and willing. For Kant, a person is a theist if he ascribes God not only properties indicating God's otherness and transcendence but also the perfection properties associated with human beings. Of course the latter can be predicated of God analogically.⁵

However, Allen Wood does not grant Immanuel Kant's considering himself a theist on his own criterion. But he applies a different criterion to decide whether his position is a theistic position or a deistic one.⁶ Allen Wood argues that Kant is a deist by taking into account commonly accepted definitions of deism and by checking whether Kant's conception of religion fits with commonly accepted definitions of deism. Wood provides a definition of a deist "A deist is someone who believes in a natural or rational religion rather than a religion based on supernatural revelation."⁷ By arguing that Kant is simply agnostic regarding the claims of religion based on revelation, Wood concludes that Kant is a deist, rather than a theist.⁸ This is a judgement contrary what Kant claims himself to be.

Having read Wood's article, I asked the question to myself, could Ibn Sīnā be considered a deist? I do not ask this question to suggest a definite similarity between the position of Ibn Sīnā and that of Kant. However, Ibn Sīnā's conception of religion may suggest that he defended some kind of religion of reason since he seems to reduce revelation to reason, or receiving revelation to acquiring rational knowledge. Thus my question is this: could Ibn Sīnā be considered as a deist despite the fact

² It would be enough to remind the famous three problems discussed in his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, eternity of the world, God's knowledge of particulars and the bodily resurrection. Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers = Tahāfut al-falāsifa*, ed. & trans. Michael E. Marmura, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000). In this regard, Al-Ghazālī's argument that interpretation of religious texts as metaphorical or symbolic expressions may imply rejection of those texts should also be taken into account. Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*, ed. Maḥmūd Bījū (Damascus: Maḥmūd Bījū, 1413/1993). chs. 2-4, pp. 25-39.

³ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen (eds.), (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 1.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (hrsg. Politz) 2. Ausgabe (Leipzig: Taubert, 1830), 96/81 quoted in Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," p. 1.

⁵ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," p. 1.

⁶ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," pp. 1-2.

⁷ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," p. 10.

⁸ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," pp. 11-12.

that he apparently acknowledged prophecy and revelation? Ibn Sīnā considered himself as a Muslim, but he was criticized for being a non-Muslim, for not accepting Islam, a theistic religion, but violating the religious boundaries. Certain differences between his conception of revelation and the conception of revelation common among Muslim theologians may be easily traced.

In the following, I am going to try to make a case concerning Ibn Sīnā, and try to answer the question “whether Ibn Sīnā was a deist?” Trying to answer this question, I am going to explain (1) Ibn Sīnā’s conception of revelation and religious teachings, and (2) relate his conception of revelation and religious teachings to that of Muslim theologians. This shall serve to identify the place of reason in Ibn Sīnā’s conception of revelation and to determine whether one is justified in calling Ibn Sīnā a deist, who rejects a theistic conception of God and who does not accept Islam.

1. Ibn Sīnā: Rational Philosophical Knowledge and Revelation

Ibn Sīnā’s conception of revelation reflects his religious background as well as his philosophical upbringing. First, having lived within an Islamic religious setting, he attempted to explain prophecy and receiving revelation.⁹ Thus when he talks about revelation, he seems to have in mind the notion of revelation common among Muslims, i.e. the expression of divine message instead of the expression of divinity, for example. Or when he talks about the reception of revelation, he has in mind the personality of the prophet, a human being receiving the divine message. Among the early Muslim philosophers, Ibn Sīnā seems to have deliberately tried to establish a philosophical basis for Muslim institutions, instead of providing a general description of revelation.¹⁰ Since Ibn Sīnā lived in a Muslim society and got a religious education, just as any other Muslim kid, the first and foremost example of revelation was the Qur’an, something that is recited, something that included statements, truth-claims, principles, rules concerning the conduct of daily life in personal affairs and social relations. It contained propositions constituting explanation about the ultimate reality, human life on earth and the hereafter.

The second factor that shaped Ibn Sīnā’s conception of revelation was his philosophical breeding, characterized by certain ontological and epistemological positions. In a sense, his religious background provided the questions to be answered, and his philosophical upbringing determined the answers. To explain what exists out there, Ibn Sīnā had the ontological paradigm including God, heavenly intellects, souls, spheres and the sublunary world. The whole being is hierarchically ordered beginning from God and ending at the realm of generation and corruption where human beings are located. Secondly, the existence of the human being and his knowledge concerning all things are ultimately traced back to the tenth and the last heavenly intellect, the so called Active Intellect.¹¹ For Ibn Sīnā all knowledge must be related to this one single source. Furthermore, since he had a strong realistic epistemological position, demonstrative philosophical knowledge must be true and

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958), p. 63.

¹⁰ Michael E. Marmura, “Avicenna’s Theory of Prophecy in the Light of Ash’arite Theology,” in his *Probing in Islamic Philosophy: Studies in the Philosophies of Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali and Other Major Muslim Thinkers* (henceforth *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*) (New York: Global Academic Publishing, 2005), p. 202.

¹¹ For details of Ibn Sīnā’s position concerning the place of the Active Intellect in the ontological hierarchy and its ontological and epistemological function see, Herbert A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 74-126.

must reflect reality as it is. If demonstrative philosophical knowledge depicts reality as it is, any other knowledge claim, including revelation, cannot contradict the demonstrative philosophical knowledge, if it is to be accepted.

Accordingly, Ibn Sīnā assigns one single source for the intellectual revelation received by the prophet and the rational philosophical knowledge. He identifies celestial intellects and celestial souls in the philosophical terminology with angels in religious terminology.¹² If we use the religious terminology, we may say that the Angel Gabriel is the source of revelation as well as demonstrative philosophical knowledge, since it is identical with the Active Intellect, the last of the cosmological Intellects. The same source is identified for both intellectual revelation and philosophical knowledge, because intellectual revelation (i.e., the prophetic knowledge) is nothing other than rational demonstrative knowledge. The human soul is an immaterial substance, and it is generated as a potential intellect. Its generation and later on actualization as an intellect is due to the active intellect, which stands as the last member of cosmic intelligences emanating from God. The human soul acquires knowledge of secondary intelligible forms from the active intellect by establishing conjunction with the active intellect that possesses all intellectual knowledge. The ability to acquire intellectual knowledge is not uniform in all human beings. The prophet excels other human beings in receiving the emanation of the Active intellect.

Regarding the scope of rational demonstrative knowledge and intellectual revelation, the only difference between the philosopher and the prophet with regard to their universal intellectual knowledge is that the prophet has more comprehensive knowledge and he does not need preparation to reach this comprehensive knowledge. The ability to acquire intellectual knowledge is not uniform in all men. Some people have such a strong ability to acquire rational knowledge that they do not require external teaching and preparation. Such a strong ability is called holy reason. The prophet has this kind of powerful ability to acquire knowledge. He can receive the inspiration of the active intellect concerning all things, either at once or nearly so. His knowledge is not classified as imitation, but it is strictly rational and based on middle terms that insure the truth of their conclusions. The prophet's ability to acquire knowledge is so powerful that he seems to know all things by himself. While ordinary people including philosophers need to prepare themselves by studying and reflection, prophets do not need to do so.¹³

This description of receiving revelation may be related to the religious conception of revelation, if we take the role of the imaginative faculty of the prophet into account. The conception of revelation concerning religious teachings, in Islamic theology, is that God reveals to the prophet via Angel Gabriel something recited and pronounced.¹⁴ The appearance of something super-natural, hearing the audible expressions are explained in this manner. For Ibn Sīnā, the imaginative power

¹² M. Marmura, *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*, p.203; Ibn Sīnā, *The Metaphysics of the Healing (Kitāb al-Shifā': al-Ilāhīyyāt)* (henceforth *Metaphysics*), A Parallel English-Arabic Text, translated, introduced, and annotated by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), Book X, Chapter 1, p. 358.

¹³ Fazlur Rahman (ed.), *Avicenna's De Anima (Arabic Text), being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā'* (London: Oxford University Press 1959), p. 248-50. See also, Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt fī al-Hikma al-Manṭiqīyya wa al-Ṭabī'īyya wa al-Ilāhīyya* (henceforth *Najāt*), ed. Majid Fakhry, (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāqī al-Jadīda, 1985), ss. 205-6.

¹⁴ For different senses of revelation and different ways to acquire revelation, see Aydın Işık, *Bir Felsefî Problem Olarak Vahiy ve Mucize* (Ankara: Elis Yayınları, 2006), pp. 12-61; Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, "Vahiy," *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 42 (İstanbul: TDV, 2012), pp.440-443.

of the prophet distinguishes him from the philosopher who acquires knowledge from above only by his rational power. The function of imaginative faculty is to figurize and symbolize that which is perceived. It transforms intellectual, sensible or emotional data into lively symbols that affect people. The imaginative faculty of the prophetic soul “figurizes the intelligibles bestowed upon it by the Active Intelligence in terms of perceptual (literally: visible) symbols. These figurative images, in their turn, impress themselves on the perceptual faculty.”¹⁵ When the prophet received the emanation from the active intellect, this faculty renders the revelation into “figurative images.”¹⁶ For Ibn Sīnā, people with such a powerful imaginative faculty sometime perceive things as they are in reality, and sometime an image appears to them. They may perceive an apparition (*shibh*), and they perceive through imagination that the apparition speaks to them by audible sounds.”¹⁷

Thus for Ibn Sīnā, religious texts, e.g., the Qur’an, texts that are accepted as the exact records of the divine revelation are traced to the powerful imaginative faculty of the prophet. By the intellectual prophetic faculty, the prophet receives intellectual revelation. But the powerful imaginative faculty of the prophet figurizes the intellectual content of the revelation received by the prophet. Intellectual, or rational revelation—which is of the same kind as that of the philosophical demonstrative knowledge—“results in the verbal revelation (for example, the Koran) thanks to the strong prophetic power of imagination which transforms intellective knowledge into moving images.”¹⁸ The prophet shares the intellectual revelation as such with the philosopher, but the verbal form of religious texts and philosophical expression differ from each other. Religious texts, especially the Qur’an in contrast to Prophetic traditions, might be considered as rendering of, or recasting, the intellectual knowledge in metaphorical or symbolic expression. Ibn Sīnā’s explanation about the nature of revelation may be taken to imply that religious texts are not the exact divine words, but rather the work of the powerful imaginative faculty of the prophet.

Although the scope of the rational knowledge and that of revelation are the same, the philosopher cannot fulfill the function of the prophet. The difference between the prophet and the philosopher concerns the establishment of moral-legal rules. These rules can be postulated only by the prophet, unlike the philosopher. We need the prophet to establish rules to organize the conduct of the individual as well the social life. Indeed, Ibn Sīnā argues for the necessity of the emergence of the prophet to establish objective rules. Only an exceptional figure, like a prophet, may settle down moral, political issues, and may set up traditions respected by people.¹⁹ Thus the question that comes to mind is that when the prophet announces a moral or legal prescription as a divine command, “is it really a divine command or a command of the prophet himself to establish a just order among people?”

Thus for Ibn Sīnā, that which is known by reason and that which is known by revelation are

¹⁵ Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, p.37. See also, *Avicenna’s De Anima*, p. 249.

¹⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna’s De Anima*, pp.248-249.

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna’s De Anima*, pp. 173 ff.

¹⁸ Fazlur Rahman, “Avicenna vi: Psychology,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Vol. III, Fasc. 1, pp. 83-84 (London: 1987). [<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/avicenna-vi>, date checked on the internet: 07-October 2016.].

¹⁹ Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, pp. 364-369; Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, pp. 338-9. For a detailed discussion on this issue, see M. Cüneyt Kaya, “Prophetic Legislation: Avicenna’s View of Practical Philosophy Revisited,” in *Philosophy and Abrahamic Religions* ed. Torrence Kirby, Rahim Acar and Bilal Baş (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 205-223.

equal (1) with regard to their source and (2) with regard to their scope. But they are different (3) with regard to their expression—which may be traced back to the imaginative revelation—and (4) with regard to the establishment of religious rites and moral-political-legal rules. One may ask at first, if such a conception of revelation could be accepted by Muslim theologians. Could they think that rational-philosophical knowledge and what the Prophet Muhammad taught came from the same source? Secondly, could rational-philosophical knowledge extend to the areas where revelation reached, could they have the same scope? Thirdly, could it be acceptable that the wording of religious texts belongs to the Prophet instead of being exact divine word without any human intervention? Could specific religious teachings based on revelation be reduced to metaphorical, symbolic expression of rational truths? And finally, could they think that religious rituals and moral and legal commands of the religion were not given directly by God but they were established by the prophet himself, a human being after all?

2. The State of Ibn Sīnā's Position from the Kalām Theological Perspective

Identification of the source of revelation as the tenth heavenly Intellect was not acceptable to Muslim theologians. Obviously, it required to accept the whole cosmological theory of Ibn Sīnā, i.e. hierarchy of heavenly intelligences, souls and spheres and mediate creation of the world in which we live.²⁰ On this account, the Active Intellect is situated at equal distance to all human beings. There is no difference between the prophet and other people, in this regard. Hence identification of the source of revelation as the Active Intellect is considered as elimination of the special status of revelation and that of the prophet, as a person appointed for a duty specific to him.

A common strategy among medieval Muslim theologians is to distinguish between the scope of reason and that of revelation. For Ibn Sīnā the extent of rational-philosophical knowledge of the philosopher and the knowledge of the prophet acquired by revelation were the same, because they acquired their knowledge from the same source. Against the equation of the extent of rational-philosophical knowledge and knowledge based on revelation, Muslim theologians limited the extent of philosophical knowledge. Accordingly, there were things that may be known only by revelation. The scope of the things that could be known only by revelation, of course, differed from one theological school to another. For example, for a Mu'tezilite theologian even though one may reach knowledge of God²¹ and the moral principles of good and bad, there are other things that cannot be known by reason alone. This set of issues that cannot be known by reason include either the implementation of the moral principles in actuality, the institution of rules that may not be known by reason alone.²² For an early Ash'arite theologian, the scope of rational knowledge was quite limited in religious matters. It is because, without revelation, by reason alone, we cannot know the moral principles of good and bad, let alone other religious teachings concerning the hereafter etc.²³

²⁰ See Frank Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy: the Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into As'arite Theology," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, vol. 14 (2004), p.137; Richard M. Frank, "Currents and countercurrents," in Peter Rife and Tony Street (eds.), *Islam: Essays on Scripture Thought and Society* (Leiden, 1997), p. 127.

²¹ Kādî Abdülcebbar, *Şerhu'l-Usûli'l-Hamse* (Mu'tezile'nin Beş İlkesi), (Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı: İstanbul, 2013), vol.1, p. 64, 70-71, 104-108.

²² Kādî Abdülcebbar, *Şerhu'l-Usûli'l-Hamse= Mu'tezile'nin Beş İlkesi*, vol. 2, pp. 420-426

²³ For a recent explanation of the Ash'arite position regarding knowledge of ethical truths, see Ayman Shihadeh, "Theories of Value in Kalām: A New Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 396-402.

At first sight, Ibn Sīnā may look like a deist, since his conception of revelation and his conception of theological language seem to fit certain definitions of deism. Ibn Sīnā's identification of the scope of rational –philosophical knowledge and that of revelation—except for the rules concerning morality and rituals—may seem to be reduction of knowledge received by revelation to knowledge acquired by reason. Revelation cannot provide us with knowledge that falls beyond reason. In fact, Ibn Sīnā's certain theories are taken to be a sign of such reduction. It is common interpretation that Ibn Sīnā rejected bodily resurrection and that he rejected occurrence of at least certain prophetic miracles.²⁴ On this account, Ibn Sīnā interpreted these to be metaphorical, did not acknowledge them literally, because it did not fit philosophical rational knowledge. Since revelation might be “the translation of some abstract scientific truth into metaphorical language by a particularly bright human being”²⁵ the conception of God, description of divine activity found in the Qur'an and the one that is defended by philosophers, including Ibn Sīnā, are “equivocations,” and fundamentally different from each other.²⁶ One may remember how Ibn Sīnā has been accused of rejecting perfection properties of God, such as willing and knowledge. Since the day of al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā is considered to reject God's knowledge of particulars, and that creation is not a voluntary activity. On this interpretation, for Ibn Sīnā God does not know particulars, and creation understood as the necessary emanation is like a natural action rather than a voluntary one. If this way of interpreting Ibn Sīnā's views is taken to be correct, Ibn Sīnā may be considered a deist. His position may indeed be related actually to looser definitions of deism. And one may say, Ibn Sīnā looks like a deist, since he rejects perfection properties of God such as will, knowledge, which are taught by monotheistic religions. His conception of God includes only properties consisting of negations of the creaturely properties.

Concerning the verbal status of the religious texts, and commands, Ibn Sīnā took the religious texts not as the divine word but figurative or symbolic expression of that which is intellectually received from the Active Intellect. This was also rejected by theologians.²⁷ For the common theological conception, the text of the Qur'an is not simply a working out of the imaginative faculty of the Prophet, but it is exactly the divine word, revealed to the Prophet in that form. It would suffice, in this context, to remind al-Ghazālī's criticism of philosophers. Al-Ghazālī argues that interpretation of religious texts as metaphorical or symbolic expressions is a rejection of them, and also rejection of the truthfulness of the Prophet who announced them to people.²⁸

²⁴ Marmura, *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*, p. 210-213. Nadja Germann argues that philosophical account and theological account of revelation are not commensurate, because their conceptions of God are different. While theologians emphasize the literal character of the revelation and revealed texts, philosophers like Fārābī, and I suppose we may include Ibn Sīnā, have Neo-platonic conception of God. With such a conception of God, Germann implies, it is not suitable to have the conception of revelation similar to the theological one. Nadja Germann, “Natural and Revealed Religion,” in Richard Taylor & Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), p.355-356.

²⁵ Nadja Germann, “Natural and Revealed Religion,” pp. 356.

²⁶ Nadja Germann: “Natural and Revealed Religion,” pp. 355-356.

²⁷ Ibn Khaldun, for example, confirms that the Qur'an was exactly revealed to the Prophet. The actual statements are divine. However, in other heavenly revealed books, they were revealed to the prophet as ideas, and prophets expressed those ideas in their own words. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, tr. Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited N. J. Dawood (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp.192-193.

²⁸ Frank Griffel, “Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy: the Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into As'Arīte Theology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, vol. 14 (2004), pp. 121-129.

On al-Ghazālī's account philosophers, like Ibn Sīnā, reject the truth of revelation because they interpret the content of revelation to be consisting of metaphorical or symbolic expressions, instead of interpreting it to be literally true statements. To trace how al-Ghazālī's argument works, we need to look at al-Ghazālī's explanation of the acceptance of the truth of statements. Al-Ghazālī identifies five degrees of reality to which religious statements may correspond. These five degrees of reality are hierarchically ordered. The first and the foremost degree of reality is the degree of real being/existence that is independent of human mind and supposition. The second degree of existence is the degree of sense-perception of a subject who perceives or feels. The third degree of existence is the degree of "imaginative being." The fourth degree is "the conceptual or the intellectual" degree of existence. The expressions like "God's hand" that are interpreted metaphorically is an example of this degree of being. The fifth degree of being is that of "similar being" and the example would be "God's anger."²⁹ The fourth degree of being and that of the fifth one seem to be different only while the fourth degree include concepts of substances; the fifth degree seems to delimit the concepts of things that do not exist on their own but occur to substances, i.e., accidents. On the one hand, for al-Ghazālī the truth of a proposition is its correspondence to reality. Thus one may acknowledge the truth of a religious proposition if one accepts its correspondence to reality.³⁰ If one takes religious statements not to correspond to reality, this is the rejection of them. For Ibn Sīnā, on the other hand, prophets teach only very small amount of literally true statements. But for the benefit of the masses they express the rational philosophical truth in images and symbols.³¹ This al-Ghazālī considers to be an outright rejection of the truth of religious statements and the veracity of the prophet.³² This is because Ibn Sīnā interpreted the religious texts as being the result of imaginative power of the prophet. In a sense, translation of the intellectual revelation into figurative or symbolic expression meant for al-Ghazālī, "to present things as they are not (*talbis*)."³³ "...the view that the metaphors, which are a result of the Prophet's sensible and mental states, are representing things in a way different from what they are (*talbīs*) and are struck only for the educational benefit

²⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* chs. 2-4, See for a detailed analysis, Frank Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy," pp. 127-129.

³⁰ Frank Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy," pp. 126-127.

³¹ Ibn Sīnā, *Metaphysics*, pp. 365-366.

³² "You should know that everybody who reduces a statement of the lawgiver to one of these degrees is amongst those who believe. *Takzīb* is the case only when all these meanings are denied and when it is said that the statements (of the lawgiver) have no meaning and are only pure falsehood (*kiẓb*), that the aim behind (such a false statement) is to present things as they are not (*talbīs*), or to improve the conditions in the present world (*maṣlahat al-dunya*)." Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal*, p. 184.1-4. The translation is quoted from Frank Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy," pp. 134-135.

³³ Of course al-Ghazālī also grants that there are metaphorical and symbolic expressions in the religious texts. Al-Ghazālī's criterion is confusing. Unless we support his position with ad-hoc rules, there may not be much difference between his position and that of philosophers; or philosophers may not be rightfully blamed of infidelity. His point seems to be that philosophers (including Ibn Sīnā) take the religious statements that correspond to the first degree of reality to correspond to the fourth degree of reality, without justification. Hence they do not acknowledge their truth properly. While the prophet meant, for example, a statement to indicate the first degree of reality, philosophers took it to indicate the fourth degree of reality. Since philosophers thought that Prophet intentionally changed the literal – rational-philosophical truth—to metaphorical and symbolic expressions, he did not tell the truth. Thus from al-Ghazālī's perspective, it constitutes the rejection of the veracity of the prophet. Aydın Işık interprets al-Ghazālī's position in a totally different manner. He argues that since philosophers grant the degrees of reality stated by al-Ghazālī, religious statements correspond one of these degrees of reality. Hence al-Ghazālī does not blame philosophers for rejecting the truth of religious statements included in the scripture. Aydın Işık, *Bir Felsefî Problem Olarak Vahiy ve Mucize*, p. 116. However, the crucial issue seems to be that certain religious statement that are considered by al-Ghazālī to correspond to the first degree of reality seem to be considered by philosophers to correspond the fourth degree of reality.

of the ordinary people is rejected. The latter notion is, in fact, vehemently denied in the *Fayṣal...*"³⁴

Indeed, from the perspective of theologians, the kind of revelation accepted by Ibn Sīnā may include only one kind of revelation, but exclude the verbal revelation. Theologians undoubtedly accepted that the revelation received by the prophet (especially the Prophet Muhammad) was given to him in a recited-pronounced form. They distinguish between different kinds of revelation. For example, al-Māturīdī distinguished three kinds of revelation: recited revelation (*waḥy matluw*), non-recited revelation (*waḥy ḡhayr matluw*) and revelation of inspiration and insight (*ifhām*). The revelation verbally recited is the Qur'an and the non-recited revelation include Prophetic traditions which he expresses reporting the saying of God or the angel Gabriel. The third is the inspiration and insight in dealing with the issues that he had to take care in daily affairs.³⁵

Obviously Ibn Sīnā's position diverges from the common theological understanding of revelation. His position differs from the common theological understanding regarding (1) the nature of the source of revelation (2) the scope of revelation *vis a vis* the rational knowledge, (3) regarding the nature of religious texts as the expression of the revelation. Firstly, for the common theological understanding, identification of the source of revelation as the tenth cosmic Intellect was not acceptable. Obviously Ibn Sīnā claims that "the apparition of something" does not indicate the angel of revelation but something that appears to the prophet, even though it does not have an objective reality. Secondly, the extent of rational knowledge is limited in religious matters. Revelation goes way beyond what reason can reach. And thirdly, Ibn Sīnā's theory that religious statements must be interpreted metaphorically is considered to be a rejection of that which is established by religion.

3. Concluding Remarks

Given that Ibn Sīnā does not allow anything beyond the reach of reason, can we conclude that he was a deist? To answer the question whether Ibn Sīnā was a deist, let us remember the definition of a deist. "A deist is someone who believes in a natural or rational religion rather than a religion based on supernatural revelation."³⁶ Believing God's existence as the ultimate cause of everything but rejecting anything beyond the rational knowledge, rejecting the divine intervention in the world by special revelation or miracle are characteristics of deism.³⁷ And theism is defined as "the belief in a single Creator-God who is omniscient, omnipotent, all good, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting, and a being that does not depend on any other being for its existence...As opposed to deists, theists believe that God is revealed in human history."³⁸

The evidence may be interpreted to argue that Ibn Sīnā was a deist, as well as to argue that he was a theist. Ibn Sīnā looks like a deist, given the fact that he reduced the revelation into rational-philosophical knowledge. They both come from the same source. The religious texts are a kind of

³⁴ Frank Griffel, "Al-Gazali's Concept of Prophecy," pp. 137.

³⁵ For this triple division of revelation by Maturidi, see Hülya Alper, "İmam Mâturîdî'de Akıl-Vahiy İlişkisi: Akılın Önceliği ve Vahyin Gerekliliği," *Milel ve Nihal*, vol.7, issue 2 (2010), pp. 18-19.

³⁶ Allen Wood, "Kant's Deism," p. 10.

³⁷ Charles Taliaferro and Elsa J. Marty, *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* (New York, NY: Continuum:2010), p.60-61; Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 167.

³⁸ Charles Taliaferro and Elsa J. Marty, *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion*, p. 225.

translation of the rational-philosophical truth into figures and symbols by the activity of the imaginative faculty of the prophet. The religious rules and rites are established by the prophet; they are not literally-verbally determined by the revelation. This all indicates that Ibn Sīnā does not accept the special (not the supernatural) character of revelation, and extraordinary status of the person who received revelation, since the difference between the philosopher who acquires rational knowledge and the prophet who receives revelation is a matter of degree within one kind but it is not a matter of kind. That is, rational knowledge and revelation are of the same kind.

From a different perspective, it is difficult to consider Ibn Sīnā as a deist, because he definitely grants the occurrence of revelation and recognizes and positively reacts to the emergence of the prophet. He even argues for the necessity of the emergence of the prophet to receive revelation and to institute religion for other people. Even though a philosopher may acquire demonstrative knowledge, he cannot institute a religion and establish religious rules and rites to guide the mass. And the way Ibn Sīnā relates the rational-demonstrative knowledge and revelation may be considered not as reduction of revelation to reason but rather elevation of rational knowledge to the status of revelation. That is, for Ibn Sīnā rational knowledge is not something produced by the human mind. It is something acquired from the Active Intellect. Thus Ibn Sīnā claims not that revelation is something natural but rather rational knowledge has a supernatural source. Obviously this way of relating the rational knowledge and revelation does not reject the supernatural character of revelation, but it eliminates its special status with regard to rational demonstrative knowledge.

It would be appropriate to call Ibn Sīnā's position as a "naturalistic explanation" instead of a deistic explanation. This is because (1) he acknowledges the supernatural source of the revelation, even though (2) he does not grant a special status for the source revelation and (3) he traces verbal expression of revelation to the imaginative faculty of the prophet. I do not want call him a deist, since he identifies a supernatural source for the revelation. And he considers God to be the essential cause of what happens in the universe each and every moment. His position may be difficult to fit to the paradigm associating revelation with a supernatural source and associating reason with the natural conditions of human beings. Ibn Sīnā's explanation is a naturalistic one in the sense that revelation and emergence of prophets who established religions is part of the constitution of the world. This is how the world is designed.³⁹ For Ibn Sīnā no special divine appointment for prophecy, no special divine revelation, no special event of sending the angel Gabriel to the prophet to deliver revelation. But the universe is constituted in such a way that there appear special people with powerful intellectual and imaginative faculties who get into contact with the heavenly active intellect. Since ultimately God is the creator and since ultimately God is the essential cause of everything, one may say that the emergence of every minute event is under divine control, and this includes the emergence of the prophet as well. This is obviously a different paradigm to express how God sends prophets than the common Islamic theological or *Kalām* paradigm. But it certainly acknowledges the special status of the prophet among human beings.

³⁹ It is similar to the debate regarding miracles. Ibn Sīnā did not reject miracles, but he was accused of rejecting miracles, simply because he explained the occurrence of miracles as part of the constitution of the world. To trace the similarity, see my discussion on Ibn Sīnā's position concerning the character of miracles. Rahim Acar, "A Naturalistic Explanation of Miracles: The Case of Ibn Sīnā," *Toronto Journal of Theology*, Supplement 1 (2017), pp. 161–173.

With a benign reading of Ibn Sīnā's views on prophecy, one may say that he assigned a firmer and more respectable position to prophets and prophecy, since prophets as Ibn Sīnā described were philosophers par excellence. Philosophy meant demonstrative knowledge, a philosopher had demonstrative knowledge. A prophet was a person who reached the demonstrative knowledge more quickly, had broader scope of demonstrative knowledge, had the ability to translate it to the understanding of the masses, had the ability to show miracles, had the ability to postulate prescriptions to govern individual lives, as moral principles and patterns of behavior, and to govern social life as religious law or sharia. This identification of the prophet as the philosopher par excellence seems to be reflecting Ibn Sīnā's strong realistic epistemology and his acknowledgement of the truth of the prophetic message. The strong realistic epistemological stance requires that knowledge corresponds to reality. Hence on any given topic, contradictory knowledge claims cannot have equal status. Only one of them may be true at most. Since for Ibn Sīnā philosophers among human beings know reality as it is. Since knowledge strongly correspond to reality, what should the status of the propositions that are claimed to be the result of revelation? Ibn Sīnā could either say that they are false, since they did not strictly match philosophical truths, or he could say they are in agreement with philosophical truth. He obviously opted for the second alternative and considered them at the highest level of knowledge claims, as philosophical truths, with a different expression.

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Abstract

With reference to the conception of God, in philosophy of religion scholars make a distinction between the God of philosophers and the God of religion. A similar distinction is made between rational religion and religion based on revelation. In conformity with these distinctions, it is a deistic position to believe that we may know what God is and what the true religious beliefs are on the basis of reason alone, and to believe that revelation does not add anything further to our rational knowledge in this regard. In this article, I am going to discuss if Ibn Sīnā, who was charged with infidelity for some of his ideas about God and the nature of religious beliefs by al-Ghazālī, could be considered as a deist. To answer the question if Ibn Sīnā was a deist, I am going to discuss his theories regarding the nature of revelation and religious teachings. Then I am going to relate his theories to the position of medieval Muslim theologians. I am going to defend that even though there are important differences between Avicenna's position and that of Muslim theologians on these issues, it would be misleading to consider his position as a deistic position.

Keywords: Deism, Ibn Sīnā, Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, Rational Religion, Theism.