The Goal of Islamic Philosophy: Reflections on the Works of Afdal al-Din Kashani

by William C. Chittick

Afdal al-Din Kashani, commonly called Baba Afzal, has remained almost unknown to historians of Islamic philosophy.[1] He flourished toward the end of the twelfth century, and the most likely date of his death is 1214. This means that he was a contemporary of Averroes, Ibn Arabi, and the philosopher Suhrawardi. It also means that he had been dead a hundred years before his compatriot, Abd al-Razzaq Kashani, composed his well-known commentary on Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-hikam*.

Little is known about Baba Afzal's life. We do know that toward the end of it—and perhaps much earlier—he was living in Maraq, a village about thirty-five kilometers from Kashan. The sparsely populated valley, now dominated by the dome of his tomb, still looks like an ideal location for a philosopher to retire from the preoccupations of the world. However, Baba Afzal was by no means a hermit, since his letters attest to the fact that he had a number of children and many students. The people in Maraq consider him to have been a saint, and their picture of him is confirmed by local histories of Kashan written before modern times. Moreover, the affectionate title *Baba*, that is, "Papa," was often given to Sufi teachers. Nonetheless, there is no evidence in his writings for affili-

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr introduced him to the English-speaking world in his article, *Afzal al-Din Kashani and the Philosophical World of Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi*, in M. E. Marmura (ed.), *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), pp. 249-64; reprinted in Nasr, *The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), pp. 189-206. For a thorough study of his life, works, and teachings, along with translations of about half his writings, see Chittick, *The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afdal al-Dîn Kâshânî* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

ation with any Sufi teachers or specifically Sufi schools of thought. Rather he appears as a pure philosopher in the Greco-Islamic style.

Baba Afzal was not a prolific author by the scholarly standards of the time. Nonetheless, his collected Persian works fill a printed volume of 750 pages. Six of his works are longish philosophical treatises, including one on the science of logic. Three more are Persian translations of Arabic works thought to be translated originally from Greek—two by Aristotle and one by Hermes. Seven are substantial letters to students. In addition, there are about fifty short treatises, essays, and paragraphs, and about two hundred quatrains as well as a handful of other poems. Another four hundred quatrains are attributed to him in a separate edition of his *Diwan*. As the author of quatrains, he can be compared with a famous earlier philosopher, Umar Khayyam.

In short, Baba Afzal left behind a considerable corpus of prose writings, and these are written in finely crafted Persian. Why then is he not better known? The main reason, of course, is that he wrote his works in Persian and not in Arabic. Western historians of Islamic philosophy have considered Persian works to be rather peripheral to the tradition, and in this they are not mistaken. Even in modern Iran, a country that celebrates its philosophers, Baba Afzal is little remembered. To the general public, he is more likely to be recognized as a poet than as a philosopher. For those who have studied the history of Persian literature, he is known as a great master of philosophical prose. Among scholars trained in the traditional methods—those who have learned their philosophy in the *madrasahs*—Baba Afzal is almost totally forgotten. This is because the traditional philosophical canon largely excludes works in the Persian language.

Baba Afzal was by no means the only philosopher to write in Persian, but for the most part, the Persian works of great figures like Avicenna, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra are minor parts of their corpus. When philosophers did write in Persian, they wanted to reach an audience that did not include, in the first intention, the *ulama* or other philosophers, all of whom knew Arabic. Given that philosophy was considered the most difficult and sophisticated of the disciplines, the general understanding was that anyone with enough intellectual preparation to study philosophy would have a thorough grounding in the other sciences, all of which were studied mainly in Arabic. By definition, a budding philosopher would be one of the *ulama*, at least in the broad sense of this

word, according to which it denotes "those who have knowledge."

Students of traditional philosophy in the *madrasahs* rarely study Persian works, and they also have little interest in the history of philosophy *per se*, because philosophy for them is a living intellectual discipline. As a result, Baba Afzal has disappeared from their horizon. Moreover, it seems that he was largely ignored by the philosophers who came after him. Mulla Sadra, for example, was well informed about the philosophers of the past, but apparently he does not mention him by name. However, this does not mean that Sadra had not read Baba Afzal's works. We do know that he had studied at least one of them carefully, because he rewrote *Jawidan-nama* in Arabic with the title *Iksir al-'arifin*. Sadra does not claim that the work is his own—even though most of it is in fact his own expansion of the text—because he says at the beginning that he has taken its discussions from the "folk of God" (*ahl Allah*).

Enough details have been given about Baba Afzal's life and writings. Let me now turn to certain peculiarities of his works that will help clarify why I think that his philosophical position is emblematic of traditional Islamic philosophy. But in order to lead up to this issue, we need to ask a basic question: Why did Baba Afzal write in Persian and not in Arabic? The answer is certainly not that his Arabic was inadequate to the task. We know for certain that he wrote one, and probably two, of his long works first in Arabic, and that he then translated them into Persian. His translations of works from the Arabic corpus of Greek writers are some of the most accurate examples of translation from Arabic to Persian that I have ever seen, including modern translations, and their literary quality makes them masterpieces of Persian prose.

So, Baba Afzal certainly knew Arabic very well, and he was also familiar with the Arabic writings of his predecessors. However, we do not know which works he had studied, nor indeed which philosophers he had read, because he never mentions any names—except Aristotle and Hermes. Moreover, as far as I have been able to tell, he does not borrow from any of the earlier philosophers by rewriting their discussions in Persian. The distinguished Iranian historian, Abbas Zaryab, goes so far as to claim that Baba Afzal "follows a new road in the formulation of questions, method of argumentation, and the presentation of philosophical views, a road that distin-

guishes him from the earlier and later philosophers."

This "new road" is determined at least partly by Baba Afzal's decision to write in Persian rather than Arabic. So again, we come back to the question of why he chose to do so. There are several factors at work here, but I think the most important is simply this: He was a teacher and had a specific audience that he was addressing. His primary concern in life was to help his students learn philosophy, and few of them were members of the *ulama* class. Hence they did not have sufficient training in the philosophical sciences to understand works written in Arabic.

By saying that Baba Afzal was a teacher, I do not mean to imply that he was associated with any of the institutions of Islamic learning. His students would have come to his house in the village of Maraq. Presumably they stayed for weeks or months at a time. It would have taken them at least a full day just to come to Maraq from Kashan. In Maraq they devoted their time to learning philosophy from Baba Afzal. There were no academic careers waiting for them, no promotions in their chosen professions. They came purely for the sake of "philosophy" itself, that is, "the love of wisdom." They came to Baba Afzal because they recognized in him not just a philosopher, but more than anything else, a man of wisdom.

As historians of philosophy know, the word philosophy has largely lost its ancient meaning. It is well to remember Pierre Hadot's insistence that philosophy used to be a "way of life," not an academic discipline or a theoretical construct. Baba Afzal is one of the Muslim philosophers whose teachings match Hadot's descriptions of philosophy as a spiritual quest. Philosophers like Baba Afzal were spiritual guides, and their concern was to lead their students to full human perfection.

So, Baba Afzal departed from scholarly convention by writing in Persian, and he did so for the sake of people who would not ordinarily have been considered qualified to study philosophy. In order to understand his motives, we need to have a clear idea of what philosophers like him were doing. What was he trying to teach to his students?

The philosophical tradition offered a number of standard definitions for the word "philosophy," and most of these refer to two sides of the philosophical quest—the theoretical and the practical. It is not enough for someone who loves wisdom to concentrate on theoretical learning. Seekers must also concentrate on the practical side of the soul. In other words, the goal

was to achieve knowledge of the way things are, and, along with that knowledge, a praxis that would accord with the knowledge.

"Ethics" was an important branch of philosophy not only for theoretical reasons, but also for practical reasons. One could not become a true philosopher without being a virtuous human being. The discussion of ethics allowed students to understand how to conceptualize the practical perfections of the soul. But it also set down guidelines for proper activity. No one could claim to understand the science of ethics if he were not ethical. To know the definitions of the cardinal virtues—wisdom, continence, courage, and justice—without possessing them is a sure mark of a failed philosopher. And notice that "wisdom" (*hikma*), which is commonly treated as a synonym of the word "philosophy" (*falsafa*), is itself a virtue. It is, in other words, a deeply rooted quality of the soul that needs to be acquired through self-discipline.

In Islamic terms then, "philosophy" is not only "love of wisdom" (*hubb al-hikma*), it is also wisdom itself. Whatever it is called, it demands ethical and moral perfection along with theoretical and intellectual perfection. Indeed, the philosophers maintained that it is impossible to achieve either kind of perfection in its fullness without achieving the other kind as well. The reason for this is obvious—the human self is not a disembodied intellect, even though, in its full perfection, it disengages itself from all worldly attachments. Human existence in this world demands that the practical, embodied side of the soul accord fully with the nature of things. This can only happen when the individual interacts appropriately with other individuals, with society, and with the universe itself. The standards of this appropriate behavior are described in the science of ethics as the "virtues" (*fada'il*) or the "praiseworthy habitudes" (*malakat hamida*) that need to be permanently acquired by the human self. (In the Sufi tradition, the same sort of discussion was carried out in terms of the "stations" [*maqamat*] on the path to God.)

For the philosophers, then, achieving wisdom was the goal, and to do this they had to dedicate their lives to it. Even if we separate the theoretical goal from the practical goal, we still find that the theoretical goal entailed rigorous practice. The basic objective was to train the mind to think correctly with the ultimate aim of achieving a correct vision of things. People do not easily learn how to think correctly, and Baba Afzal on occasion complains of the difficulty of working with students who have picked up bad

habits of thought by studying the normal scholarly disciplines.

Baba Afzal wrote his treatise on logic to provide the "scale" (*mizan*) of proper thinking. But, learning the definitions of concepts and how to differentiate between correct and incorrect syllogisms is not the same as learning how to think properly. One still has to employ the scale of logic constantly in one's life, because people are nothing if not conscious beings with the power of thought and reflection. They can only live up to their own nature if they train their minds to think correctly at all times, and this is a rigorous discipline that Baba Afzal regularly encourages his students to follow.

There is a second important reason why Baba Afzal chose to write in Persian, closely connected to the first, but perhaps more interesting philosophically. This is the difference between the Arabic and the Persian languages. Persian speakers familiar with philosophical texts in Arabic who read Baba Afzal in Persian are struck by the remarkable clarity of his writings. There are important linguistic reasons for this, and Baba Afzal was fully aware of them.

One of the basic difficulties faced by Persian speakers in philosophical works, whether they are written in Arabic or Persian, is the abstractness of the vocabulary. Most of the Arabic technical terms were already known to Persian speakers, though perhaps not in their technical senses. However, like Latin and Greek words in English, Arabic words tend to have a pedantic sound to them, and invariably they are more abstract than the Persian equivalents. The abstract terms may be more precise for purposes of scientific inquiry, but this precision removes them from the domain of the real world, where boundaries are always fuzzy. If a philosopher is striving to express reality itself, abstract precision may not be the best route.

Baba Afzal is fully aware of the disadvantages of abstract terms, and he tries to avoid these disadvantages in two basic ways. First, he unfolds the laconic style of the philosophers, who mostly wrote for colleagues and advanced students. He develops his arguments rigorously, but he also writes them out in more detail than would be normal in Arabic.

Second, although he often mentions the Arabic technical terms, he

also uses Persian equivalents from everyday speech. The advantage of Persian over Arabic is that readers will have a better sense of the concreteness of the idea and not be drawn into abstractions. They will, as it were, feel the meaning of the words in the gut, and they will not need to stop and ask about what the words mean. The concrete and graphic nature of the Persian vocabulary prevents students from being drawn away from the real and present meaning found at the depth of their embodied souls. In short, Baba Afzal's Persian prose has the effect of bringing philosophy out of the realm of abstractions and presenting it as a lively enterprise that students can engage with in everyday terms.

Let me cite an example of how Baba Afzal employs Persian terminology to clarify what is at issue in Arabic words. You may have noticed that I said that the philosopher is striving to achieve a correct "vision" of the way things are. I do not mean the word "vision" metaphorically. This vision is commonly called the "theoretical" perfection of the soul. The Arabic word is *nazar*, which was adopted into the Persian vocabulary very early. In both Persian and Arabic, it means look, gaze, vision, consideration, theory, speculation. But, in Persian, there is something abstract about the term, if only because it has no Persian root and tends to be used in bookish contexts. Baba Afzal translates the word into Persian as *binish* or "seeing," which is the verbal noun from the everyday Persian word meaning "to see." This word has a down-to-earth concreteness that few loan words can have, because it refers to an act designated by the most commonplace of words.

Now, if *nazar* is attributed to the mind, a Persian speaker thinks of an abstraction, like we do when we think of "theory" in English. But if *binish* is attributed to the mind, a Persian speaker is forced to think of the mind as another kind of eye. When Baba Afzal translates the Arabic expression *'aql nazari* ("theoretical intellect") as *khirad-i bina* ("seeing intelligence"), the reader has a very different feel for what the enterprise of philosophy is all about. It pertains to the real world of seeing, not the abstract world of theorizing, contemplating, speculating, and supposing. By his use of this expression, Baba Afzal is able to tell us that the philosopher is trying to see the real nature of himself and the world.

Given that Baba Afzal considered philosophy a way of life, and given that he used the Persian language as a tool to train his students to live this way of life, we still need to ask why students would come all the way to Maraq to learn philosophy. More specifically, what exactly was philosophy's goal? Here Baba Afzal is extraordinarily direct, much more so than most of the other Muslim philosophers, who tend to be rather long-winded. They never tire of analyzing texts and problems, but they rarely focus squarely and insistently on the purpose of the philosophical quest. Baba Afzal, in contrast, does not like to beat around the bush. He goes directly to the heart of the issue, and for him the issue is that voiced in the Delphic maxim, "Know thyself." He explains repeatedly, with a great variety of direct and relatively simple arguments, that he is trying to aid his students in the quest for wisdom that must animate all philosophy worthy of the name, and that true wisdom remains inaccessible to those who do not know who they are. Those who investigate and learn things that fail to throw light on their own self-understanding are wasting their time.

For Baba Afzal then, the basic philosophical question is "Who am I?" Or, in other terms, "What does it mean to be human?" His answer is that the true substance of a human self, or a human soul, is intelligence, and that the proper object of intelligence's scrutiny is itself. Intelligence is fully achieved only when the knower, the known object, and the act of knowing have come to be one. This, for Baba Afzal, is *tawhid*—the first principle of Islamic faith, a word that is normally understood to mean "asserting the unity of God." In Baba Afzal's view, no one can grasp the unity of God who has not himself achieved the unity of soul. When it is reached, the intellect that knows is identical with the object known. Baba Afzal calls this self-knowing intellect the "radiance" (*furugh*) of the Divine Essence, and he tells us that this radiance can never cease to shine.

Baba Afzal's basic positions on knowledge, existence, and human becoming are not strange to the philosophical tradition. One can argue that his viewpoint is largely the same as that already expressed in the translations of Neoplatonic works, in various works of Hermetic provenance, in the writings of the *Ikhwan al-Safa*, and in the works of Peripatetic philosophers such as Avicenna. There are, of course, many differences of detail, but the general themes expounded by Baba Afzal are reflected in much of Islamic philosophy. What is interesting and attrac-

tive about him is not so much his philosophical stance per se, but rather the manner in which he explicates it for those who are not trained in the technical language of the Islamic sciences.

A good example of Baba Afzal's mode of argumentation is found in a treatise that he calls *Rah-anjam-nama*, "The Book of the Road's End." He is discussing a question that is utterly basic to the philosophical tradition—*wujud*, a word that is normally translated as "existence" or "being." Although the concept and reality of *wujud* are central to Baba Afzal's philosophizing, he had no interest in many of the issues that it raised for other philosophers. For example, he does not consider God *per se* a proper object of philosophical investigation, so he does not discuss the First as *wajib al-wujud*, the "Necessary in existence." For him, *wujud* can only be discussed in terms of everything other than God, that is, the universe and all that it contains.

In talking about *wujud*, Baba Afzal looks first at the word itself. In Arabic, it does not simply mean "to exist." It also means "to find." If we are to understand what *wujud* is all about, we need to think of it in terms of both "being" and "finding." Here Baba Afzal uses two Persian words—*hasti*, a gerund from the "to be" verb, and *yaft*, a gerund from the verb *yaftan*, meaning "to find." He also employs *yaftan* as a synonym for Arabic *idrak* or "perception." And he uses the gerund from *yaftan*'s active participle, *yabandagi* or "finderness," in the same meaning as the words "awareness" (*agahi*), "consciousness" (*ba-khabari*), and "knowledge" (Persian *danish*, Arabic *'ilm*).

If *wujud* means both being and finding, or both existence and awareness, in what sense may we talk about things having *wujud*? Here Baba Afzal says that everyone recognizes two basic levels of *wujud*, those designated by the two meanings of the word. We have things that are there and that do not find, and we have things that perceive the things that are there. Obviously, the things that perceive have both finding and being, so they stand on a higher level of existence than unaware things.

These two levels of *wujud* can be subdivided according to potentiality (*quwwat*) and actuality (*fi'l*). Then we have "potential being," like a tree in a seed, or a table in a tree. On the next level we have "actual

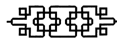
being," like the tree itself or the table itself. The third level is "potential finding," which belongs to the soul or self. The soul has actual being, but it also has the capacity to find, to know, and to be aware of the things around it. Finally, the highest level of existence, "actual finding," belongs to the intellect (Arabic *'aql*) or intelligence (Persian *khirad*), which is the human soul that has turned its resources to the task of knowing itself and others and has reached the full actuality of its own selfhood.

At first sight, this way of looking at things leaves us with something like the Cartesian *cogito*, because it means that to know is to be. However, a formula does not make a philosophy, and a given position needs to be judged by what it means for those who hold it. In Baba Afzal's case, to say that knowing is being means that the truly actualized knower—who is none but the intellect within us—has achieved eternal being as the radiance of God. Such a knower exists by his own essence, not by means of something other than his essence. Things that exist in the first three levels of *wujud* exist by means of something other than themselves, so existence does not belong to them. They are not fully conscious, so they do not truly exist. Knowing is the essential being of self, and truly to know is truly to be. That which knows by essence possesses the fullness of existence and consciousness, and it possesses them forever, because awareness is its very selfhood and reality. Such a being has brought all four levels of existence to fruition.

Baba Afzal's way of picturing the unity of existence and consciousness stresses a point that constantly surfaces in Islamic philosophical writings—that human knowledge and awareness can never be disengaged from being and existence, and that the human self can never be detached from the reality of the outside world. For Baba Afzal and, I would maintain, for the whole philosophical tradition, this point is practically self-evident. It means that the fullness of reality and actuality is also the fullness of consciousness, and that whatever is more conscious and more aware is more real. The more fully things exist, the more fully they know, and the more fully they know, the fuller is their reality and actuality.

Aristotelian hylomorphism was understood in these same terms. The forms or ideas pertain to the domain of intelligence, and full awareness of the forms can only come through full actualization of human consciousness. Matter per se is dead and unintelligible, whereas the forms are alive through the life of the intelligence that knows them.

To understand the world, we need to achieve a sufficient degree of self-awareness and self-actualization, and this task cannot be accomplished by focusing on the forms embedded in matter. To strive to understand and manipulate the embodied forms is to disperse and scatter the intelligence and to abandon true selfhood. The human task is to learn how to detach and disengage the forms from their localization in things. We need to learn how to perceive the forms in themselves, for they are the realities of the self and the things. We can only perceive them for what they are in the world of self-awareness. This self-awareness transcends all the individual limitations that prevent human egos from a true vision of things, and it allows people to live in the world in exactly the manner that the realities require.



By way of a general conclusion, let me suggest some of the historical implications of the unity of existence and consciousness as discussed by the Muslim philosophers.

Certainly, the goal of the philosophical tradition that is epitomized by Baba Afzal is to know oneself and the world in terms of the First Real, the Absolute Truth that brought the universe into existence, and then to act in accordance with what this knowledge demands. This is precisely "wisdom," which embraces the theoretical and practical sides of the human self. But what sets this vision totally apart from modern thought and puts it squarely at the center of a human project whose permutations can be seen in all the great pre-modern civilizations is the focus on what might best be called "*anthropocosmism*"—to use the evocative expression that Tu Weiming employs to describe the Confucian world view.

The dominant perspective in the Islamic philosophical tradition pictures human beings in terms of the unity of the human world and the natural world. There is no place to drive a wedge between humans and cosmos. In the final analysis, the natural world is the externalization of the true human self, and the human self is the internalization of the realm of nature. In Baba Afzal's terms, this is because the human world embraces all four levels of existence—potential and actual being and finding—and the natural world is simply the external presence of the three lower levels. Human beings and the whole universe are intimately inter-

twined, and they face each other like two great mirrors. The quest for wisdom can only succeed if the natural world is recognized as equivalent to one's own self. In the same way, one must see the whole human race as the external manifestation of all the potencies of the human soul. Only in these terms is it possible to "love thy neighbor as thyself."

Islamic philosophy never put into practice all the "scientific" insights that were present among its great masters and that have so often been admired by Western historians. Many of these historians, and even more so the modern-day Muslims who have followed in their footsteps, have lamented the "decadence" that prevented Islam from pursuing the "progressive" course of the early philosopher-scientists. Instead, they remark, these advances were carried over into Latin, and then they were instrumental in the development of philosophy and science in the West, which in turn led to the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution.

However, to claim that the Muslims failed to capitalize on the insights of the early thinkers is simply to acknowledge that the Islamic intellectual tradition remained true to itself. It held and continued to hold that human beings and the world must never be driven apart—in the Cartesian or Kantian manners, for example. There could be no justification for the objectification and reification of the natural world—for considering it as an "object" or a mere "thing" with no divine and human rights. Down into the nineteenth century, Muslim intellectuals continued to look upon the cosmos as a realm of reality inseparable from the human self. Any transgression of the natural world betrays human nature, and to "rape the earth" in the modern manner could only be the rape of the human soul and the surrender of the claim to human status.

The Enlightenment project of instrumental rationality depended for its success on the bifurcation of the human and the cosmic, for only then could the world be seen as a great collection of inanimate objects that people are free to manipulate and control as they wish. The net result has been a whole culture that sees itself alien to the natural realm and that drives people to search ever more desperately for unspoiled "nature." The existential *angst* of so many modern thinkers, who see themselves beleaguered by a hostile universe, is utterly inconceivable within the Islamic intellectual tradition, where the world is nothing if not a nurturing womb.

It is not without significance that Islamic philosophy has largely been

moribund in most of the Islamic world for the past century, just as intellectual Sufism—which developed a parallel *anthropocosmic* vision—has been the least prevalent of the many forms of Sufism in modern times. In place of these traditions, Muslim intellectuals, who nowadays are most commonly trained as doctors and engineers, are typically ruled by modern Western ideologies. Those intellectuals who have clung to their own traditions have for the most part specialized in *Shariah* (Islamic law), which has nothing to say about the nature of God, the cosmos, and the human soul. And a large number of those who have tried to revive an Islamic intellectual tradition that would not simply be warmed-over scientism or political ideology have done so by appealing to the school of *Kalam* (dogmatic theology), which asserts a radical divine transcendence that precludes any sort of *anthropocosmic* vision. Hence *Kalam* leaves the door open to treat the universe as an object to be manipulated. Modern Muslim intellectuals intuitively recognize in *Kalam* the one theological method that will allow them to justify their abandonment of most of their own intellectual tradition and their adoption of scientism, ideology, and technology in its place.

The vast majority of modern-day Muslim intellectuals, like most of their counterparts in the West, have considered science and technology absolutely desirable for the sake of human progress and happiness. They raise no questions about the alienation from the world and God that scientistic thinking inevitably brings down upon a culture—the flattening of intellectual horizons that takes for granted an anthropocentrism without a transcendent God or a living cosmos. Few have seen that scientistic thinking is largely responsible for negating every human possibility beyond the mundane in the name of an "inevitable" development—"inevitable" simply because it can be done, and because nothing can stop technology's juggernaut.

Fortunately, however, there is much to be hopeful about in the modern world, not least the fact that more and more people are recognizing that something important has been lost. The recognition of loss is the necessary precondition for gain.

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