

The Authentic Self:
Essays in al-Fārābī and Late Ancient
Greek Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation contains four original articles, either published or to be published, and a summary. The four articles are concerned with concepts of self in Late Ancient and Early Arabic Philosophy, with a special interest in the transmission and modification of the ideas involved in these concepts from the former period to the latter. The analyses are carried out the rubric of the concept of “authentic self” which describes a kind of concept of self which is common both to many, if not most or all, of post-Hellenistic philosophers and to many of the early Arabic philosophers. Taken broadly, authentic self is just the substantial and true self-identity of the individual human being which, in some way, the individual initially lacks but yet is the goal of the entirety of that person’s life-activity. It is the source of whatever unity can be discerned in the life and actions of the individual and it always has a noetic character; in other words, it always carries within it a derived intellectual content.

There are almost as many formulations of the authentic self as there are philosophers who hold to such a notion. It is the primary work of this dissertation to examine the formulation of authentic self in the philosophical works of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c.870-950 CE). Authentic self in the works of Proclus (412-485 CE) is investigated as means of providing a benchmark for discerning the innovations which appear in the version found in Fārābī. A study of the Arabic *Liber de Causis*, an anonymously authored produced in the late 9th century CE and attributed to Aristotle, has also been made, in order to show just one way in which Neoplatonic ideas pertaining to the structure of authentic self had been transmitted in a much modified way to early Arabic philosophers like Fārābī.

Keywords: Selfhood, Arabic philosophy, Neoplatonism, metaphysics, philosophical psychology

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1 LIST OF ARTICLES

- (I) "Elements of the Authentic Self in Fārābī: Between Alexander and Proclus." *Dionysius* XXIX (2011) 61-80.
- (II) "Authentic Selfhood in the Philosophy of Proclus: Rational Soul and its Significance for the Individual." Submitted for publication in *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*.
- (III) "On the Absence of the Henads in the Arabic *Liber de Causis*: Some Consequences for Proclean Subjectivity in and Arabic Translation." Submitted for publication in the proceedings of the conference *Arxai: Proclus Diadochus of Constantinople and his Abrahamic Interpreters*, held in Istanbul, December 12-16, 2012.
- (IV) "Authentic Self in Fārābī: An Analysis of the Transformation of Soul into Intellect and its Consequences for Human Individuality." To be submitted to the journal *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*.

2 BACKGROUND

The self, as a philosophical and cultural concept, has a long and varied history, even if for most of that history the word “self” did not yet exist. To be sure, in the earliest part of that history, there was no one “thing” to which one could point and say, ‘that is the self’. What has been constant, however, is the drive for self-understanding, whether that is of an individual, a people, or of human beings in general.¹ The concepts of authentic self in the works Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and in the works of the Neoplatonists of 5th and 6th century Athens and Alexandria, are just particular, yet related instances of this drive.

The name “authentic self” has been coined for the purpose of referring to the concept of self which went by the name of *psuchē* and was developed out of the dialogues of Plato interpreted in conjunction with elements from the philosophies of Aristotle and the later Stoics by the Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity, beginning with Plotinus. According to the Neoplatonic view, *logikos psuchē* (rational soul) is what we could reasonably call the seat of human consciousness: it is a stable, substantial centre of self-identity from which all the life of the individual human being proceeds. This rational soul is an eternal being whose activity is informed and driven by a noetic, or intellectual, content—a complete

¹ This is the line of interpretation taken, for example, by Raymond Martin and John Barresi in *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). A similar line, with respect to the related theme of subjectivity, can be found in Jari Kaukua & Vili Lähteenmäki, “Subjectivity As a Non-Textual Standard of Interpretation in the History of Philosophical Psychology,” *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 49(1) (2010) 21-37.

knowledge of the world—which it always possesses but of which it does not always have consciousness.

A prime difficulty for this notion of self is the need to accommodate the obvious multiplicity within a single human life. Every individual changes over the course of a lifetime, through physical growth and degeneration, through education and formation of moral habit, so that a person in one stage of life may not even resemble the person he or she was at an earlier stage. Explanation of these normal and easily observed changes becomes a significant problem when one believes that the individual person is an immortal, incorporeal and intellectual soul. Such a conception of self seems to preclude the possibility of any kind of change and to be completely foreign to the life of the body through which this stable self, the rational soul, must manifest itself. Philosophers who posit an authentic self, as that has been described here, run the risk of failing to reconcile that notion of self with the nature of the embodied life which it is intended to explain.

Different variations of this conception of self came to exert an influence that cannot be overstated on the entire development of self-understanding in both Medieval Europe and in the Arab-controlled lands following the conquests of the Prophet, Muhammad. The earliest Arabic philosophers, al-Kindī and those gathered around him in the late 9th century CE, received Greek philosophy largely through the translations they made, or had made for them, of the works of Aristotle and the Neoplatonic commentaries accompanying them, and, to a lesser extent, the works of Plato.² These translations, unsurprisingly, suffered more or less from the same kinds of problems that all translations do: including mistranslations, misinterpretations, or just obscure renderings. Other Neoplatonic works were transmitted through a series of texts attributed to Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 3rd century CE). The latter texts included paraphrases of Plotinus' *Enneads* and Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, in particular

² On the translation project undertaken in Baghdad in the 9th and 10th centuries CE, see Dimitri Gutas, 'Fārābī I: Biography,' in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater (London-Boston, 1999)

the *Theology of Aristotle* and *Liber de Causis* (*Kitāb al-īdāh fī l-khair al-mahḍ* in Arabic) attributed to Aristotle.³

The result was a view of the Greek philosophical tradition which was at best fragmentary and obscured and, especially in the cases of the *Theology of Aristotle* and the *Liber de Causis*, misleading. The question then arises, in just what form or forms Neoplatonic ideas made their entrance into their new Arabic milieu. Although these avenues of transmission are not often easy to trace, they certainly left an indelible mark upon the development of philosophical ideas by the early Arabic philosophers. This is seen, without a doubt, in regard to the Neoplatonic concept of self which was, in various modified ways, taken up by the earliest Arabic philosophers.

³ On the extensive influence of these texts see, e.g., Jill Kraye et al, eds., *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages* (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London), 1986.

3 THE ARTICLES IN CONTEXT

The four articles in this dissertation dwell on the conceptions of authentic self in, on the one hand, Proclus (412-485 CE) and, on the other hand, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (c.870-950CE), with a primary view to illuminating the conception as it is developed by the latter. Fārābī adopted much of the Neoplatonic conception of a teaching curriculum and its ultimate goal of human intellectual perfection, although he set Aristotle at the pinnacle of that curriculum whereas the Neoplatonists had subordinated Aristotle to Plato. Proclus' psychology serves as a clearly defined model of Neoplatonic authentic self, whose perfection was the goal of the curriculum, and of the metaphysical foundation on which it was built. This Proclean foundation, with some significant modifications, was transmitted most significantly via the Arabic *Liber de Causis* and there are clear parallels between the metaphysics in that text and Fārābī's metaphysics. In order to give greater substance to the comparison between the concept of authentic self as it is formulated by Proclus and as it is formulated by Fārābī, consideration of the content of the *Liber de Causis* acts as a connecting bridge.

(I) The first article, "Elements of the Authentic Self in Fārābī: Between Alexander and Proclus," sets out a framework within which Fārābī's psychology can be better understood and its relation to the Greek philosophical tradition made clearer. I argue that Fārābī, although very obviously indebted to Alexander of Aphrodisias for much of his psychology, nevertheless abandons that phi-

losopher's psychology when it comes to the nature of true human self, in favour of something closer to what we find in Proclus' psychology. In this way, Fārābī does not adhere exclusively to either the Platonic or Aristotelian strands of Greek philosophy, as those are usually understood, but has effected a new interpretation of Plato and Aristotle, which draws on both strands. In this new interpretation, soul begins its life as an animating principle which is inseparable from the body which it animates, but ends its life as an eternal, incorporeal and intellectual entity, so long as it has lived a philosophical life (or lived under the rule of a philosopher). In this article, Alexander does not receive a stand-alone treatment as do Proclus and Fārābī, since he was no proponent of authentic self as I have described it; for the same reason, he makes only a complementary appearance in later articles.

(II) The article, "Authentic Selfhood in the Philosophy of Proclus: Rational Soul and its Significance for the Individual," is a detailed treatment of Proclus' conception of the structure of the rational soul as authentic self and how it endeavours to account for the simultaneous universality and irreducible particularity of the individual self. Whereas different aspects of the rational soul have been studied to varying degrees of detail in scholarship, I gather these aspects into a synoptic account of rational soul in its relation to its proximate metaphysical ground and paradigm, the Demiurgic Intellect. Rational soul is shown to replicate the important aspects of its intellectual cause, but according to its own more multiple mode of being. Special emphasis is laid upon the *logos* faculty, which has hardly been discussed in the scholarly literature, as the expression of the very essence of the self in the activities of the individual person. Finally, Proclus' solution to the problem of individuation of souls is considered at some length. This solution is shown to be consistent with his metaphysics, in that it posits a particular Form for each particular soul, in recognition of the incommensurability of matter as a principle of individuation for an incorporeal entity. This account is drawn from nearly the whole range of Proclus' extant works,

and so it must be kept in mind that Fārābī is unlikely to have had this kind of access to Proclus' works or to the works of any of the Neoplatonic philosophers.

The whole of the analysis of Proclean rational soul is framed, by an engagement with the work of Christopher Gill, who has argued against the theory held by many scholars that a turn toward the self can be discerned in the Hellenistic philosophies of Ancient Greece, in particular Stoic philosophy. In opposition to this, Gill argues that selfhood in Ancient Greek philosophy in general, and this includes the Neoplatonists, should be understood under the rubric of an objective-participant self, in contradistinction to a subjective-individualist self which is characteristic of post-Cartesian philosophies. This distinction is found to be wanting when applied to Proclus', in many ways, paradoxical psychology. Rather, elements of both of Gill's categories are found to be applicable to Proclean rational soul. Gill's work is used only as a useful interpretive tool to draw out the seemingly paradoxical aspects of Proclus' rational soul.

(III) The third article, "On the Absence of the Henads in the Arabic *Liber de Causis*: Some Consequences for Proclean Subjectivity in and Arabic Translation," provides the bridge between Proclus and Fārābī, giving some evidence for a possible relationship between the two which was only barely suggested in the first article. The Arabic *Liber de Causis* serves here as the bridge since its Adaptor takes as its inspiration and, for much of the text, its source from Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. The article analyses just one aspect (there may be others) of the removal of the Gods—*henads* in Proclus' technical vocabulary—from the passages of the *Elements* which the Adaptor used to craft his treatise. Drawing on recent research which has demonstrated the central importance of the *henads* in Proclus' philosophy, particularly with respect to their role as primal, absolute individuals, I show that this aspect of the *henads* has been lost in the *Liber de Causis*. Without these principles, the only means left in the *Liber* by which to differentiate between incorporeal beings, is the principle of

delcining universality of intellectual in proportion to remoteness from the First Being or First Cause.

While it poses no immediate difficulty for the *Liber's* Adaptor, since his text is primarily conceived with the causal principles of reality and not human psychology, the loss of the individual character of the *henads* from the metaphysics of the *Liber* does cause problems for any philosophers may make use of the metaphysical principles in that text. This is shown in a brief summary of the main ideas involved in Fārābī's concept of authentic self and the resulting difficulty he encounters with respect to maintaining the individuality of the souls of philosophers who have attained intellectual immortality after death. The relevant parallels between the Fārābī's metaphysics and the metaphysics of the *Liber* are outlined here.

(IV) The last article, "Authentic Self in Fārābī: An Analysis of the Transformation of Soul into Intellect and its Consequences for Human Individuality," picks up from themes outlined in the first and third articles. In this essay, I go deeper into the structure and development of Fārābī's concept of authentic self in order to better see its innovations and deviations from its sources, but also to come to a judgment of its internal consistency. I pay little attention to the faculties of the soul as Fārābī conceives them, but instead focus on the highest faculty, intellect and, even then, I focus primarily on intellect's highest stage of development, namely the stage of "acquired intellect". Properly speaking, this stage of intellectual development is what amounts to the authentic self in Fārābī's psychology. Analysis of this stage shows that authentic selfhood is, in Fārābī's view, a rare attainment, open really only to very few individuals. Attainment of acquired intellect is shown to involve assimilation to the Active Intellect, the higher cause which makes human intellect and intellection possible, and that this assimilation results in the loss of the individuality of souls. Fārābī's solution to this difficulty, to argue that even in death and separation from body the now substantiated human soul and intellect maintains some rela-

tion to the body, is analysed and shown to be inconsistent with his own metaphysics. This is significant because, ultimately, Fārābī's psychology would become highly influential, especially with Avicenna who, in turn, came to be an important influence upon Medieval Latin philosophy.

The articles are presented either as they have been published or in the format which has been required by the editors and publishers to whom they have been submitted or will be submitted, as the case may be.

SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the nature of selfhood in the 10th century Arabic philosopher, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, as well as aspects of the philosophical background to his psychology which came to him through the massive translation carried out in Baghdad in the 9th-10th centuries CE. This is completed through a series of four articles examining issues regarding selfhood in Proclus, as representative of the Neoplatonic philosophy with which Fārābī was to a large extent engaged, as well as in the Arabic *Liber de Causis*, which communicated, in addition to its own particular theses, much of Proclus' metaphysical formulations. There are indications in the Fārābī's philosophical works that he had likely read this text and adopted some of its principles.

The conceptions of selfhood in Fārābī and Proclus are presented here under the rubric of the concept of "authentic self", a term of art which is used to refer in the articles to a particular way of conceiving of self which was, in a general way, common to both Fārābī and the Greek Neoplatonists of Late Antiquity. In this context, the authentic self is an eternal or immortal, incorporeal, unchanging entity which is conceived as perfection of human nature and thus the end to be achieved through human activity, whether a given individual be conscious of this or not. Although Fārābī's conception of authentic self shares this bare notion with that of the Neoplatonists, he arrives at it in a much different way, a way which, significantly, is heavily indebted to the psychology of Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 3rd century CE) which was, in many important ways, incommensurable with the Neoplatonic view.

By way of a number of philosophical modifications, Fārābī was able to fuse Alexander's Peripatetic psychology to a Neoplatonic view of human nature which finds its intellectual perfection through a program of philosophical study, and to back up this Neoplatonic view with a quasi-Neoplatonic metaphysics. Whereas for the Neoplatonists, the self or rational soul is always an eternal, intellectual and incorporeal entity, albeit one which needs to, so to speak, come back to itself by making itself conscious of its own intellectual content. Adoption of Alexander's view of soul as inseparable form of a body forces Fārābī to come to the Neoplatonic view of soul as an intellectual entity capable of subsisting independently of body by other avenues. In Fārābī's new conception, soul becomes substantial on its own through philosophical study of the cosmos. According to this view, only very few people will ever attain to the immortality which the Neoplatonists had believed belonged to everyone.

Fārābī's fusion of the two streams of thought, namely, Alexander's psychology and Neoplatonic metaphysics, results in a point of tension arising precisely in Fārābī's concept of authentic self. That is to say, that Fārābī is left with the difficulty of explaining how, once the soul becomes a substantial intellectual being, its prior individuality which it had attained through its relation to its body, can be maintained. The *Liber de Causis* appears then as a text that could have offered Fārābī a more coherent way out of his dilemma than the one which he took, had it been more faithful to its source-text, Proclus' *Elements of Theology*.

ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

ELEMENTS OF THE AUTHENTIC SELF IN FĀRĀBĪ: BETWEEN ALEXANDER AND PROCLUS

By

Tim Riggs

Dionysius vol. XXIX, 2011, 61-80

II

AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PROCLUS: RATIONAL SOUL AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

by

Tim Riggs

Accepted for publication in *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*

III

ON THE ABSENCE OF THE HENADS IN THE ARABIC *LIBER DE CAUSIS*: SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR PROCLEAN SUBJECTIVITY IN AND ARABIC TRANSLATION

by

Tim Riggs

Submitted for publication in the proceedings of the conference *Arxai: Proclus Diadochus of Constantinople and his Abrahamic Interpreters*, held in Istanbul, December 12-16, 2012

IV

**AUTHENTIC SELF IN FĀRĀBĪ: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANS-
FORMATION OF SOUL INTO INTELLECT AND ITS CONSE-
QUENCES FOR HUMAN INDIVIDUALITY**

by

Tim Riggs

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