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Intertextuality and Intellectual Affiliations: The Case of Molla Fanārī's Ontology

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Molla Muḥammad b. Ḥamza al-Fanārī is the first in a series of influential scholars in the Fanārī family. He and his son are well known scholars, and a large portion of the scholarly writings these authors have produced is articulated in the form of commentary literature –a feature typical of many other

Ottoman scholars as well.

In past decades, a major change of paradigm in the evaluation of the importance and impact of commentary literature has taken place. This shift has been effected most notably in the study of Greek commentary literature stemming from Late Antiquity. In earlier research and ultimately based on 19th century conceptions of originality and ‘genius’, commentary literature and views articulated in it typically have not been analyzed as original contributions of their authors. The focus of interest had been on whether or not these commentaries may help to better understand the work they comment on, and whether or not the commentaries render faithfully what the original work, for example a book by Aristotle, tells the reader. In the study of Ottoman intellectual history, the rich production of a scholarly literature consisting of commentaries and glosses has been integrated in a broader picture of the later phases of Ottoman history as a period of stagnation and decline. More recent research, however, calls for a reevaluation of commentaries and glosses as a literary genre in its own right. This approach has been applied successfully in the study of Late Antiquity, and it is in the course of being established as a new paradigm in the study of Arabic philosophy and science as well.¹

¹ On this shift cf. most notably Wisnovsky, Robert, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic

The focus is no longer restricted to the “big heroes” of intellectual history, but includes the close study of the intertextual relations of texts, manifesting the interaction and discourse of a complex intellectual community. For understanding how a doctrine has evolved and for understanding what has motivated its elaboration, this discourse needs to be reconstructed. Such a micro-history of arguments exchanged (and in particular also of arguments criticized and dismissed) is required for understanding the concerns of scholars involved. Only thus we can trace how the major developments in the later history of Arabic-Islamic thought have emerged and how they are to be contextualized within a broader historical context.

This is the case also for the impact of the thought of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Arabī on Ottoman intellectual history. Contextualizing the historical evolution of this process requires a step by step analysis of the various layers constituting the intellectual horizons of scholars of that period. While the social networks of Ottoman ‘*ulamā*’ have been recognized as an interesting area worth studying, a counterpart in the investigation of intellectual history is still missing. A first starting point which permits us to connect these two areas of research is the history of *madrasas* and their curricula.²

In order to assess the role of Molla Fanārī in this context we may focus on his commentary on a work of Ibn Arabī's most prominent student, i.e. Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī. The very fact that he wrote a commentary on al-Qūnawī's *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* with the title *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns bayn al-Ma'qūl wa-l-Mashhūd fī Sharḥ Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* suggests that he stands in the tradition of the *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* Ibn al-Arabī. We must, however, consider that this tradition is very much intertwined with elements of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy and *kalām*. Naturally, the

Philosophical Commentary in Post-classical (ca. 1100-1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations”, *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries* (eds. Peter Adamson, Han Balthussen & M. W. F. Stone), Institute of Classical Studies, University of London, London 2004, II, 149-191. For a programmatic view on the investigation of Post-Avicennian philosophy cf. Gutas, Dimitri, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, 1000-ca. 1350”, *Avicenna and His Heritage, Acts of the International Colloquium, Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve September 8-September 11, 1999* (eds. Jules Janssens & Daniel De Smet), Leuven University Press, Leuven 2002, 81-97.

² For a general sketch of how Islamic religious science are situated in the institutional context of the *madrasa*, cf. Makdisi, George, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1981. A comprehensive evaluation of *madrasa-curricula* in the Ottoman period is provided by İzgi, Cevat, *Osmanlı Medreselerinde İlim*, I-II, İz Yayıncılık, İstanbul 1997.

kalâm influence on many elements of Molla Fanârî's exposition can clearly be connected to his role in the formation of the educational system of Ottoman madrasas. Both the texts on which he chooses to comment and the commentary strategies he applies should be interpreted in this context. The intellectual profile of Molla Fanârî and his involvement with Ibn Arabian mysticism also recall Dâwūd al-Qaysarî in Iznik. The institutional background of teaching in a madrasa is the reason why both authors are so familiar with formal requirements of contemporary *kalâm* writings. The contemporary *kalâm* tradition, in turn, was influenced by Avicennian philosophy in a very complex process.

Here, I am going to exemplify how these multi-disciplinary affiliations are present in Molla Fanârî's writings. The example introduced will be the theory of how a science is constituted. In addition to the *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns* another work by Molla Fanârî, i.e. his commentary on a logical work Athîr al-Dîn al-Abharî's *İsāghujî* is to be considered in this context.

In the case of the *Miṣbāḥ al-Uns*, the work on which al-Fanârî comments, i.e. the *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* is the earliest attempt at forming a coherent interpretation of Ibn Arabî's philosophical system. Sadr al-Dîn al-Qūnawî's *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* provides a systematic account of Ibn Arabî's philosophy, and in doing so it follows many conventions dominant in the contemporary philosophical and theological traditions. The *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* considerably transforms Ibn Arabî's ontology by integrating it in the framework of a structured philosophical exposition. The transformation initiated by al-Qūnawî is further increased by Molla Fanârî's commentaries, which add further elements that emphasize systematical aspects of Ibn Arabî's ontology.

The feature that I am going to discuss here, i.e. the problem of how a science is constituted, is present also in the commentary on al-Abharî's *İsāghujî*, a work which, Molla Fanârî tells us, was completed in one day. In this commentary, Fanârî expands on al-Abharî's very short enumeration of expressions used in logic and explains them to some longer extent. In our context, in both works, the introduction is of interest and provides an extensive discussion of how this work is to be situated in the context of a system of sciences. Such an interest in the construction of a system of sciences is

documented by the existence of yet another work by Molla Fanārī, i.e. his *Unmudhaj al-'Ulūm* – a description of the system of sciences.

Describing how a given text is to be situated in the system of sciences is a problem typically addressed in introductions and commentaries to scholarly works. Thus, in Greek texts of Late Antiquity a series of 8 *kephaleia* (*ru'ūs* in Arabic translation) was developed. These *kephaleia* explain to the reader for example the aim, the contents, the place in the order of instruction etc. of a text.³

In the course of the reception of Avicenna's philosophy in the Arabic-Islamic tradition this merges with yet another tradition. This is a discussion ultimately going back to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (*K. al-Burhān*). There, subject-matter, principles and problems (*maḥdū'*, *mabādi'*, *masā'il*) constituting a science are discussed. In 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī's *K. al-Mawāqif* on which Molla Fanārī's son wrote a commentary, this tradition reaches the *kalām* tradition.⁴ Molla Fanārī himself, too, discusses these constituents. Major transformations of the very conception of a science are effected by the introduction of such a technical approach.

Let us turn to the very term of *al-'ilm al-ilāhī*. Sadr al-Qūnawī uses it in the *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* in order to describe the contents of this work.

Molla Fanārī explains this:

*al-ilāhī al-shar'ī al-musammā 'ilm al-ḥaqā'iq huwa al-'ilm bi-llāh al-ḥaqq ta'ālā min ḥaythu irtibāṭihi bi-l-khalq wa-ntishā' al-'ālam minhu.*⁵

The 'religious' divine science which is called science of the true essences (*al-ḥaqā'iq*) is the science about God the true He is exalted insofar as He is connected to the creation and insofar as the world originated from him.

³ On the *kephaleia* in the *kalām*-tradition of the 13th and 14th century cf. Eichner, Heidrun, *The Post-Avicennian Philosophical Tradition and Islamic Orthodoxy: Philosophical and Theological Summae in Context* (unpublished Habilitationsschrift), Halle 2009, 324-325.

⁴ On the *kephaleia* in the *K. al-Mawāqif* van Ess, Joseph, *Die Erkenntnislehre des 'Aḍudaddīn al-Ījī: Übersetzung und Kommentar des ersten Buches seiner Mawāqif*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1966, 37-59.

⁵ Mollā Fanārī, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Ḥamza, *Miṣbah al-Uns bayn al-Ma'qul wa-l-Mashbūd fī Sharḥ Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* (with Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb*), lithographed edition, Tehran 1905, 13.

Trying to situate Molla Fanârî's elaborations on the original text in the context of the contemporary discussion we may observe the following features:

1. Speaking of a 'religious' type of *[al-'ilm] al-ilâhî* Molla Fanârî distinguishes it from a primarily philosophical context, i.e. the *al-'ilm al-ilâhî* as we encounter it in Ibn Sînâ's writings where it continues Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.⁶

2. Referring to *ḥaqā'iq* Molla Fanârî uses an expression which has prominence in the Ibn Arabian tradition, most notably in the text of al-Qūnawî's *Miftāḥ al-Ghayb* itself.

3. Identifying an aspect (*ḥayth*) under which the subject-matter of a science is taken again is a feature of Ibn Sînâ's interpretation of the constitution of a science.

4. The reference to the connection between God and the world is a feature that we can link to the *kalām* discussion. While in the early 13th century theologians such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Āmidī simply identify God's essence (*dhāt*) as the subject-matter of *'ilm al-kalām*, by the Ilkhanid period this has changed. *Mutakallimūn* are increasingly aware that *kalām* addresses various topics other than God.

5. The reference to the notion of *intishā'*, or 'origination', again, refers to Ibn Arabian ontology.

We may assume that, like in other scientific traditions, the presence of such explicit discussions attests to the presence of competing classifications of sciences and intellectual affiliations. As can be seen already from the first example, an analysis of intertextual relations can detect different layers documenting a process of adaptation of competing discourses. In the above example only the specific intertextual relation of a basic text to its commentary permits us to identify the transformations that have taken place between the two texts. One word in the basic text (*[al-'ilm] al-ilâhî*) corresponds to a complex phrase in the commentary. Already Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawî's text itself has situated the term *al-'ilm al-ilâhî* in the framework of an Avicennian system of the

⁶ For a discussion how Ibn Sînâ influences the conception of Metaphysics thought and the way how he uses the Aristotelian formula that describes this science as dealing with the existent insofar it is existent, cf. Bertolacci, Amos, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifā': A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 2006.

sciences and has thus undertaken a first step towards an “Avicennization” and “systematization” of Ibn Arabian ontology constituting his understanding of Divine Being. This trend is continued by Molla Fanārī.

This becomes even more evident from yet another passage. There, Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī refers to the ‘subject-matter’, i.e. the topic of the science under consideration. This, he tells us, is ‘existence of the (divine) truth’ (*wujūd al-ḥaqq subḥānahu*). This is expanded by Molla Fanārī by a reference to the aspect under which this is case and a further explanation. The way in which the investigation of the subject-matter is to be undertaken is rephrased in light of Ibn Arabī's ontology:

fa-mawdu'uhū al-kbāss al-wujūd al-ḥaqq subḥānahu min ḥaythu al-irtibāṭ lā min ḥaythu huwa li-annahū min tilka al-ḥaythiyya ghani 'an al-'ālamīn lā yunāwiluhū ishāra 'aqliyya aw wahmiyya fa-lā 'ibārata 'anhu fa-kayfa yubḥath 'anhu aw 'an aḥwālīhi wa-kadhā 'an kull ḥaqīqa min ḥaqā'iqīhi fī al-ḥaqīqa.

fa-in qulta: laysa wujūd al-ḥaqq min ḥaythu huwa maṭlūb ḥattā 'an qayd al-ṭīlaq ishāra ilayhi wa-'ibāra 'anhu; qultu: na'am lakinna al-manfī al-ishāra ilā ḥaqīqatīhi wa-bādhā al-salb al-mu'abbar 'anhu kadhā. qila: wa-l-tahqīq anna al-manfī al-ishāra ilayhi mā dama maṭlūban wa-mu'abbaran min ḥaythu. wa-l-ishāra fī al-jumla wa-min ḥaythu ta'ayyunibā al-waḍ'i lā yunāfīhi. wa-qad 'arafta fī anna al-majhūl al-muṭlaq yamtani' al-ḥukmu 'alayhi wa-fī anna al-ma'dūm al-muṭlaq a'nī dhibnan wa-khārijan qasīm li-l-ākharayn.⁷

The first part says:

Its specific subject-matter is the existence of the truth insofar as it is connected, not insofar as it is what it is. Under this aspect it is not in need of the world, and no intellectual or imaginative reference may reach it, and it cannot be expressed. How could it be investigated, or how could its states be investigated or any among the true core essences in truth.

Again, the distinction between the divine self as such and the divine self as viewed in connection with the world is made. It is further made clear that the transcendence of the divine self insofar as it is what it is makes it impossible to reach it by the intermediation of a semantic process: Neither a purely intellectual nor an imaginative directedness has access to it, and hence it

⁷ Mollā Fanārī, *Miṣbah al-Uns*, 13.

cannot be expressed by words or any other way. The semantic aspect introduced here is a feature of Ibn Arabian ontology that conceives the divine names and attributes as the medium by which the transcendent divine existence manifests itself and thus creates the realm of worldly existence.

A possible objection is then raised, and we do not know whether this refers to an argument actually discussed in the contemporary discussion, or whether this is a merely hypothetical argument:

If you were to say: “The existence of the [divine] truth insofar as it is what it is cannot be investigated, even under the condition that it is pointed to or expressed” I say: Yes, but there is something about which a ‘pointing to its [true] core-essence’ is, and this negation can be expressed.

It is said: What results from this is that something about which a pointing to it is negated does not cease to be sought and expressed insofar as it is what it is. ‘Pointing to’ as such and insofar as it is concretized in a position does not negate it. You know already that no judgment can be passed about what is absolutely unknown. What is absolutely non-existent, i.e. mentally and externally, underlies the division of these two [realms, i.e. mental and external existence].

Ultimately, in the background of this passage stands the problem of how mental activity can generate something existent. This is a classical debate between Mutazilite and Asharite *mutakallimūn*. In the 13th century a first decisive phase in the reception of Avicennian ontology together with its essence-existence distinction can be identified, which influenced the interpretation of this classical debate. In the course of the 13th century the evolution of two highly influential mystical ontologies takes place, i.e. the illuminationist tradition of al-Suhrawardī and the tradition of Ibn Arabī.⁸

This example of how Molla Fanârî expands on Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s remarks shows how important a close comparison between a text and its commentary is: The intellectual profile of the author can be determined by a

⁸ On the evolution of mystical ontologies in the 13th century, cf. Eichner, H., “The Chapter ‘On Existence and Non-existence’ of Ibn Kammūna’s *al-Jadid fī l-Hikma*: Trends and Sources in an Author’s Shaping the Exegetical Tradition on al-Suhrawardī’s Ontology”, *Avicenna and His Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy* (ed. Y. Tzvi Langermann), Brepols Publishers, Turnhout 2009, 143-178.

careful analysis of minute modifications observable between the basic text and the commentary. Additionally, the results of such a comparison have to be situated in a more complex context: A series of comparisons carried out on textual units of one given text are to be coordinated, and they are to be supplemented by the results of comparisons carried out based on other texts as well. Many elements that we could discern as providing the specific profile of Molla Fanārī's approach can be contextualized only if we know comparable texts from other areas of the tradition contemporary to him.

In the case of Molla Fanārī it can be seen that both Ibn Sīnā's and Ibn Arabī's philosophical systems provide the two major points of reference for modifications and elaborations. The contemporary discourse carried out in several disciplines has to be taken into consideration.

The way al-Fanārī expands on the discussion of the subject-matter of *al-'ilm al-ilāhī* could be supplemented by observations on a very similar procedure he applies in his introduction to his commentary on al-Abharī's *Isāghūjī*. In a further step this may be linked to the procedure applied by other authors as well. For example in the writing of Dāwūd al-Qaysarī a comparable amalgamation between Ibn Arabian Ontology and a formalization of scientific conventions –ultimately based on Avicenna's ontology– can be identified. As a result, a closed evaluation of intertextual relations traceable in commentary literature can be used in order to gain a more precise picture of the intellectual activity of Ottoman intellectual history.

The presence and abundance of commentary literature in Ottoman intellectual history are not automatically to be viewed as an indicator of decline –rather, the commentary is a literary genre which requires complex interpretative strategies in its evaluation. Whether such an evaluation will contribute to a picture of decline or, conversely, will deconstruct such a perception remains an open question and requires further research. In the meantime, I rather opt for the latter option.