

**William C. Chittick (*Stony Brook University, United States*)**

## **BĀBĀ AFḌAL ON THE SOUL'S IMMORTALITY**

Bābā Afḏal, also known as Afḏal al-Dīn Kāshānī, most likely died in the year 606/1210. This makes him a contemporary of Suhrawardī, Averroes (d. 595/1198), and Ibn al-‘Arabī. There are few references to him in contemporary or later sources. All we know for certain is that he taught and died in the village of Marāq, a few kilometers distant from Kāshān in central Iran. Most of what we know about him comes from his own writings, which amount to perhaps a thousand pages. And, like most philosophers, he says practically nothing about his personal life.

Bābā Afḏal’s philosophical perspective is difficult to classify. Generally, he was a Neoplatonist, but we can say the same thing about most of the Muslim philosophers. Unusually, he has nothing to say about his Muslim predecessors. He refers to them allusively as “our brothers”, but he mentions only Aristotle and Hermes by name. He has no known teachers, nor do we know which of the books of the Muslim philosophers he had read.

Until recently, Bābā Afḏal did not register on the radar screen of Western historians<sup>1</sup>. The first reason for this is that most of them considered Islamic philosophy to have ended with Averroes, the last Muslim philosopher to be translated into Latin, and Bābā Afḏal lived far from Spain and remained unknown in the Western lands of Islam. Moreover, he wrote his books mainly in Persian, and this was almost unprecedented among Muslim philosophers. The great and famous all wrote their books primarily in Arabic.

It is not just Western historians, however, who failed to notice Bābā Afḏal. By the very fact that he wrote in Persian, he left little mark on the Islamic philosophical tradition. Among the later Islamic philosophers, only Mullā Ṣadrā is known to have been familiar with his writings. He used one of Bābā Afḏal’s Persian treatises as the basis for an Arabic book<sup>2</sup>. Thus we have Ṣadrā, a Persian philosopher who lived in a central city of Persia, rewriting Bābā Afḏal in Arabic, no doubt so that students of philosophy would take him seriously.

In general, philosophers wrote for each other, or for accomplished scholars in other fields. Arabic was the language of Islamic scholarship in general, and it was

---

<sup>1</sup> For a lengthy introduction to Bābā Afḏal’s life and thought, along with translations of more than half of his writings, see: *Chittick W. C. The Heart of Islamic Philosophy: The Quest for Self-Knowledge in the Teachings of Afḏal al-Dīn Kāshānī*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See: my introduction to Ṣadrā. «The Elixir of the Gnostics». Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003.

read by every Muslim scholar, no matter if he lived in Morocco or China. Arabic was the language through which one left one's mark on the whole Islamic world. When philosophers like Avicenna wrote in Persian, they normally did so because some powerful person had asked them to explain something in layman's language. Avicenna, certainly, was not good at layman's language. His Persian books are practically as opaque to Persian readers as his Arabic writings.

Bābā Afḍal, in contrast, is one of the great stylists of the Persian language. Some scholars, myself included, consider his philosophical prose to be the best and most beautiful in Persian. But why did he write in Persian in the first place? It was certainly not because he was ignorant of Arabic. He wrote some of his treatises in Arabic before he translated them into Persian, and he translated into Persian four Arabic versions of Greek philosophical texts, thereby producing some of the most beautiful, accurate, and insightful Persian translations of philosophical texts ever accomplished.

Bābā Afḍal wrote in Persian because he was not writing for other philosophers or scholars, but rather for a group of dedicated students. We know this partly because he left behind six rather lengthy letters to some of his students, and the letters make it clear that a good number of people used to come to his village to learn philosophy from him. It is this peculiarity of Bābā Afḍal—that he was writing for non-philosophers—which makes him especially relevant today. Philosophers then and now are not necessarily clear and direct in what they want to say. Needing to attend to the arguments of their important predecessors and to fend off the objections of their critics, they go on and on and never quite get to the point. What is peculiar about Bābā Afḍal is that he is trying to make the reflective life available to a group of people lacking in the usual training, and he gets to the point rather quickly.

When I say that Bābā Afḍal's students were not philosophers or scholars, I do not mean to imply that they were ignorant or uneducated. Rather, they were busy with the active life and did not have specialized training. Why then did they come to Bābā Afḍal to study? The reason has everything to do with what philosophy was thought to be. It was lost on no one that philosophy is the search for wisdom, and that wisdom is a highly desirable trait. The Koran tells us, for example, that *He who has been given wisdom has been given much good* (2: 269). Even today, many students — whom their professors usually consider a bit naïve — take courses in philosophy because they think it will provide them with the answers to the big questions of life.

For Bābā Afḍal and those who came to him, philosophy was not simply an academic discipline. Rather, it was — to use the phrase of Pierre Hadot in reference to the Greek tradition — a “spiritual exercise”<sup>3</sup>. Wisdom (*ḥikma*) was defined as knowledge of things as they truly are along with activity appropriate to that knowledge. Wisdom, in other words, demands not only correct knowledge of things but

---

<sup>3</sup> See: *Hadot P.*, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase, Oxford: Blackwell 1995, especially part two.

also good and virtuous activity. This is why Bābā Afḍal stresses the practical goal of the philosophical quest in all his writings.

Although few of the better known Muslim philosophers would have disagreed with Bābā Afḍal's basic position, they seem to have felt that the philosopher, as the knower of all things, needs to write about practically everything. Thus, after setting down the goal of philosophy, they tended to obscure it by addressing numerous preliminary steps and analyzing all the logical, linguistic, and mathematical tools that are necessary to achieve the goal.

What, then, is the goal? As I said, it is to know things as they are and to act appropriately. Bābā Afḍal takes the position — unremarkable in itself — that the one knowledge upon which the whole philosophical quest depends is knowledge of oneself. If seekers of wisdom can differentiate themselves from the world and situate themselves in the grand picture, it will be possible for them to actualize the perfections that are latent in the human soul and become completely human. One of the results of achieving these latent perfections will be to recognize and experience the immortality of the soul already in this life.

### Immortality

That immortality was a human possibility; for the premoderns it was of course a common philosophical position. Generally speaking, the Aristotelians, who were enormously influential on much of Islamic philosophy, held that the soul attained immortality only inasmuch as it actualized its intellectual nature. To the degree that it remained a potential intellect, the soul was held back from everlastingness. Avicenna, however, took the position that the soul is immortal by nature, and thus he joined the mainstream of the religious tradition.

The whole discussion of immortality hangs on definitions. Especially important here are the words “body”, “soul”, and “intellect”. For Bābā Afḍal and many others, if one can simply understand the meanings of these terms and then discern their realities within oneself, one has taken a long step toward achieving immortality. It seems that for the philosophers, it was the understanding itself that marks the achievement, though there are numerous practical consequences that flow from the understanding, and these are discussed mostly under the heading of ethics.

Bābā Afḍal comes back repeatedly to the issue of immortality in his treatises, situating it within the broad context of metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology. One of his simplest and most straightforward analyses is found in a little treatise called *Īmanī az buṭlān-i naḥs dar panāh-i khirad* (“Security from the Soul's Nullification in the Refuge of Intelligence”)<sup>4</sup>. He begins by saying that he was asked to write a treatise that “would give the seeker cognizance of the self's reality and security from the nonbeing and nullification of the human soul at the nullification of the body's life”. One of his students, in other words, had asked him how the soul could be immortal, and he wrote the treatise in response.

<sup>4</sup> This treatise is translated in Chittick «The Heart of Islamic Philosophy». P. 171—74.

Bābā Afḍal starts the essay by pointing that both humans and animals seek to satisfy their needs, but that humans have a need over and above bodily needs that is not shared by animals — the need for knowledge and understanding:

No human individuals want not to know. In every state they choose knowing over not-knowing. So much more do they love to be knowers than nonknowers that, when they come to know something, they do not stop at that, but they also want to know more. They never become satiated with knowing. They may gather many known things, but they never suffer from this or become ill — as they do when they are held back from other knowledges. On the contrary, they become more capable and stronger when there is much provision. Moreover, when they become provided and capable through knowledge, they still see requirement and neediness.

The human hunger for knowledge and understanding, in other words, though analogous to the hunger for food, is different in that it does not become satiated no matter how much one knows. The body becomes full, and eventually, as its corruptibility comes to the fore, food no longer nurtures it, and it dies, because life does not pertain to its very definition. In contrast, the soul can never be full, nor can it die, because the soul is precisely life, and life is life by definition. As Bābā Afḍal puts it, “What is dead by nature comes to life through the *anima*, so how can what is alive by nature come to die?”

The food of the soul is knowledge, and there is no end to the known things. But all knowledge goes back to a single knowledge, which is the soul's knowing itself. This is a point to which Bābā Afḍal constantly returns, explaining it with many arguments. Typical is the following from his *ʿArḍ-nāma* (“The Book of Displays”):

The seeker of anything will not reach the object of desire unless he seeks it from its mine and locus. He who wants water and searches for it from the mine of sal ammoniac will never reach the object of desire. A cold-stricken man in need of the shine of fire and the shining of the sun: one who does not aim for fire and sun but turns toward running water and blowing wind will be nearer to perishment than to the object of desire. In the same way, the seeker and wantor of knowledge, wakefulness, and awareness will reach his desire only when he sets out for the dwelling-place and mine of knowledge, wakefulness, and awareness, not when he turns his face toward the realm of ignorance and the shelter of unconsciousness.

The dwelling-place of knowledge is the knower, and the mine of awareness is the aware. Whenever the distance between you and a knower and someone aware becomes shorter, you will have more hope of finding the objective from him. No knower and no one aware is closer to you than your own intelligent *anima*. If you aim toward knowing it and if you bring the face of your search toward it, you will soon win the object of desire<sup>5</sup>.

In his *Īmanī az buṭlān-i naḥs*, Bābā Afḍal tells us, in short, that one should seek for the root knowledge. In order to do this, one first needs to differentiate among body, soul, and intelligence:

<sup>5</sup> Cited in *ibid.* P. 235—36.

The way to reach [knowledge of self] is to think over, to enumerate for yourself, and to become aware, that you have three things: [a] body, which has been woven and depicted from several diverse bodies, like bones, tendons, veins, flesh, and so on. Second, you have a soul, through which your body is alive and without which it is dead. Third, you have an intelligence, which knows both body and soul and which recognizes each of them separately.

When thought comes to know all three of these, such that no doubt and mistake remain, once again you should think over and know that the body is not the soul, and the soul is not the intelligence. For the body is never held back from being a body, whether it be with the soul or without it. However, it is not continually alive; rather, it is alive through the soul. Hence the soul, through which the body is alive and without which it is dead, is not the body.

In the same way, intelligence is neither the body nor the soul. Were intelligence the body, all bodies would be intelligent, and were intelligence the soul, all animals would be intelligent. Hence it is correct that the knower of the soul and the body is neither the soul nor the body.

Bābā Afḍal goes on to analyze the nature of intelligence and the manner in which it assimilates into its own being everything that it knows, without thereby becoming colored, determined, or limited by what it knows. For intelligence has no opposite. Nothing is incompatible with it, so there is nothing that can harm it:

When something has no opposite or incompatible, its existence will not be nullified, for everything that is destroyed and nullified is nullified and destroyed by the victory and domination of the incompatible. But the existence of intelligence is its awareness, wakefulness, and knowing from self and through self. Whatever has existence through self and from self will not be nullified or receive destruction and corruption.

After offering additional clarification on the nature of intelligence, Bābā Afḍal summarizes the argument as follows:

Hence the path of release and security from perishment and ruin is for humans to seek refuge in intelligence and to enter under its guardianship. It is to keep the inclination and pull toward nonlasting states and the body's nonlasting enjoyments far from the nature of self. It is to be in the measure of intelligence during movement and stillness, sleep and wakefulness.

Most moderns and postmoderns, of course, find Bābā Afḍal's argument unconvincing. The real problem in understanding Bābā Afḍal's concept of immortality lies in grasping the context in which his arguments make sense. In general, the barrier to any understanding of what the premoderns were saying goes back to the scientific modes of thinking, in which most of us are indoctrinated from infancy. So we are, in a sense, hamstrung from the outset.

One of the consequences of believing in the scientific worldview is that we find it extremely difficult to think about life and awareness as anything but epiphenomena of matter. We find it natural to suppose that when the body is put together correctly, it comes to life on the basis of its constituent elements. So also, we think, living bodies develop awareness on the basis of their physical structure. The basic

premodern intuition, however, is just the reverse: the body is an epiphenomenon of life and awareness. Life and awareness are utterly foundational to all of reality, and it is living awareness that gives rise to living things. However, in the physical realm, certain modes of life and awareness are more intense than others, and the most intense of these pertain to the human realm.

What I am saying is that we make sense of the world on the basis of a grand matrix of thought, and without that matrix words are empty. Philosophers like Bābā Afḍal are aware of this problem, so they make no attempt to discuss the soul and the intellect separate from other issues.

Let me then summarize the “big picture” in the context of which Bābā Afḍal’s arguments gain their persuasive weight. Western historians tend to classify the Islamic philosophical worldview by calling it “Neoplatonic”, and they rightly point out that it acknowledges what Lovejoy called “the Great Chain of Being”. The popular perception of Neoplatonism can be summed up in a single word: “emanation”. All of reality, in other words, comes forth from the One. The Muslim philosophers accept this, but they lay equal if not greater stress on the process of the return to the One, because it is the return’s trajectory that determines our individual destinies.

In this basic Neoplatonic scheme, all reality is fully present at the Origin, in the infinite consciousness and awareness of the One. The creative act is analogous to the shining of the sun, though it may be analyzed in many different ways. As the creative light moves away from its source in the One, it becomes diminished. Along with the diminishment of light comes a lessening of life, awareness, desire, power, and all the other basic qualities of the First Reality. Once the light becomes fully deployed, its dimness appears as a realm that is characterized by inanimateness, unawareness, apathy, and weakness—that is, the material world. Then, however, the flow of light reverses direction and begins to be absorbed back into the Origin.

For us who stand in the middle of the process, the return to the One appears as a hierarchy of beings moving from the inanimate to the living, then to the aware, and then to the self-conscious; in other words, the hierarchy appears in the minerals, plants, animals, and humans that occupy the material realm. In each higher stage, the original qualities of the One — life, awareness, desire, power — become intensified. From the human stage onward, however, the knowing subject assumes a certain responsibility for its own becoming. The quest for wisdom is the attempt to understand who that subject is and to assist it in its rise into the fullness of the human state and beyond, in the direction of the One. For the philosophers, one of the main issues was this: do human beings achieve immortality at a certain point in the ascent toward God? Or, are they—as the religious tradition maintains—immortal by their very nature?

### **The Argument from Wujūd**

Let me now turn to one of Bābā Afḍal’s more original arguments concerning human immortality. It is rooted in his understanding of the single most important

word in Islamic philosophy — at least from Avicenna onward. This word is *wujūd*, normally translated as “existence” or “being”.

A typical definition of philosophy tells us that philosophy is the study of *wujūd* qua *wujūd*. In other words, philosophers set out to understand the nature of being. They are not primarily interested in what it means to be this or to be that, but rather what it means to **be**, without qualification. What it means to be an animal might be the primary focus of a zoologist, and what it means to be a star would be an important question for an astronomer. But philosophers wanted to understand what it means to “be” as such. They were interested in various modalities of beings — such as animals and stars — because of the light that these throw on being *per se*.

When one understands what it means to be, it is then possible to understand the global significance of the various modalities of being that are studied in the diverse sciences. This helps to explain why the philosophers considered their science to be the science of all sciences. Only knowledge of what it means to be allows for an all-comprehensive and all-embracing view of things. Only this makes “wisdom” possible — a knowledge of things as they truly are along with appropriate activity.

For much of Islamic philosophy from Avicenna onward — whether the orientation was more rational or more mystical — *wujūd* was a name applied to the Ultimate Reality. Followers of Ibn al-‘Arabī came to be known as proponents of *wahdat al-wujūd*, “the oneness of being”. Mullā Ṣadrā, the greatest and most prolific of the later philosophers, spoke of the “principiality” or “primacy” (*aṣāla*) of being, meaning that the multiplicity of things needs to be understood as an infinity of being’s gradations. For both Mullā Ṣadrā and Sufis with a theoretical bent, *wujūd* is a name applied to the Ultimate Reality and, with reservations, to everything that arises from the Ultimate Reality. Interestingly, Bābā Afḍal does not follow the mainstream here, because he discusses *wujūd* only inasmuch as the word designates everything other than the Ultimate Reality.

When the secondary literature summarizes the positions of the Muslim philosophers on *wujūd*, it usually forgets to mention that the Arabic word does not have the same connotations as the English words “existence” or “being”. “Being” is perhaps a better translation than existence, because it does not imply the same coldness, concreteness, and inanimateness that “existence” does. But the literal meaning of the word *wujūd* is “to find” and “to perceive”. It has always been understood to imply (if not to demand), awareness and consciousness. When Avicenna and others speak of the Necessary *Wujūd* — meaning the Ultimate Reality — it is not at all strange that they should immediately say that this Being is by Its nature alive and aware. Quite the contrary, given the meaning of the word, it seems almost self-evident.

But let us turn to Bābā Afḍal. The word *wujūd* had long been used in the Persian language, so he did not have to define it. In any case, he points out — as others do — that it cannot be defined, because it is presupposed in every definition. What he does do is to make use of the Persian language to unpack the implications of using this word in global discussions of reality. He points out that it has two basic

meanings. One is *hastī*, Persian for “being”, and the other is *yāft*, Persian for “finding” and “perception”.

Given that *wujūd* is indefinable but present in everything, the proper way to talk about it is to classify it into different varieties. When we do so, we see that “being” and “finding” designate the two basic sorts of *wujūd*. Finding is more inclusive, because everything that finds exists, but not everything that exists finds. In other words, finding is more fully and more authentically real than simply being. The more a thing finds, perceives, understands, and knows, the more fully and actually it partakes of the qualities of reality.

Having divided *wujūd* into two basic sorts, Bābā Afḍal then uses standard Aristotelian terminology to subdivide both being and finding. Both may be potential or actual. Actual being pertains to everything that exists. Potential being pertains to things that do not yet exist but which may come to exist in a ready material:

Potential being is the lowest level in being. It is the existence of material things in the matter, such as the existence of the tree in the seed and the existence of the animal in the sperm. Actual being without finding is like the existence of elemental bodies...

As for potential finding, it belongs to the soul. The meaning of the words **soul** and **self** is one.

Actual finding belongs to the intellect. What is potential in the soul becomes actual through the intellect<sup>6</sup>.

Note that Bābā Afḍal defines “soul” — the Arabic word *nafs* — with the Persian word *khwud*, self, which is the reflexive pronoun. He is right to do so, not least because *nafs* is the reflexive pronoun in Arabic. However, the reflexive meaning of the word *nafs* is usually lost in Persian. And, in both Arabic and Persian, the use of the word on its own, without reference to a noun, closely parallels the use of English “soul”. So, it is well to keep in mind that in answering the question, “What is the soul?”, Bābā Afḍal and many others simply reply, “You yourself”, or, “That which asked the question”.

But what is it that allows oneself to recognize oneself as oneself? The answer as we have already seen is “intelligence” (Persian *khirad*) or “intellect” (*‘aql*), which is actualized self-awareness and self-consciousness. In Bābā Afḍal’s terms, “intelligence” is actualized finding, realized knowing, correct and sound consciousness of oneself. And this actualized finding is the highest and fullest mode of *wujūd*:

The soul is a finder with the intellect. Just as potential being is the meanest level in existence, so actual finding is the highest level of existence, because being becomes correct through finding<sup>7</sup>.

In other words, existence is made real through awareness. This means that for Bābā Afḍal—and, as remarked earlier, his position is hardly unusual—the philosophical quest is for the soul to seek to actualize itself by knowing. When it comes

<sup>6</sup> Cited in *ibid.* P. 274.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *ibid.* P. 274.



to fully know itself, then it is no longer potential finding, but actual finding, actual being, fully realized existence:

When the soul seeks itself, it is potentially found and finder. When it finds itself, it is actually finder and found. As long as it knows itself potentially, it is the soul. But when it knows and finds itself actually, it is not the soul. Rather, it is the “intellect”, for, when the specificity turns into something else, the name also turns into something else<sup>8</sup>.

In short, the highest rank of *wujūd* belongs to the intellect, which is the human self that has found itself. In terms of the cosmological scheme that I outlined, this is the soul that has retraced the levels of darkening and densification that came into existence when consciousness and awareness brought the material realm into existence. The self that finds itself is the soul that actualizes the original light and consciousness that gave birth to itself and to the universe.

It is in this discussion of *wujūd* that Bābā Afḍal departs from the mainstream of Islamic philosophy, because for most philosophers, the highest level of *wujūd* is the Ultimate Reality, identical with the God of theology. For Bābā Afḍal, the highest level of *wujūd* is the actualization of human intelligence. It is to rise beyond the realm of mere being, which is the domain of generation and corruption, and enter into the realm of pure life and awareness, unsullied by the traces of death or ignorance. The fullness of finding and existing that is achieved, however, is not in fact the highest reality. In effect, he says that the Ultimate Reality lies in a realm “beyond being”, though he does not use this particular expression. Hence, fully actualized being — the self that knows itself — is the “radiance” or the “effulgence” of the Ultimate Reality, which he typically calls “Ipseity” (*huwiyya*) or “Essence” (*dhāt*). In one treatise, however, he refers to this highest level simply by the word “God” (*khudā*).

In explaining the classification of *wujūd* into different sorts, Bābā Afḍal tells us that intelligence is related to the soul just as a tree is related to a seed:

The universe is a tree whose produce and fruit is man, man is a tree whose produce and fruit is the soul, the soul is a tree whose fruit is intelligence, and intelligence is a tree whose fruit is the encounter with God<sup>9</sup>.

Given this ontology, it is natural that immortality follows upon self-understanding. To the degree that intelligence — which is simply one’s true selfhood — is realized, one joins with actual existence. As Bābā Afḍal puts it, “The soul’s existence is the soul’s knowledge of self, and this existence belongs to it from itself. Whatever has existence from itself is secure from annihilation”<sup>10</sup>. In other words, inasmuch as the soul knows itself, it finds itself, and “finding” is precisely “being”. The very existence of the soul is awareness and finding. Finding is pure, actualized existence, unsullied by potentiality. Hence, the actualized soul is simply existence, and existence is the radiance of the Ipseity, which shines by definition.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *ibid.* p. 281.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in *ibid.* P. 229.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *ibid.* P 176.