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Nasir Khusraw: Fatimid Intellectual

Alice C. Hunsberger

Reference

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Abstract

This short article focuses on 'one compelling individual, Nasir Khusraw' And some of his ideas. While making brief mention of the Safar Nama, his philosophical works and the Divan, it attempts to elaborate on the ideas of the Concept of Creation and the importance of the soul as well as the body.

Key Words

Fatimid, Intellectual Tradition, The concept of Creation, Aql, Ilm

In thinking about the Fatimid intellectual tradition, a number of the essays in this book have taken a 'big picture' approach, giving an overview of the larger cultural and historical issues. I should like to move away from this approach and focus on one compelling individual, Nasir Khusraw, who lived primarily in Khurasan during the 11th century. In keeping with the theme of the book, I shall concentrate on a few of his ideas. From them, perhaps, one can start to see what makes him such a noteworthy character.

'E' for 'Eagles'

In New York City, a group of scholars is currently busy making an encyclopaedia which will fill in the gaps of Iranian history and culture not adequately covered in other encyclopaedias, such as *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. This new encyclopedia, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, contains many articles one would expect: cities of Iran, historical personages of Iran, and so on. But it also contains articles on more unusual topics. Under the letter 'E', for example, there is an article on 'Eagles'. Now, this may make sense were there some unique species of eagle in the Iranian world. Indeed, the article does mention the actual birds found in Iran. But the article is also about Nasir Khusraw, because of a famous poem he wrote about an eagle.¹ It begins with these lines:

*Ruzi zi sar-i sang 'uqabi bi haaa khwast
Bahr-i talab-i tu' mih, par o bal biyarast.*²

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The poem tells the tale of how, one day, an eagle rose up from its rocky perch, luxuriously extended its wings and feathers, and flew off to look for food. While soaring at great heights, the eagle marvelled at his superior talents, on eyesight so keen he could even discern a tiny hair at the bottom of the sea, or a gnat moving on a twig. He boasted, 'Who is a better creature than I, anywhere on earth or sky?' But suddenly, in the midst of this reverie of self-satisfaction, he is struck by a terrible pain and falls, hurtling to the ground below. In shock, he looks around to see the cause of his disaster and spies an arrow lodged deep within him. But his disbelief continues. He cannot fathom how something made of wood and metal, two heavy and earth-bound elements, could fell a creature of the air, a creature with powers superior even to those of man. It is only when his eye catches sight of the feathers attached to the end of the arrow, the feathers of an eagle, that he understands the source of the arrow's power. The implications of this sink deep within his soul, and he exclaims:

*Zi tir nigah kard o par-i khwish baru did,
Gufta: zi ki nalim ? Ki az ma-st ki bar ma-st!*

He realizes that it is the feathers that have brought his doom, the very feathers which carried him to the skies have brought him down. The climactic words '*az mast ki bar mast*' still signify today that we, too, have within ourselves the very thing which will take us up as well as down. The poet's point is to be careful of its power. Nasir Khusraw ends the poem with straightforward advice:

Khusraw! Cast out your ego and your selfishness.
Look at this eagle full of selfish pride.
It was his selfishness, excessive sense of self,
That brought him down.

Nasir Khusraw

So who is Nasir Khusraw, whose moralizing poem merits an encyclopaedia entry for a bird? This is a man who woke up one day and decided to turn his life around and devote it to the attainment of true, spiritual wealth instead of just the wealth of this world. He has left us both a poem and a piece of prose detailing this change of heart. This is a man who left all family and all possessions behind and set off from Khurasan for a journey to Jerusalem, Mecca and Egypt which would eventually last for seven years before he saw his homeland again. This is a man who became such a successful preacher of the Ismaili faith, much of it spread in today's Tajikistan and Afghanistan, that those of other Islamic schools turned viciously against him so that he had to flee for his life. He spent his last 15 or 20 years in exile in Yumgan, a remote mountain town in the Pamir mountains of Badakhshan under the protection of a local Ismaili prince.³

A Transformation



But besides the drama of his life, which is dramatic indeed, I think what makes Nasir Khusraw a most beguiling character - so much so that people still memorize his poems today - is that while his vision remains steadfastly fixed on some faraway perfection to which he calls us all to aspire, his feet remain firmly planted on the ground of this world. Nasir Khusraw is no Sufi longing for *fana*, annihilation in God, the Beloved. He is no ascetic totally repudiating the pleasures of this world. Rather, he urges us to be fully in this world and to actively use it for achieving our own perfection. He exhorts his readers to become the best human beings they can.

The Safarnama

Abu'l-Mu'in Nasir ibn Khusraw al-Qubadiyani al-Marwazi (1004- ca. 1077), better known as Nasir Khusraw, is a beloved figure in Persian literature. Zabih Allah Safa (1911-1999) ranked him as one of the greatest and most talented poets and writers of the Persian language.⁴ Nasir Khusraw further distinguishes himself in his unique capacity as the only eminent philosophical writer of his era to have composed all his works in the Persian language. Besides his acclaimed virtuosity with words, Nasir displayed his linguistic virtuosity by leaving us three different genres of writing: a prose memoir of his travels, the *Safar-nama*, his poetry gathered in his *Divan*, and a number of philosophical works in which he lays out the doctrines of Ismailism. Of these philosophical books, so far six have been edited and published: *Gushayish wa rahayish*, *jami al-hikmatayn*, *Khwan al-ikhwan*, *Shish fasl*, which is another name for his prose *Rawshana'i-nama*, *Wajh-i din*, and *Zad al-musafirin*,⁵ but many more treatises still remain in manuscript form in libraries in cities like St. Petersburg and Dushanbe.⁶

A Glimpse of the Writer

But Nasir Khusraw earned his title 'Hakim', which may, perhaps, be best translated as 'sage,' for more than just his skill with language. He earned it through his broad training in philosophy and other sciences, including finance and mathematics. All his writings betray a wide knowledge encompassing Greek philosophy and science, ancient Iranian religions and culture, and all the fields of Islamic literature, philosophy and theology. Beyond his empirical knowledge, however, he exhibits a certain honesty and directness which, I suggest, is what has drawn people to him for over 900 years. He tells of the everyday things of life, of his pain, his hopes, and his gratitude for God's creations, in a very candid style. His *Safar-nama* is admired particularly as an example of beautiful Persian prose, not because it performs linguistic acrobatics (a style which seriously came into vogue a bit later), but because it is plain and unadorned. In fact, sometimes his writing is so terse, one wishes for more elaboration. For example, the first line, 'I was a clerk by profession and one of those in charge of the sultan's revenue service,'⁷ is one such simple sentence, with no play on words, no allegorical meaning to discover. One only wishes for more detail.

Philosophical Works



Around his fortieth birthday, Nasir Khusraw underwent a spiritual awakening so profound that he set aside his privileged life in the royal Saljuq court and set out on his journey. While it seems we cannot know all the steps that led to this turning point, we can examine each of his writings carefully, since most of them date from the period after his conversion, looking for clues as to how he understood the event and how it echoed in his later life. We can also compare these texts to see how each one mirrors different aspects of his personality.

In the *Safar-nama* we encounter a man very conscious of the way cities are fortified and how they are administered. Nasir makes a point of telling how many gates each city has, how thick are its walls and where its water comes from.⁸ He actually paces out the length and breadth of cities.⁹ He also goes into markets and records how much certain items cost, and then gives comparisons for the people back home in Khurasan.¹⁰ While we may be grateful for these details, we are often not sure whether he is just writing in his administrative style, recording numbers as in a ledger, or if there is some sociological or historical reason for him to mention them. The answer always seems to be the former – that he is interested in the details of everyday life and he wants to share them with others. However, when he does offer some of the historical background to his narrative, it is often too cryptic to be very satisfying. In the story of his visit to the city of Lahsa (al-Ahsa), then still the capital of the Qarmati state of Bahrayn, he speaks about the time some people of Lahsa attacked Islam's sacred mosque in Mecca, stole the Black Stone out of the Ka'ba, and carried it off to Lahsa.¹¹ Nasir Khusraw uses the anecdote as an opportunity to make a preacherly point. He criticizes the people of Lahsa for foolishly thinking that the stone itself was some kind of 'human magnet' which draws people to Mecca, and for not understanding that it was in fact the excellence of the Prophet Muhammad and his message which attracted people to Mecca as a place of pilgrimage, and not the stone. After this brief criticism, which only takes two lines or so, Nasir lists the animals they eat in Lahsa. The reader is left wishing for more analysis and explanation from this traveller who is so sensitive and astute an observer, as well as opinionated.

Besides his record of the facts of what he observed in his physical environment, Nasir allows a few glimpses of himself. There was the joke he shared with his brother, who traveled with him, about the shopkeeper from Kharzavil who had nothing they asked for.¹² Thereafter on the journey, whenever someone did not have the thing they were looking for, the two brothers would look at each other and say, 'This is just like the grocer from Kharzavil!' Then there was the other comment Nasir made after spending a day with a teacher in Simnan.¹³ The teacher had grouped his students close to the pillars of the courtyard, At one pillar a group was studying medicine, at another mathematics. The teacher kept remarking in earshot of the visitor that he had heard this or that from Ibn Sina. But in a direct conversation with Nasir Khusraw, this teacher, who had hundreds of students around him, confessed, 'I do not know anything about mathematics.' Nasir Khusraw went away wondering how the fellow could possibly teach anything if he did not even know the subject.

These little remarks show us a tiny piece of his personality; but they account for a small portion of the travelogue, which is otherwise filled with descriptive details. We may fault



Nasir for being too terse, but we can at the same time rest assured that when he does tell us something, it is based on the fact of his own experience. When the locals outside Jerusalem tell him about the nearby valley of Gehenna (i.e. Hell) and explain that it has that name because when you lean over the edge you can hear the cries of the people in Hell, Nasir tries it out. He writes that he went over there but did not hear anything.¹⁴ The picture that arises of the author of this travelogue is of a man who is very observant, who takes the responsibility of recording and presenting facts truthfully for others, and who wants to help others learn from his experience, as in the story of the baths at Basra.¹⁵

On the homeward leg of the journey, having taken months to get across the deserts of the Arabian peninsula, Nasir and his brother arrive in Basra in a condition of extreme poverty and dishevelment. They are thirty dinars in debt just for the rent of their camel and have nothing left to sell. They look so terrible that even the bathkeeper chases them away from the public baths. Nasir writes, 'I retired to a corner to contemplate the changes in the world.' He quickly came upon a solution. Nasir composed a beautiful letter to the ruler of the city, introducing himself and showing, in content and style, that he was a man of great learning and court experience. His strategy worked. Two sets of fine clothing were soon delivered and the travellers were admitted to court, where they spent some time. Before they left Basra, however, the two returned to the baths dressed in all their finery and accompanied by servants. They were admitted with great apologies. But for Nasir the story does not end there. The victory of being allowed in and of showing the bathkeeper that things are not always what they appear to be on the outside 'may indeed have given Nasir personal pleasure. But he finds a serious lesson here. He writes that he included this incident in his travelogue so that his readers would not despair in times of adversity, but would know that sometimes God's mercy does come through. 'For He is most merciful indeed,' he adds. With this, we see even more clearly that Nasir Khusraw is writing his *Safar-nama* as a gift to others. He uses it to proclaim that what is here in this world matters and that having hope for the future matters ultimately. The same attitude can be seen even more clearly in his two other types of writing, poetry and philosophy.

Well-schooled in the intellectual traditions of his day, Nasir Khusraw brought his learning to the cause of defending and proclaiming the Ismaili faith. From his philosophical books, we can see that he was familiar with the full scope of religious enquiry, from metaphysics to ethics. In them, he addresses a broad range of questions: How did the world come to be? What is meant by space, time and matter? What is the relationship of matter to spirit? What is soul and what is intellect? What are the central ethical issues a believer should be concerned with? After his conversion, Nasir used all his knowledge and intellectual curiosity in the service of the Ismaili cause, specifically to lead others to its truth and to defend it against its enemies.

The Concept of Creation in the Quran

Let us take, for example, the concept of creation. The creation story, that is the narration of how things came to be as they are now, is of fundamental importance in all religions because



it provides the rationale for rules and regulations now and, in addition, it explains the human relationship with God, including requirements for salvation. If we can determine how this world came to be, then we can figure out why and how we should seek salvation. In the Qur'an, as in the Judaic and Christian scriptures, the creation takes place when God says 'Be!' ('*kun*'). For many people, this raises a number of questions because, when God gives the creative command, where does the world actually come from? Does it come from God? From His essence? For, if so, then how could it not have existed before, for there cannot be a new part of God's essence that suddenly came into being. But, even if we acknowledged some new essence in God, where would that essence have come from? If it had already existed somewhere else, the creation could not have been in God's essence from the beginning. And if it was in God's essence eternally, how can we call it a creation? And if we try to say that it was an idea of God, one of His thoughts, then we get into a similar problem, in that any idea God had, He must have had from eternity since He could not have changed His essence to produce the idea.

Neoplatonism and the Concept of Creation

One of the streams of philosophical thought which Muslim philosophers and theologians adapted for their own use (as did intellectuals in the Jewish and Christian religions) was Neoplatonism which offered a conceptual framework of creation that found a way around some of these questions. Nasir Khusraw and other Ismaili thinkers, especially those in the Iranian lands, used the tools of Neoplatonism to explain rationally the creation of the physical world from a bodiless, non-physical God.¹⁶

Nasir's God-intellect-soul-nature model

Nasir Khusraw writes in his *Shish fasl* that the human soul can only attain eternal bliss (*baqa*) through knowledge of *tawhid*, which he defines as a knowledge of God that is equally free of *tashbih*, anthropomorphism, and of *ta'til*, which divests Him of any attributes.¹⁷ God totally transcends all creation, that is, He is so far beyond all that exists and so far beyond human comprehension that He also transcends all language, thought and being. However, as Nasir Khusraw says, we know that the first action coming from God was His word (*sukhan*) 'only to make it easier for everyone to understand'.¹⁸ This word was perfect (*tamam*) and caused universal intellect (*'aql-i kull*) to come into existence.

Intellect thus has the closest relationship with the Neoplatonic One. In its closeness with the One, intellect overflows into another hypostasis called universal soul (*nafs-i hull*). When soul 'looks back' (or refers back) and sees that intellect is between it and God, it generates nature which contains within it the material world (*hayula*). We now have a spiritual hierarchy descending from God to intellect, soul and nature. The four principal elements of the material world are earth, air, fire and water, and from them everything else is constituted.

The hierarchy of creation now starts to ascend. At the lowest level, the four elements combine to make, first, the minerals (which occupy space but cannot move by themselves nor



reproduce), then the plants (which cannot move but can reproduce), and then the animals (which can move as well as reproduce). Of the animals, the highest ranked are the humans (which can not only move and reproduce but can also think). Thus, a clear path from humans to God has been established. Once we clarify the relation of the human soul to the universal soul, as well as to the human intellect and universal intellect, we will have the necessary grid onto which religion can spread its ethics.

Notice that, for Nasir Khusraw, it is the universal soul that desires perfection. Universal intellect already has perfection. This is certainly not the gnostic idea of the soul descending to the earth and being imprisoned by desire for it. For Nasir Khusraw, the soul's desiring of perfection leads to the creation. This then provides the groundwork for an appreciation of the physical world. We can see the root, then, of some lessons in Nasir Khusraw's writings – in order to achieve the higher world, one must be in this world, and this world is a vital part of the whole scheme.

Al-Kirmani's ten-intellect model

More than the specifics of his particular view though, what is inherently interesting about all this in the Islamic tradition is that there was another version of the cosmogonic explanation of how the world was created, how we got from absolute spirit to the physical world. The other version involved ten intellects and had been well articulated by Abu nasr al-Farabi (d 950).¹⁹ So, instead of a scheme of God, intellect, soul, nature, here one has God and the first intellect, and so on down to the tenth, which is identified with the Prophetic intellect, or Gabriel. This then constitutes the connection, the ladder for human souls' ascent up the hierarchy of the ten intellects toward God. Al-Farabi's cosmogonic system was adopted by some among Ismailis, such as Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani (d. ca. 1021).²⁰ We can see then these two cosmogonic traditions at work in Ismaili thought of the Fatimid period – the God-intellect-soul-nature model and the ten intellect model. Why would al-Farabi's system of ten descending intellects move in on the territory of the earlier system so that some Ismaili thinkers adopted it and abandoned the earlier version?

I suggest that it supported the philosophers' claim that people do not have to give up their intellect in order to have faith. The philosophers preferred this system in which man's intellect connects to the hierarchy of intellects, and through that connection gets him to God. Their concern was how to make the ontological connection between humans and a God who is so totally different, totally other. But what the proponents of the ten intellects left out, and what Nasir Khusraw did not, is the creative energy of the soul. As he points out, the soul creates the physical world and is in charge of running it. For Nasir Khusraw, the universal soul is not just that which creates and animates, though it surely is that; it is all of these at once, as well as the very thing that will be saved, that is, the human soul. We never hear of the intellect being saved. We see that the soul has the creative power to save itself. The soul (*nafs*), according to Nasir Khusraw, is therefore conscious of its current state and a better future; it is active and creative, and always trying to drive itself to perfection.

Nasir's Divan

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Besides the travelogue and the philosophical works, we also have Nasir Khusraw's corpus of poetry, and as we was with the poem on the self-centred eagle, the poet employs this genre to teach and give moral advice. He also puts poetry to use in the service of his philosophical theology, hiding profound doctrine in verse. But the poetry also makes it possible to see the poet's personality more fully, Here, I would like to look for a moment at one of these emotions, sadness, and then at one theme which comes up in his poetry, that of reason or intellect.

A good portion of Nasir's poetry – which dates from his period of exile – grapples directly with his sadness and the bitterness of losing much that was dear to him; often he is very bitter at the ignorant fools who reject all the knowledge and wisdom he wishes to bring. At such a moment, he describes his pain as sharper than anyone has ever known:

The scorpion of exile has stung my heart so,
You'd say heaven invented suffering just for me.²¹

In another verse, he bitterly declares:

Though sinless, I have become the enemy
of the Turk, the Arab, the Iraqi and the Khurasani.
Always searching for a fault and finding none, they still
call me 'heretic' and an enemy of the Companions!²²

Nonetheless, at some point in each of his poems, Nasir Khusraw changes from anger or sadness to a reaffirmation of his life's work. He reminds himself of his commitment to the Fatimid caliph-imam and the truth of the Ismaili faith. He consoles himself that the rule of this fickle world means that not only can good turn to bad but, since change is inevitable, bad will also necessarily change, some day, to good.

Intellect and Action

With one prominent theme in his poetry, that of reason or intellect (*'aql*), Nasir shows clearly how he despises ignorance. He finds most people so stupid he can barely tolerate it, and compares them to all sorts of animals, like donkeys and asses of course, but also like silent fishes and noisy little birds. He takes seriously the famous *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad: 'Seek knowledge even unto China.' On an exoteric (*zahir*) level, the travels he recounts in the *Safar-nama* may certainly be seen as a way of seeking wisdom, but only on an exoteric level. When he speaks in his poetry of another China, this one called 'Ma Chin', we realize it is an esoteric Orient that calls for an inner journey, and we realize he is taking us to a deeper level. According to Nasir Khusraw, this esoteric China is to be found in the family of the Prophet, who are the gateway to the hidden truths of religion.

What we see in Nasir's *Divan* of poetry is a man struggling with conflicting emotions, between warning others against the physical world which entraps and ultimately betrays a spiritual person, and asserting at the same time that the physical world is essential in the



effort of following the spiritual path. While it may be easy to see the puritanical tenor of this message of the seductive dangers of the physical world, it requires more thought to understand the positive value of the physical world that Nasir holds for the spiritual person. For a spiritual person, one who holds the other world more important than this world, the greater challenge is to actively and productively engage in the physical world than to reject it. The physical world is essential to a life of faith because it holds the tools for learning true wisdom, namely reason (or intellect) and knowledge, that is *`aql* and *`ilm*. In his *Wajh-i din*, Nasir explains that animals act without knowledge, while angels know without acting. But humans must combine both knowledge and action, just as they represent a combination of animal bodies and angelic knowledge.²³ While among the Sufis, reason (*`aql*) was a boundary to be overcome, an obstacle in the path of achieving union in the wellspring of love, for Nasir Khusraw reason is not something to be surpassed or suppressed but to be used for increasing knowledge and strengthening faith. In another poem, here translated in Victorian style by Edward G. Browne (1862-1926), Nasir says:

Reason was ever my leader, leading me on by the hand
Till it made me famed for wisdom through the length and breadth of the land.
Reason it was which gave me the crown of faith, I say, and faith
hath given me virtue, and strength to endure and obey.²⁴

For Nasir Khusraw, then, reason is not opposed to faith, nor does it represent an alternative way of life. Rather, it is integral to both, leading a believer to proper faith and then strengthening that conviction.

On the other hand, for Nasir Khusraw, knowledge without proper action is hollow. It is not sufficient to know what is true; and it is not enough to know the imam of the time. To him that would be 'like a string of pearls in which you have placed a common stone in the centre.' One must also act in accordance with this knowledge. He preaches the usual ethics, but he always grounds them in practicality; he explains that good deeds are not advocated simply because they are good, but because they bring you good either in this world or the next. He says that the scorpion that causes you pain will one day also suffer equal pain, so there is no need to fear suffering because you will get your reward later. Nasir Khusraw's popularity may indeed spring from this practical sense; he has his feet very much on the ground and gives this world its proper due, no matter how dangerously attractive it may appear. Since a part of Nasir's virtuous behaviour is to guide others, his ethics call for a dual path of using the intellect: to learn for oneself and to teach others. It is not enough to acquire knowledge; one must also point out the path to others. For example, in the dream that turned him around to a spiritual life of preaching, the voice proclaimed: 'He cannot be called wise who leads men to senselessness; rather, one should seek out that which increases reason and wisdom.'²⁵

A Rational and a Specified Shari'a

Let us look at his teachings on the shari'a, the religious law of Islam. Once we have made the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric, the *zahir* and the *batin*, and once we have



shown that in many ways to *ta'wil* or the esoteric understanding of the *shari'a* is more important than its external manifestation, it would not be a great leap to conclude that one could forego or eliminate its strictures altogether. Indeed, the Ismailis were often charged by their opponents with the offence of not taking seriously the prescriptions of the *shari'a*. Nasir Khusraw, for his part, vigorously attacked the critics, both within his community and without, by maintaining that a believer must certainly follow the *shari'a*, and that he cannot be excused from its requirements simply because he has attained inner knowledge. In the *Khwan al-ikhwan*, he asks rhetorically: 'If the observance of the *shari'a* is so critical to the proper expression of faith, why would its strictures be lifted when the Lord of the Resurrection (*khudawand-i qiyamat*) comes?'²⁶ He responds to his own question by affirming that the *shari'a* is partly rational (*'aqli*) and partly specified (*wad'i*).

The *shari'a* is rational, he argues, in its prohibitions against murder, fornication and stealing in that if these prohibitions were eliminated, the social order of the world would collapse. These rules are vital for a functioning society, an *umma*. The part of the *shari'a* which is specified, he continues, involves items like ablution, prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage, and so on, which have been prescribed. They may not seem to be as serious as stealing and murder, but these rules are also there because of what lies beneath them. Nasir gives a number of arguments to support this position. First, he likens the *zahir* of the *shari'a* with the physical world around us, in that just as the physical world is comprised of a whole variety of different things, so too are religious practices, and each duty has many layers. For example, prayer involves different physical requirements such as speaking, listening, standing and bowing. Fasting involves not only keeping away from food but also drinking, along with other abstentions. Similarly, making the pilgrimage to Mecca involves a variety of activities. In this way, he shows that the multiplicity of the physical world is mirrored in the multiplicity of the *shari'a*.

Nasir notes, further, that besides this parallel multiplicity, physical and religious things share a parallel internality as well, in that each can be shown to derive from four things. That is, just as all physical things can be shown to derive from the four elements, in the same way all religious things are derived from four spiritual elements, that is, the Qur'an, the *shari'a*, *ta'wil* and *tawhid*. Furthermore, not only is everything, therefore, based on four things in both the physical and the spiritual worlds, but the four are also connected to each other. For example, air and water join together to make moisture, and fire and water join together to make warmth. The world's existence thus depends on the connection of the elements. From these pairings has come good. Nasir writes that the good things join each other in the same way in the spiritual world. Each prophet brought a *shari'a* which is dependent on its parts, and if these are all taken apart, then disaster would result in the spiritual world. He also compares the observance of the *shari'a* with taking medicine when we are sick. We may not want to do it, he says, and we may not like it when we do it, but we do it because the one who has prescribed this action is a physician who can heal the physical body. The one who brings medicine for souls is the Prophet Muhammad and the medicine he brings to heal our souls is the *shari'a*. Thus, by means of this parallel external and internal multiplicity, parallel derivations from four things, and the interconnectedness of the four elements, Nasir Khusraw



lays out his arguments to prove that the believer must carry out the requirements of the *shari'a* properly so as to attain the highest level of knowledge. It is through the observance of the *shari'a* and its physical actions that believers can bring about the arrival of the imam into the heart.

The Soul and the Body

Since the *shari'a* is grounded in physical requirements for the body, and also because the search for knowledge itself requires that the mind be housed in a physical body, with eyes and ears, with access to books, pens and papers, Nasir Khusraw, like many religious thinkers, must reserve a place of honour for the body within his spirituality. Thus, what develops almost surprisingly within this traditional Neoplatonic hierarchy, in which matter occupies the lowest level, is the critical importance Nasir attaches to the role of the individual human being and, by extension, to matter itself, in the process of purification and perfection of one's soul. Since, as we saw above, the physical world is a product of the universal soul's desire to achieve the ontological perfection of the universal intellect, the physical world cannot be approached by Nasir Khusraw with the same repugnance given to it by Plotinus and other Neoplatonists.

True pleasure for mankind, then, lies in seeking perfection, that is, in repeating the pattern by which the whole cosmos began and returns to its source. Nasir Khusraw makes this spirituality of pleasure and desire a critical feature of his philosophy. He connects pleasure and desire with the human will, the process of self-realization, and the relationship between the universal soul and the individual soul. While the superiority of the spiritual or intelligible world over the material or physical world can be sustained in pure metaphysics, we encounter a difficulty when we try to translate this superiority into the actual functioning of physical bodies in space and time. That is why religion has to deal both with theory and codes of conduct. Nasir Khusraw's detailed analysis of human salvation reveals the limit of the Neoplatonic dualism of body and soul.

Moreover, as a conscientious and responsible thinker, Nasir Khusraw lets the consequences of the theory lead him to its logical conclusion, one in which the body is not just the lowest form of the Neoplatonic realm, but is raised to an instrument of spiritual perfection. For it is through the body that the soul can be perfected by carrying out the *shari'a*. In this way, by modifying the Neoplatonic system, Nasir took what could have been its metaphysical limit and transformed it into an enriched dynamic between the power of the soul and its use of a bodily instrument for human perfection. Since man is responsible for his actions, the effects of his actions are transferred to his soul. This transference will lead to the purification or perfection of man's soul, which can only occur by observing the *shari'a*. What Nasir Khusraw achieves in his theology is to make the body an intermediary agent in the purification of the soul - the soul is purified by acts of the body. While he allowed Ismaili philosophical theology to remain Neoplatonic in its metaphysics up to this level with its emanations and hierarchies, and in conformity with the Ismaili polarity of *zahir* and *batin*, he created a critical synthesis by making the ethical scheme clearly Islamic. In this way, Nasir Khusraw reveals



the centrality of the body and the material world in not only the day-to-day intellectual and ethical processes of our lives, but also in the ultimate perfection of the soul.



- ¹ . William L. Hanaway, Jr., 'Eagles: ii. The Eagle in Persian Literature,' *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 7, pp. 625-6.
- ² . Nasir Khusraw, *Divan*, ed. N. Taqavi et al. (Tehran, 1304-7/1925-28), pp. 615-16. A shorter, four-couplet version is contained in Nasir Khusraw's *Divan*, ed. by M. Minuvi and M. Mohaghegh (Tehran, (1353/1974), p.523
- ³ Biographical information on Nasir Khusraw may be found in his own works, such as his *Safar-nama*, ed. M. Dabir Siyaqi (Tehran, 1356/1977); English trans., *Naser-e Khosraw's Book of Travels (Safarnama)*, tr. W. Thackston Jr. (Albany, N.Y., 1986). For studies of his life and thought, see W. Ivanow, *Nasir-i Khusraw and Ismailism* (Bombay, 1948); his *Problems in Nasir-i Khusraw's Biography* (Bombay, 1956); A.E. Bertel's *Nasir-i Khosrov i ismailizm* (Moscow, 1959); Persian trans., *Nasir-i Khusraw wa Isma'iliyan*, tr. Y. Ariyanpur (Tehran, 1346/1967); E.G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia* (Cambridge, 1928), vol. 2, pp. 218-46; J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn (Dordrecht, 1968), pp. 185-8; H. Corbin, 'Nasir-i Khusrau and Iranian Isma'ilism,' in *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 4, The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R.N. Frye (Cambridge, 1975) pp. 520-42; F. Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 215-20, 639-42, and Alice C. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw: The Ruby of Badakhshan* (London, 2000).
- ⁴ Zabih Allah Safa, *Ta'rikh-i adabiyat dar Iran* (4th ed., Tehran, 1342-/1963-), vol. 2, pp. 165-6, 443-56, 893-8.
- ⁵ The following editions and translations of Nasir Khusraw's works may be noted here: *Gushayish wa Rahayish* ed. S. Nafisi (Leiden, 1950); ed. and tr. F.M. Hunzai under the title *Knowledge and Liberation* (London, 1998); *Jami' al-hikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mu'in (Tehran and Paris, 1953); French trans., *Le Livre réunissant les deux sages*, tr. I. de Gastines (Paris, 1990); *Khwan al-ikhwan*, ed. Y. al-Khashshab (Cairo, 1940); *Shish fasl*, ed. and tr. W. Ivanow (Leiden, 1948); *Wajh-i din*, ed. G.R. A'vani (Tehran, 1977); *Zad al-musafirin*, ed. M. Badhl al-Rahman (Berlin, 1341/1923).
- ⁶ See I.K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Isma'ili Literature* (Malibu, Calif., 1977), pp. 111-24.
- ⁷ Nasir Khusraw, *Safar-nama*, In Thackston, p. 1
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7, representing as one such example his description of the city of Mayyafariqin: 'The place has an enormous fortification made of white stone, each slab of which weighs five hundred maunds, and every fifty ells is a huge tower of this same white stone. The top of the rampart is all crenellated and looks as though the master builder had just finished working on it. The city has one gate on the west side set in a large gateway with a masonry arch and an iron door with no wood in it.'
- ⁹ For instance, in his entry on Acre, *Safar-nama*, tr. Thackston, p. 16, Nasir writes that he measured the city, and determined its length to be 2000 cubits and its breadth 500. In Ramla, he paced out the courtyard of the Friday mosque at 200 by 300 paces.
- ¹⁰ See Nasir's shopping excursions for barley and bread in Quha on the road to Qazwin; grapes in Arzan; food, fruit and paper in Tripoli; olives in Jerusalem; and especially the bazaars in Cairo, as described in *Safar-nama*, tr. Thackston, pp. 3, 7, 13, 21, 53-6.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-9.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
- ¹³ See *ibid.*, pp. 2-3, where Nasir names this teacher as 'Master 'Ali Nasa'i ... a young man who spoke Persian with a Daylamite accent and wore his hair uncovered.'
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-4.
- ¹⁶ For information on the introduction and development of Neoplatonic thought in Islam, see P. Kraus, 'Plotin chez les Arabes,' *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte*, 23 (1940-41), pp. 263-95, reprinted in his *Alchimie, Ketzerei, Apokryphen im frühen Islam*, ed. R. Brague (Hildesheim, 1994), pp. 313-45; S. Pines, 'La Longue récession de la Théologie d'Aristote dans ses rapports avec la doctrine Ismaélienne,' *Revue des Études Islamiques*, 22 (1954), pp. 7-20, and R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford, 1962).
- ¹⁷ Nasir Khusraw, *Shish fasl*, p. 33. This brief schema is derived also from this text.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- ¹⁹ For more on al-Farabi, see I.R. Netton, *Al-Farabi and his School*, (London and New York, 1992), and H.A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect* (Oxford, 1992).
- ²⁰ See Daniel de Smet, *La Quiétude de l'intellect: Neoplatonisme et gnose Ismaélienne dans L'oeuvre de Hamid ad-Din al-Kirmanî (Xe/XIes)* (Louvain, 1995), and Paul E. Walker, *Hamid al-Din al-Kirmanî: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Hakim* (London, 1999).
- ²¹ Nasir Khusraw, *Divan*, ed. Taqavi, p. 6.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 429. Here, the word *yanan* refers to the Companions of the Prophet, those who were closest to him from the very beginning of his prophethood.
- ²³ Nasir Khusraw, *Wajh-i din*, pp. 60-1.
- ²⁴ Browne, *Literary History*, vol. 2, p. 241.
- ²⁵ *Safar-nama*, In Thackston, p. 1.



²⁶ . Nasir Khusraw, *Khwan al-ikhwan*, p. 282. I have discussed this in more depth in my dissertation, 'Nasir-i Khusraw's Doctrine of the Soul: From the Universal Intellect to the Physical World in Isma'ili Philosophy' (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1992), pp. 204-13, and in *Nasir Khusraw: The Ruby of Badakhshan* (London, 2000).