

IBN SINA: TREATISE ON THE SECRET OF DESTINY ¹

Someone asked the Eminent *Shaykh* Abū ‘Alī ibn Sīnā the meaning of the Ṣūfī saying, “Whoever makes known the secret of destiny is a heretic.” In reply he stated that this question is extremely recondite, being one of those questions that can only be put down in cipher and taught in private, on account of the harmful effects its open explanation would have on the general public. The basic principle concerning it is contained in a Tradition of the Prophet, God bless him and his family, “Destiny is the secret of God; do not reveal the secret of God,” and in another Tradition of the Prince of Believers ‘Alī, peace on him: that when questioned about it he replied, “Destiny is a deep sea; do not sail out on it.” Being asked again he replied, “It is a stony road; do not walk on it.” Being asked once more he said, “It is a hard ascent; do not undertake it.”

Know that the secret of destiny is based on certain premises, such as (1) the world order, (2) the report that there is Reward and Punishment, and (3) the affirmation of the resurrection of souls.

(1) The first premise is that you should know that there is nothing in the world as a whole or in its parts, upper and lower, which is excluded from the statements that God is the cause of its being and its origination, and that God has knowledge of it, controls it and wills its existence: on the contrary, the whole of it exists by His control, determination, knowledge and will. This is a general and superficial account, although in describing the situation thus we intend a true description, not as the theologians explain it; and of this proofs and demonstrations could be given. And if this world were not composed of elements which would give rise to good and evil in it, and produce both righteousness and corruption in its inhabitants, there would have been no completion of an order for the world; for if it contained nothing but unmixed righteousness, it would not have been this world,² but another one. And it was necessary that the world should be composed in this fashion and order, for it does contain both righteousness and corruption.

(2) The second premise is that the ancient philosophers held that Reward is the occurrence of pleasure in the soul according to the extent of its perfection, while Punishment is the occurrence of pain in the soul according to the extent of its deficiency. So the soul’s abiding in deficiency is its “alienation from God,” and this is “the curse,” “Punishment,” (God’s) “wrath” and “anger”; and pain comes to it

¹ Translated from the Arabic text, “*Risāla fī sirr al-qadar*” in *Majmū‘ rasā’il... Ibn Sīnā* (Hyderabad, 1354 A.H.), by George F. Hourani, with acknowledgement of a debt to A. J. Arberry’s translation in *Avicenna on theology* (London, 1951), pp. 38-41.

² Omitting هذا العالم after

from that deficiency. And its perfection is what is meant by (God's) "satisfaction" with it, its "closeness" and "nearness" and "attachment." This, then, and nothing else is the meaning of "Reward" and "Punishment," in the view of the ancients.

(3) The third premise is that the resurrection is only the return of human souls to their own world: this is why God the Exalted said, "O tranquil soul, return to your Lord satisfied and satisfactory."

These are summary statements which need to be supported by demonstrative arguments.

If these premises are established, we say (a) that the apparent evils which occur in this world are, on a sound judgement, not purposed (by God) for the world; only good is purposed, while evil is privation. (b) But according to Plato both are purposed as well as willed; and the commandments and prohibitions given to the world with respect to the acts of responsible beings are just stimulants to those of whom it is foreknown (by God) that they will perform what is commanded, and deterrents to those of whom it is foreknown that they will refrain from what is forbidden. Thus the commandment is a cause of the act's proceeding from him of whom it is foreknown that it will proceed, and the prohibition is a cause of intimidation to him who refrains as a result of it from something base. Without the commandment the first agent would not have been stimulated; without the prohibition the second would not have been scared. He (Plato) imagined that there was an (initial) potentiality of 100 % of corruption occurring in the absence of any prohibition and that with the intervention of prohibitions 50 % of corruption has occurred, whereas without prohibitions 100 % would have occurred. He viewed commandments in the same way: had there been no commandments nothing of righteousness would have occurred, but with the supervening of commandments 50 % of righteousness has resulted.

(c) As for praise and blame, these have only two objects. One is to incite the doer of good³ to repeat the like act which it is willed should occur from him; while blame scares the one from whom the act has issued from repeating the like of it, and (ensures) that the one from whom that act might issue will abstain from doing something which is within his capacity to do but which it is not willed should proceed from him.

(d) It is not admissible that Reward and Punishment could be such as the theologians suppose: requital of the fornicator, for example, by putting him in chains and shackles, burning him in the fire over and over again, and setting snakes and scorpions upon him. For this is the behavior of one who wills to slake his wrath against his enemy, through injury or pain befalling him in consequence of his wrongdoing against himself (the avenger); and that is impossible in the character

³ Omitting *على* after *فاعل*

of God the Exalted, or that He should so visit(?)⁴ one whom He willed to refrain from such behavior⁵ or to be restrained from repeating it. And it is not to be imagined that after the resurrection obligations should be imposed, with commandments and prohibitions for anyone, so that he should be scared or refrain as a result of the Reward and Punishment that he has witnessed, as they have imagined.

(e) As for the sanctions established by the divine law for those who commit offenses, they have the same effect as a prohibition, which restrains him who abstains from the offense, whereas but for the prohibition it is conceivable that the act might issue from him. Sanctions may also be useful in preventing him from some other act of corruption, and because men must be bound by one of two bonds, either the bond of the divine law or the bond of reason, in order that the world may be completed. Do you not see that if anyone were loosed from both bonds the corruption he would commit would be intolerable, and the order of the world's affairs would be upset because of his release from both bonds? But God is more knowing and wiser.

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⁴ أو قصد

⁵ Omitting عن الممثل after يرتدع