
TIME ACCORDING TO THE BRETHREN OF PURITY

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Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā' (Epistles of the Brethren of Purity), the celebrated medieval Islamic encyclopedia, composed sometime between 260 H./ 873 A.D. and 297/909¹ in four parts contains fifty-two epistles, a table of contents (*fihrisṭ*) at the beginning and an additional *Risālat al-Jāmi'ah* at the end which summarises and makes more explicit the ideas contained in the rest of the epistles.² This article presents translations of two passages in the *Rasā'il* on Time. (Beirut edition, vol. II, pp. 17-19 and vol. III, p. 455-456). They can best be understood by first considering the context of the general arrangement of the encyclopedia's subjects.

Part I of the Encyclopedia deals with "mathematics". It contains fourteen epistles on 1) numbers, 2) geometry, 3) astronomy, 4) geography, 5) music, 6) numerology, 7) intellectual crafts, 8) manual crafts, 9) morals, 10) logic, 11) Aristotelian categories, 12) hermeneutics, 13) prior analytics and 14) posterior analytics. The fourteenth epistle includes a preliminary discussion of Time, among other categories.

Part II which treats "physics" contains seventeen epistles, the first of which discusses the categories of Matter, Form, Place, Motion and Time. The first excerpt translated below belongs to this epistle. It is followed by epistles dealing with Being and Nature; the evolution of vegetable, animal and human existence; human anatomy, senses, birth and the influence of stars on the newborn.

Part III, containing ten epistles, is devoted mainly to "psychology". It deals with the correspondence between Man, the microcosm, and the Universe, the macrocosm; the cultivation of souls; the will of man; the mystery of death; the multiplicity of languages; the intelligible things; celestial cycles and ages; love; causes and effects; and definitions and formulae.

Part IV of the Encyclopedia, containing eleven epistles, deals with

“religion” and “politics”. It seems to be the ultimate purpose of the Encyclopedia for which the reader is gradually prepared. The first epistle of Part IV treats philosophic and religious opinions. It contains a section on views concerning the world: eternal or created; and it is the second of the two excerpts translated below. The following epistle in this part orients the reader to the “true path,” followed by epistles which enunciate the general principles and faith of the Brethren of Purity. It is in this Part, that the Shi^cite and particularly Ismā^cilī character of *Rasā'il* is discerned, as for example in the 48th epistle in which the Imam himself addresses his followers and gives them the good news (*bashārah*) of the establishment of his rule.

The Brethren are influenced by Pythagorean arithmetic, numerology and music; Euclidean geometry; Ptolemaic astronomy; Hermetic and Indo-Persian magic and astrology; Aristotelian logic and physics, gnostic esotericism, neo-platonic cosmology, theory of emanations and metaphysics; Biblical prophetology; Platonic concepts of law and leadership, as well as Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Manichaean wisdom and allegory. This eclectic synthesis and the Brethren’s theory and preference for an ^cAlid Imāmate indicate generally a Shi^cite and more particularly an Ismā^cilī affiliation.

Of the two passages translated below, the first differentiates, in a simple popular manner, between finite and infinite Time; the second posits an efficient cause beyond the World. Taken together they reveal the Brethren’s God as being beyond Nature. In fact He is beyond all being and nothing can be predicted of Him. This concept comes close to that of al-Kindī (d. 257/870) who defended the general theological doctrine of the creation of the world *ex nihilo* by a God who is beyond eternity. This is also the position of all early Ismā^cilī thinkers such as al-Nasafī, Abu Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Abu Ya^cqūb al-Sijistānī³, and Hamid al-Din al-Kirmānī. The Brethren’s terminology for four causes (material, formal, efficient and complete) in the second passage translated below is taken entirely from the terminology of *Rasā'il al-Kindī*⁴ or from a source common to the Brethren and al-Kindī. The Brethren also share with al-Kindī the doctrines of the origination and destruction of the world by God, resurrection, and the validity of the Prophetic revelation⁵ – doctrines of Islamic dogma, despite their commitment to rational philosophy.

There is an approach to Time which is characteristic of Ismā^cilism and is embodied in the theory of *al-mabdā' wa'l-ma'ād*, the completion of the cycle of being from its origin to its end in God, the One, the Ultimate

Cause uncaused, the *Mubdi'* (Creator, Originator, Innovator, Designer) who is not within the cycle, not a part of its motion and duration but its Mover from beyond. It is essentially a neo-platonic theory adopted by almost all Ismā'īlī philosophers and we find it as an underlying theme of the *Rasā'il*, revealed in the views on resurrection; *qiyāmah* (III, 186-189; 287-320)⁶.

There is another aspect of cyclic time - more political and therefore more real - the rise and fall of the states, which the *Rasā'il* covers in a section on *ta'āqub al-duwal* (I, 180-182). The Brethren's ideas on the subject pre-date, by more than four centuries, the more developed and detailed theory of Ibn Khaldun; but a discussion of this seems outside the pale of our present consideration.

Translations

First Passage from *Rasā'il*, II, 17-19

CHAPTER ON THE SAYINGS OF SCHOLARS ABOUT THE ESSENCE OF TIME (MAHIYYAT AL—ZAMAN)

Popular opinion about time is that it is the passing of years, months, days and hours. It is said that the movements of the sphere are counted by repetition and that time is the duration of that count. Accordingly many have thought that time does not really exist, because the longest parts of time are years, those that have passed and those that have not yet come and nothing exists from them except the one (present) year; again this year has months, those that have passed and those that have not yet come and nothing exists from them except the one (present) month; also this month has days, those that have passed and those that have not yet come and nothing exists from them except the one (present) day; again this day has hours, those that have passed and those that have not yet come and nothing exists from them except the one (present) hour. And this hour has parts, those that have passed and those that are otherwise. According to this theory time has no real existence.

From another point of view, time exists eternally; accordingly time is composed of day and night, twenty-four hours existing continuously in twenty four sectors of each revolution of the Earth. As an elucidation of this, take the case of a place at 90° longitude and if it is 12 o'clock at it on a Sunday, it would be 1 o'clock at all places within 15°, it would be 2 o'clock at all places between 16° to 30°; 3 o'clock at all places from 30° to 45°; 4 o'clock at all places between 46° and 60°; 5 o'clock at all places between 61° and 75°; 6 o'clock at all places between 75° and 90°;

7 o'clock at all places between 91° and 105°; 8 o'clock at all places between 106° and 120°; 9 o'clock at all places up to 135°; 10 o'clock at all places up to 150°; 11 o'clock at all places stretching up to 165° and 12 o'clock at all places up to 180°.

There are hours of night in each sector of Earth in revolution corresponding [to the above]. For each place on Earth there is a different determination of [the time of] night or day. The sun shines on half the Earth at any time, and is hidden from the other half which was previously exposed to sun. Wherever the sun shines it is day and wherever it does not, it is night. As the day revolves, night revolves too - one opposite the other; as one wanes, the other wanes too. Both night and day make their appearance from the East; then they circle round the sun. It takes twelve hours for the sun to rise from one end of the Earth and move to the other. And so is the [duration of] the night. If you doubt what we say, then inquire from those who specialize in the science of [Ptolemy's] *Almageste*. They will confirm our opinion to you. It is said that one should resort to the specialists in any field (*ṣanā^cah*).

Know, then, that the continuous passage of night and day around the Earth creates on the psyche (soul, *nafs*) of one who reflects on it, the form (image, *ṣūrah*) of the totality of time in which is resumed the form of numbers determined by the continual spinning (*takrar*) of the One. Thus the numbers in singles and in pairs, in integers and fractions; in ones, tens, hundreds or thousands are nothing but the accumulation of ones in the psyche of one who ponders over them, as we have explained in the chapter on Numbers [I, 48-77]. In this manner, time is nothing but the sum of years, months, days and hours of which is formed the image (form, *ṣūrah*) in the soul (psyche, *nafs*) of one who contemplates the continuous passage of the cycles (*kurūr*) of night and day around the Earth.

These are the five categories - Matter, Form, Place, Time and Motion - relating to everybody, which we have commented on [before]. One who does not agree to look into these matters cannot widen his knowledge (introspection, *naẓar*) in the field of Nature, because it will not be possible for him ever to fathom the depth of its understanding (*mā^crifah*). One who is not ready to [understand] Nature, cannot discuss matters of Divinity (*al-ilāhiyyah*), as he would not know how to reach to its ultimate end (*kunh*).

CHAPTER ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF TWO KINDS:
OF AN ETERNAL WORLD (DUHRIYYAH AZALIYYAH) AND A
CREATED CAUSED ONE (MUHADDATHAH MU^cALLALAH):

We say that all the philosophical views and their systems have differed on these [questions]. Let us begin first with the *Duhriyyah* by saying: These were the people (*aqwām*) who had the most understanding and discrimination. They examined the existent particulars which are subject to sense perceptions. They contemplated them and considered their condition and they found four causes for every created object (*masnū^c*): the material cause (*illah hayulāniyyah*), the formal cause (*illah suriyyah*), the efficient cause (*illah fā^ciliyyah*) and the complete cause (*illah tamāmiyyah*). When they pondered over the creation of the World, they sought in it these four causes. They discussed them thus: Who has made it? From what was it made? How was it made? and Why was it made? And also When was it made? This they could not understand. They could not comprehend, as their souls (or minds, *nufūs*) fell short of understanding the fineness of their meanings, since the seeker [of the causes] is in need of a pure and excellent soul in knowledge and experience; he is [also] in need of clear intelligence, free from cheating and deception, and of fine insight and intense search, in order to sense these causes, their meanings, and their significances as we have explained in the epistle on gnoses (*mā^cārif*). When they examined these issues and could not understand them, their ignorance and their self-esteem led them to declare the infinity and eternity of the world. They denied the efficient cause, as they could not understand the other three [causes also].

Know that every examiner of a created object contemplates the four causes of its creation: Who made it? When was it made? How was it made? and Why was it made? When he seeks these answers, he finds at the very first sight of that object three apparent and clear things [i.e. dimensions] of its creation, not hidden from any intelligent person whose intelligence is not afflicted with problems. These three specific [dimensions] are: the shape (*al-shakl*), figure and forms (*al-naqsh wa'l-taṣāwir*), colours (*al-asbāgh*), and similar qualities. Had those who uphold the eternity of the world not experienced these impressions in examining the world and had they not contemplated its make and shape

and its form and appearance, they would not have sought its Maker and would not have inquired as to how He made it; when He made it; with what He made it and why He made it. Also had they not pretended to know or understand these causes, they would have referred to someone more knowledgeable and cognizant of its essence and reality and would have acknowledged their own incompetence whenever they made this statement or expressed this belief [about the eternity of the world]. But their confidence in themselves; their reliance on their own inquiry and their [belief] in the accuracy of their insight drove them to declare the eternity of the world. Thus they fussed over what they could not comprehend and engaged in what was not their job. They embroiled themselves in it and got confused. They suffered from what the monkey experienced at the hands of the carpenter.⁷

This chapter was about people with differing views; the worst among them being those who engaged in professions to which they ought not belong.

NOTES:

1. For the determination of this dating of the *Rasā'il*, see my article, "The Arrangement of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā'* and the Problem of Interpolations", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, XXXIX, 1 (Spring, 1984), pp. 97-110. It is maintained that the Brethren were a Fātimid Ismā'īlī group of intellectuals, *dā'īs* and their fellow-travellers, who aimed at preparing the way, psychologically, for the establishment of the Fātimid State in 297/909. Other views of the period, of authorship and of religious affiliation of the *Rasā'il* also exist; the most popular of which is the one that accepts the identification of these Brethren by the famous tenth century savant Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī (d. 414/1023). According to Abū Ḥayyān, the *Rasā'il* were composed around 373/983 to 375/985. Although now the encyclopedia has been generally accepted as an Ismā'īlī work it still continues to be attributed to Sunnī, Mu'tazilī, Ṣūfī, or Shī'ī schools or to various combinations of these schools.
2. The following complete editions of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-ṣafā'* have been printed: (a) ed. Wilāyat Ḥusayn, 3 vols., Bombay, 1883; (b) ed. Khayr al-Dīn al-Zarkalī, 4 vols., Cairo, 1928; (c) 4 vols., Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1957. Page numbers in this article refer to the Beirut edition as it is generally available. The following two editions of the *Risālat al-Jāmi'ah* have been printed: (a) ed. Jamīl Salība, 2 vols., Damascus, 1969; and (b) ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib, Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1974.
3. See Paul Walker, "An Ismā'īlī answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable Neoplatonic God", *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, II, pp. 7-21.
4. See Soheil M. Afnan, *A Philosophical Lexicon in Persian and Arabic* (Beirut: Dar Mashriq, 1968), p. 186.
5. Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 69.
6. See the very exhaustive article by Yves Marquet, "Imāmat, Resurrection et Hiérarchie selon les Ikhwān al-ṣafā'" in *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, XXX (1962), pp. 49-142.
7. This is a reference to a story in Ibn al-Muqaffa', *Kalīla wa Dimna* where a monkey meddles in what is not his business and pays dearly for it. The monkey replaces a carpenter and tries to cut a piece of wood. His tail gets caught; and when the carpenter finds him, he gives him a thorough beating.