

ABŪ ḤAYYĀN AL-TAWḤĪDĪ'S GNOSEOLOGY: A STUDY
OF "AL-LAYLĀ L-KHĀMISA WA-L-THALĀTHŪN" OF
AL-IMTĀ' WA-L-MU'ĀNASĀ

La gnoseología de Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī: un estudio de "al-Laylā l-
jāmisa wa-l-ṭalāṭūn" de *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*

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Abstract: To date, the aspects of the gnoseology exposed by Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī in "al-Laylā l-Khāmisa wa-l-thalāthūn" of his book *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* have not been studied; yet, they are worthy of consideration due both to their intrinsic value and the guidance they might provide to reconstruct and systematize the evolution of philosophy in the Islamic civilization. This research adopts a hermeneutic methodology, but in the light of the most-likely influences which might have had a sway on al-Tawḥīdī's thought. The research is introduced by a short contextualization on the relevance of gnoseology in Philosophy and the society, as well as by an assessment on the relevance of al-Tawḥīdī and his works in the History of Islamate's philosophy. The main theses defended by al-Tawḥīdī are: the impossibility of knowledge's self-understanding, the divine origin of the 'aql and nafs, and the nafs' immortality. However, other aspects of al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology are unclear: the exact correlation between the functions of the nafs and the 'aql, and the immortality of the 'aql after the death of the body.

Resumen: Hasta ahora, los aspectos de la gnoseología expuestos por Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī en "al-Laylā l-jāmisa wa-l-ṭalāṭūn" de su libro *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* no han sido estudiados. La gnoseología de al-Tawḥīdī es digna de consideración por su valor intrínseco y el esclarecimiento que ofrece para reconstruir y sistematizar la evolución del pensamiento en la civilización islámica. Este estudio adopta una metodología hermenéutica, aunque a la luz de las influencias a las que el pensamiento de al-Tawḥīdī pudiera haber estado expuesto con mayor probabilidad. Primeramente, el estudio contextualiza brevemente la relevancia de la gnoseología en el ámbito filosófico y social, y evalúa la relevancia de al-Tawḥīdī y su obra en la filosofía de la civilización islámica. Las principales tesis defendidas por al-Tawḥīdī son: la imposibilidad de que el conocimiento se comprenda a sí mismo, el origen divino del 'aql y del nafs, y la inmortalidad del nafs. Sin embargo, existen aspectos difusos: la exacta correlación entre el nafs y el 'aql en sus respectivas funciones y la inmortalidad del 'aql tras la muerte.

Key words: Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī. Gnoseology. Arabic philosophy. Islamic philosophy. Theory of knowledge.

Palabras clave: Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī. Gnoseología. Filosofía árabe. Filosofía islámica. Teoría del conocimiento.

INTRODUCTION

The object of the present study is the analysis and systematisation of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's¹ gnoseology as it is exposed in “*al-Layla l-khāmisa wa-l-thalāthūn*, The Night Thirty-Five” of his book *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*. al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology is developed in his answers to the questions of Abū l-Sa'dān, the vizier; these questions chiefly contain three of the most essential questions to any gnoseological study: where does the human knowledge come from? Which elements, either bodily or spiritual, make it possible? What are the objects of human understanding? Although not so expressly formulated in the Arabic text, these questions underlie the whole discussion. Indeed, they were the main pillars of the gnoseology dating from the period considered. Even today, the most diverse thinkers, and also neurologists and scientists from other fields, have undertaken the task of answering them without having reached consensus yet.

As the natural and biological sciences diverted from the speculative philosophical knowledge to another of more empirical character throughout the centuries, gnoseology progressively became more relevant. Simultaneously, Philosophy adopted a more humanistic focus, in the sense of a more *human-centred* perspective, which increased the interest in the human's knowledge of the world; so accentuated became this process at certain periods, that some thinkers made of gnoseology the main object of their attention and the foundation of their systems². In al-Tawḥīdī's time (X-XI centuries), gnoseology was a secondary field in the *Falsafah* (arab Philosophy), which was remarkably more concerned with strictly metaphysical questions or with more practical subjects whose applicability to the daily life was visible and demonstrable, such as ethics and politics. The interest which we may bestow on this period's developments answers to an interest in recreating the evolution of the different branches of *Falsafah* in order to obtain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this time, which was scarcely affected by the gnoseological theories.

Gnoseology has tried to answer the three abovementioned questions since its beginnings. Although they might seem sheer speculations, the implications of their answers might affect the roots of every science and knowledge, and they can even significantly affect important social foundations. Be dispensed the answer to the question about the factual existence of the reality around us, it is nonetheless undeniable that all which we are concerned with and affects us, is grounded in our experience, i.e., in our perceptions and knowledge.

1. Hereafter. “Al-Tawḥīdī”.

2. Some examples of this may be Berkeley, Spinoza, Hume, Kant and Hegel.

Gnoseology is tightly interwoven both with the materialistic and spiritual dimensions of man; consequently, the accepted results (especially if they are conclusive) of a gnoseological investigation could strongly affect the fundamentals of our scientific knowledge or our social laws. For instance: were the complete materialism of human understanding demonstrated, the implications derived would be expected to bring about a much more materialistic social organisation where "being human" might not deserve certain privileges as innate rights. The opposite is expected to happen in more spiritual traditions, which grant humans privileges mainly due to their believed superior status over the rest of natural beings; this superiority, indeed, is mainly rooted on their immaterial dimension.

However, the third question, whether God is an object of human understanding and His will knowledgeable, was far-more relevant for the pre-Modern societies, such as al-Tawḥīdī's. To a certain extent, we could not speak of Modernity without the particular answer which was given to this question by the illustrated thinkers; this fact sufficiently demonstrates the relevance of gnoseology beyond the philosophical realm.

In al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology, two main foci can be clearly discerned: the relation between God and the human understanding, and the interrelation between the different elements of human understanding and their functions.

In this discussion, three main influences can be distinguished: firstly, the Neoplatonism, which became remarkably known and widespread from Egypt to the furthest Eastern margins of the Islamicate during the X/XI centuries. Neoplatonism was not imported by Arabs; it was already known in the region many centuries before the Arab conquests, as the example of the Egyptian Gnostics clearly demonstrates. Its influence on the cultural elite, however, was stronger than ever during the first centuries of the Islamic expansion. Secondly, the influence of the Islamic sociocultural environment in which *Kalām* occupied the main part of the intellectual debates. In this Islamic frame, the individual ethical disposition (Ethics) and the organisation of the society (Politics) were, by far, the problems which asked for a most urgent answer by the thinkers and the '*ulamā*'³. Throughout *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*, this becomes obvious by the much more extensive

³ This does not mean that other important and sophisticated metaphysical and even gnoseological elaborations did not happen at the time, especially those impelled by the surge of Sufism. However, they did not enjoy of less pre-eminence than the practice-oriented fields, as it is logical in a society whose cultural foundations were not solidly settled yet and were frequently questioned. The "official" Islam was not fully consolidated till the XIII/XIV centuries, when the end of *Ijtihād* became effective, the four official Sunni *madhāhib* were established, etc. For further reading, see Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam*, "Book Three", which exclusively deals with the evolution of the high culture in all the Islamic lands (notwithstanding a remarkable disdain for al-Maghreb and al-Andalus which, anyway, does not affect the subject of this study).

treatment bestowed upon political, social, literary and cultural problems than upon gnoseology or the nature and essence of the human soul. Thirdly, Sufism strongly influenced the metaphorical images used by al-Tawḥīdī in his gnoseology, as it will be shown later.

Although al-Tawḥīdī did not reach success neither in his life nor in the centuries following his death (actually, he has barely drawn the attention of any author before the XX century, when scholars brought him back from oblivion), the quality of his thought does not deserve this disdain⁴. In the philosophical realm, al-Tawḥīdī's relevance is grounded on the confluences present in his thought and the originality of some of his theses, which are doubtless noteworthy for his time. Besides, although a good deal of his most frequent concepts can be traced back to the Hellenic Philosophy, they are here enriched by the Islamic contributions (especially those stemming from Sufism), as it happened in other contemporary thinkers. The Arab, Persian and Indian influences on the Hellenic Philosophy constitute one of the most significant phenomena of universal thought. This study aims at enriching the knowledge on how this synthesis developed.

AL-TAWḤĪDĪ'S BIOGRAPHY AND HIS HISTORICAL TRANSCENDENCE

I intend to offer a succinct approximation to al-Tawḥīdī's life in order to contextualize the present research. The published studies on his life and his works are illustrative enough as to refer to them⁵.

Abū Ḥayyān 'Alī Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-'Abbās al-Ṣūfī l-Tawḥīdī was the son of a very humble tradesman who sold a genre of dates known as *tawḥīdī*, whence he acquired his nickname (*laqab*). His birthplace is unknown, though his biographers propose several locations: Baghdad, Shīrāz, Nīshāpūr, al-Wāsiṭ and Fars. Despite their disagreement, they all coincide on his being an orphan raised under the tutelage (*kafāla*) of his father's brother; however, this did not save him from the extreme poverty in which he was born⁶. These hardships notwithstanding, al-Tawḥīdī had the possibility to learn in a *kuttāb* (an elementary school where children were taught to write and read in order to memorize the Quran) and

4. Marc Bergé is one of the Western scholars who has dedicated most attention to al-Tawḥīdī and made great efforts to analyse his work and value it fairly. For further reading on al-Tawḥīdī's fame and influence, see his article "Genèse et fortune", p. 103.

5. The main Arabic sources which, according to Bergé and Stern, refer al-Tawḥīdī's biography are *Mu'jam al-udabā' irshād al-'arīb ilā ma'arifāt al-adīb* of Yāqūt and al-Qifṭī's *Ikhbār al-'ulamā'*. Mentions of the title *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* appear in Ibn Khallikān's *Wafāyāt*, al-Qutubī's *Uyūn al-tawārīkh*, Junayd's *Sadd al-izār* and Ḥajjī Khalīfa's *Kashf al-zunūn*, in the XVIIth century. As for more recent studies, apart from 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Muṣṭāwī's *Muqaddima* to the hereby considered edition of *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*, there is also the entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*; Bergé. "Les écrits d'Abū Ḥayyān", pp. 53-63 and the aforementioned article "Genèse et Fortune".

6. Al-Muṣṭāwī. "Muqaddima", p. 6; Netton. *Al-Fārābī and his school*, p. 16.

to attend the lectures of different masters, among whom Abū Sulaymān al-Mantiqī influenced him the most. Abū Sulaymān had contact with isma'īlī groups (although the evidence seems to indicate that he was a sunni) and was strongly influenced by Neoplatonism⁷. These two doctrines are clearly observable in al-Tawḥīdī's work⁸; Aristotelianism might have also influenced al-Tawḥīdī's thought in Logic, the motivation for knowledge and some aspects of his cosmology, but certainly not in his gnosiological theory⁹.

Besides this, the influence of Sufism can be perceived in the images which illustrate several passages which will be analysed below. The proximity of al-Tawḥīdī to Sufi circles is well documented and there are several testimonies on his Sufi way of life and clothing; moreover, he was accompanied by Sufi companions during his pilgrimage to Mecca in the year 963 A.D¹⁰.

Although his education was neither extensive nor profound, al-Tawḥīdī made use of his natural talent to combine his varied knowledge to elaborate a rich, consistent synthesis.

Al-Tawḥīdī's recognition during his life was moderate; indeed, several biographers transmit the story that, in his last days, he burnt all his works out of desperation for not having reached the success that he so ardently had struggled for¹¹. In fact, it is not until Yāqūt's biographical work (XIII century) that a biographer showed some interest for al-Tawḥīdī. Yāqūt is therefore the first one to transmit that al-Tawḥīdī did not enjoy of the public's recognition during his life. He eked out a living as a *warrāq*, 'copyist' or 'archivist'¹²; this labour would account for the eclectic and dispersed character of his works. This character must also be understood within the relation that al-Tawḥīdī wanted to build between the political power and the intellectual¹³. The work which best illustrates this eclecticism is al-Tawḥīdī's *Risāla al-'Ulūm*, a kind of catalogue of the main sciences, such as Lo-

7. Al-Muṣṭāwī. "Muqaddima", pp. 7-8; Netton. *Al-Fārābī and his school*, p. 16.

8. Al-Tawḥīdī was a sunni, but taking into account the omnipresence of many diverse schools of thought and religious interpretations in the period, it is more than reasonable to suppose that al-Tawḥīdī was exposed to the influence of all kinds of doctrines; this is more than likely when we observe that he learnt from masters as Abū Sulaymān, who was tightly connected with isma'īlī thinkers (though he himself was a sunni). Al-Tawḥīdī himself writes about the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* ('The Brethren of Purity') in *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* with a remarkably close familiarity and closeness. For a more extensive study, see Hamdani. "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī", pp. 345-353.

9. Netton. *Al-Fārābī and his school*, pp. 44-45, 80.

10. *Idem*, p. 8.

11. Bergé. "Les écrits d'Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī", p. 62; Stern. "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī", p. 2.

12. Al-Muṣṭāwī. "Muqaddima", p. 7; Stern. "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī", p. 1.

13. Reymond. "L'intellectuel", p. 78.

gics, Linguistics, Mathematics, Astrology, etc. There are, however, important absences, such as the History, Physics or Zoology¹⁴.

Despite of being promoted to the position of *kātib* under the patronage of the *wazīr* Ibn Sa‘dān for three years, the death of his protector left him without friends in the court. His difficult character and his inappropriate behaviour and clothes, as well as his critical position on some cultural traditions, contributed to his being dismissed. He spent his last years in al-Shīrāz¹⁵.

Al-Tawḥīdī’s works are written in a pleasant style and they compile the most representative ideas and debates of his high-society; they are also composed from a fresh and objective perspective which makes al-Tawḥīdī worthy of being studied and re-assessed. His proper place is not, for sure, the oblivion to which he was banned by his contemporaries and the following generations, inasmuch as the fame is not a valid criterion to determine the quality of an author. Despite al-Tawḥīdī’s poor success in life, there are some scholars who support the hypothesis of his influence on al-Ghazālī (Algazel) or, at least, that al-Ghazālī did know al-Tawḥīdī’s work, according to some researches on al-Ghazālī’s biography¹⁶.

Although it would be misleading to equalize al-Tawḥīdī with great thinkers as al-Farābī or Ibn Sīna, he is withal worthy of being studied because of his analytic and objective approach when dealing the most diverse, controversial matters. Perhaps, al-Tawḥīdī neither had such an impressive knowledge of classical poetry as al-Jāhīz (whom he admired), nor did he displayed a *saj’*, ‘rhymed prose’, as al-Ma‘ārrī’s; his perspective, however, is much more tranquil and more impregnated of common sense than that of other more famous, but more sectarian, authors. This latter feature stands out in al-Tawḥīdī’s philosophy and the quality of his thoughts has impelled some scholars to compare some of his ideas with those of prominent figures as al-Farābī¹⁷. Indeed, it can be said that al-Tawḥīdī’s extraordinary common-sense, together with his serenity and his great capability of analysis make up for the flaws of his education. This, combined with his elegant, succinct and pleasant style, as well as the depth and richness of some of his paragraphs, inspired Yāqūt to qualify al-Tawḥīdī as *faylasūf al-udabā’ wa-adīb al-*

14. Bergé, “Épître sur les sciences...”, pp. 241-277, 279-283, 285-298, 300. Bergé attaches to his critical edition a useful study in which he exposes the potential motivation behind the writing of the text; he also investigates the influences of other authors, as Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, in the classification of the sciences.

15. Netton. Al-Fārābī and his school, p. 17 and 79; Reymond. “L’intellectuel”, pp. 96-99.

16. Bergé. “Genèse et fortune”, p.103; Bergé bases his hypothesis on the works of Yāqūt and al-Qifṭī (XIII century), as well as a letter from Ibn Taymiyya where it is said that al-Tawḥīdī influenced on al-Ghazālī. However, it still lacks a direct, comprehensive study of the texts in order to corroborate the actual influence of al-Tawḥīdī on other authors.

17. Mas‘ūd. “Fī mawqif”, pp. 3-7, which compares the views of both authors on *Kalām*, the pernicious use of Logic and the possible solutions offered by both thinkers.

falāsifa, 'the philosopher among the men of letters, and the man of letters among the philosophers'¹⁸. This depiction, nonetheless, also summarizes the eclectic character of his work.

Finally, it is also convenient to point that, despite the revalorisation of al-Tawḥīdī's work in the last decades, his relevance as man of letters and thinker must be always contained in its proper measure. Apart from his most outstanding and original theses, it should not be forgotten that al-Tawḥīdī neither elaborated any philosophical system, nor did he significantly advance or innovate in any field; his labour being essentially that of transmission. His scanty recognition in life also hindered the potential influence that he might have exerted on the intellectual and political elites. Because of this, he must be valued properly and the use of misleading terms in order to extol him above his real intellectual significance should be avoided. For instance, Bergé and other scholars have tried to justify the use of the term *humanist* to refer to al-Tawḥīdī in order to make him excel by this attribute, which the scholars consider to have been ignored in al-Tawḥīdī's time¹⁹.

Al-Tawḥīdī lived his last days in bitterness and solitude, surrounded of the most absolute poverty and desperation, though he gained the *ṣayj* title among his neighbours. He died, supposedly, in Shīrāz, year 1023²⁰.

AL-IMTĀ' WA-L-MU'ĀNASĀ

Bergé dates the redaction of *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* between the years 983-985²¹. The book's fortune is tightly linked to his author's: if al-Tawḥīdī became known after his death, it was mainly due to this work, which is by far the most quoted in the biographical and literary compilations, as well as the most read among later authors.

Al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa can be included within the *adab* genre, as it is a compilation of literary, religious, political and philosophical knowledge. Al-Tawḥīdī intended to reproduce the conversations which he maintained with the vizier Abū l-Sa'dān during forty nights (a symbolic number, of course). Abū l-Sa'dān received al-Tawḥīdī in his personal assembly (*maylis*) by the recommendation of a

18. Kenanah. "La conception de l'âme", p. 89, where he literally takes the epithet employed by Yāqūt.

19. Alexander Key exhibits solid arguments against the use of the term 'humanist' for authors as al-Tawḥīdī in his study "The Applicability of the Term 'Humanism'". He correctly warns on the misuse of terminology which occurs so frequently among the Western scholars, who frequently intend to trace post-Modern ideas back to Medieval or pre-Modern times. Likely, he warns on the misapprehensions derived from transposing ideas and patterns from one society to another.

20. Stern. "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī"; Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", p. 18.

21. Bergé. "Les écrits d'Abu Ḥayyān", p. 59.

common friend, in order to test al-Tawḥīdī's wisdom. By this exam, al-Tawḥīdī expected to propitiate the ruler's benevolence and therefore to obtain the so ardently sought fame and success which could ensure him economic stability. Although his expectations were never fulfilled, these meetings represent the occasion when al-Tawḥīdī was closest to some kind of recognition or success.

Al-Tawḥīdī therefore explains that in *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* he is just reproducing his answers to Abū l-Sa'dān's questions; this answers essentially consisting in the teachings of his master, Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, who had a great reputation at that time. The ambience of the text is consequently the court of the vizier, where some questions are formulated every night and their answers provided. These soirees can be related to the old pre-Islamic tradition of *samar*, 'poetical soirees', with a certain degree of security; although there are some authors who have found some connections too with *Alf layla wa-layla*, 'One Thousand and One Nights'²².

The value of *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* arises from the variety of its subjects, its pleasant, clear style, and the discussions' proper extension in order not to bore the reader, who is represented by the vizier. Al-Tawḥīdī employs the end of the night, a temporal trope, to finish the exposition when he estimates it convenient. The book gathers the most relevant or most well-known aspects of the topics discussed; besides, al-Tawḥīdī positions himself in several cultural and intellectual, political-related controversies which were happening at the time²³.

Stylistically, al-Tawḥīdī avoids a detailed analysis of the concepts by arguing that it is the reproduction of an oral conversation, which is always shorter and more superficial than written ones. Despite adorning its brevity and justifying it with well-disposed tropes, he cannot avoid that this lack of depth which occurs everywhere throughout the book arouses in the reader the permanent feeling that

22. Bergé. "Genèse et fortune", p. 99; Mirella Cassarino also studies the formal aspects of *Al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'ānasa* in her article "Parolle della Notte", pp. 97-120. The study is mainly a contextualization of the book where different conjectures on the tropes most frequently employed are discussed. The comparison with *Alf Layla wa-layla* is, in fact, one of these conjectures, which cannot be satisfactorily demonstrated due to the lack of evidence. Taking into account that there is only one preserved version of *Alf Layla* dating from the IX century; that there is no evidence on the text being popular at the time; and that al-Tawḥīdī was only in contact with classical and erudite literary texts (among which *Alf Layla* has never been included), it is hardly probable that al-Tawḥīdī either came to know the book or that he was influenced by it. However, this is a debate which cannot be answered but with more or less probable conjectures; a further discussion is, therefore, pointless, at least until new evidences come up to light. Cassarino's hypotheses, however, as well as her detailed analysis, are interesting and the whole article is a good approximation to *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* for those who have no access to the book.

23. Reymond. "L'intellectuel", pp. 80-85.

there is much more to tell on each topic. This brevity and lack of depth in the analyses is essential for the following study of the gnosiology.

GNOSEOLOGY IN AL-IMTĀ' WA-L-MU'ĀNĀSA

"Al-Laylā l-khāmisa wa-thalāthūn", 'The Night thirty-five' is doubtless one of the most outstanding chapters of the book. There irrupt different subjects which had been touched-upon in other passages and which are now more explicitly and analytically addressed. Before continuing, however, it must be emphasized that gnoseology is the only subject with which this study is concerned. As it is well known, the relation of reason, understanding and mind with the human spirit and soul is as old as Philosophy, and it has been maintained until our days. In al-Tawḥīdī's time, this relation was taken an axiom; consequently, it will be clearly observed that these concepts interact and complement each other. The concepts of *nafs*, 'soul' and *rūḥ*, 'spirit' in *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa* have already been studied by Faisal Kenanah, whose article I refer to²⁴. This study focuses more specifically on the gnoseological analysis and the concept of '*aql*' and its qualities.

Main concepts

The night starts with a brief dissertation after which the vizier throws a set of questions related to different aspects of the three aforementioned concepts: *rūḥ*, 'spirit', *nafs*, 'soul' and '*aql*', 'mind, understanding': their origins, their interaction, the essence of their nature, their hierarchy and their destiny after death. Yet, in order to provide the unfamiliarised reader with a complete contextualization which enables him to fully understand this study, I hereby offer a short definition of the Arabic terms *rūḥ*, *nafs* and '*aql*' before tackling the most complex part of the study²⁵.

1. *Rūḥ*: spirit, vegetative and sensitive soul²⁶, the spirit which insufflates life in the bodies, whatever they are, and in which passions occur.
2. *Nafs*: rational soul, *quwwa ilāhiyya*, 'divine force' which distinguishes the man from animals and stamps the most essentially human features²⁷.

24. Kenanah. "La conception de l'âme".

25. I refer again to Kenanah's study, which offers the translation of all the passages where the *nafs* and '*aql*' concepts are discussed.

26. I am consciously using the Aristotelian terminology, with which al-Tawḥīdī was familiar. Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", p. 80, has also noted this division of the soul in rational soul, passionate soul and appetitive or carnal soul, and has traced it back to Yahyā ibn 'Adī. The origin of this division is clearly Platonic and Aristotelian.

27. Al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā'*, p. 329.

3. *'Aql*: depending on the context, al-Tawḥīdī uses the term *'aql* as the equivalent of 'mind', 'reason', 'understanding' or 'judgement', in the strictest Kantian sense²⁸.

Regarding the correlation of *rūḥ*, *nafs* and *'aql* and their hierarchy, some aspects must be considered. Al-Tawḥīdī develops his cosmology by a gradual order of exposition, where the influence of Neoplatonism, namely Plotinus' emanations or hypostases, is evident. A direct reading of the Enneads must be discarded, though; most likely, the teachings of Ibn 'Adī and al-Sijistānī, who were significantly influenced by al-Fārābī's doctrine, would account for the transmission of this knowledge²⁹. The main ideas which appear in the text and can be traced back to al-Fārābī are:

1. The identification of the first creative reality as God, which is the first reality, purely intellectual and immaterial
2. The emanation of the first sky and the rest of emanations (or skies, depending on the text) from this first reality.

Al-Fārābī combined the Plotinian hypostatical system with the ten skies of Aristotle; al-Tawḥīdī, however, only speaks of emanation, *ḥayd*, and does not identify them with specific skies.

At this point, the influence of another capital text in the History of Islamic thought in al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology must be remarked: the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. How this coincidence can be explained, whether it happened through direct

28. Among the translations offered for *'aql*, it is important to distinguish between 'understanding' as the act of comprehension of an object, concept or idea, which would be equivalent to the term *fahm*; and 'judgement' as 'prudence' or 'common-sense', which would be the equivalent term for *ḥikma*. Being conscious of the strangeness of translating *'aql* for 'understanding' or 'judgement', I insist on the Kantian sense of the terms, where 'understanding' refers to the intellectual operations which *enable* the empirical perceptions and their mutual relations by means of the causality principle; on the other hand, 'judgement' refers to the ability of elaborating synthetic propositions. As it will be seen, al-Tawḥīdī employs the term *'aql* with these two meanings depending on the context. This translation therefore aims at a more accurate explanation of the text and al-Tawḥīdī's ideas. Finally, I must remark that I am not asserting that al-Tawḥīdī anticipated Kant, but just using a shared conceptualization in order to ease the understanding of the text.

29. Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", pp. 51–52; Neoplatonism deeply influenced the development of the Islamic cosmology and early thought. The hypostatical system appears in several authors of the period, such as al-Fārābī, Ibn 'Adī, Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and al-Tawḥīdī, among others. The main modifications which Neoplatonism underwent through the Islamic thought was the identification of the "One" with God or the Creator and the breaking of the ascending-descending cycle of the soul: the soul or *nafs* either ascends to Paradise to contemplate God, or descends into the underworld to pay for its sins during its material life. The ascendance to Paradise is the equivalent to the return of the individual soul to the universal soul, the *Nous*, which Plotinus exposes. This adaptation anticipates the scholastic developments in the West during the Middle Ages.

or indirect contact, is uncertain³⁰. However, it is clearly observable the coincidence of concepts (*ḥayd*, 'aql) and the cosmological conceptions.

Dealing now directly with al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology, he starts by describing the most material concepts, i.e., those in closest contact with matter, to conclude with those most spiritual, immaterial, simple concepts:

1. The *rūḥ* is the first concept to be described, since it is tightly linked to the body and which shares with it the highest number of characteristics: the *rūḥ* is the subject of passions and therefore it is subject to accidents, affections and changes.

2. The *nafs*, the immaterial divine force (*quwwa ilāhiyya*) which carries the essential human features, is above the *rūḥ*; it survives after the body's death, deprived of every trace of matter (*ḥayūla*), even of memories, which are considered material elements that cannot accompany the *nafs* in Paradise, since they would impel the *nafs* to the remembrance of matter³¹.

3 The 'aql, which has a strong resemblance with Plotinus' *nous*, illuminates the *nafs* and therefore the man during his material existence; it is a light which brings man closer to God, which does not set and does not dawn, always shining, and which has a deep interaction with the *nafs*; however, al-Tawḥīdī does not mention anything about its destiny after the body's death³².

Main statements

The brevity and shortness of some passages affect the treatment of the abovementioned concepts: the functions of the 'aql and its relationship with the *nafs* are not always clear. Since the 'aql is the most relevant concept in any gnosiological system, it is absolutely necessary for the elaboration of a coherent theory. The following in-depth analysis intends at elucidating these problems in order to clarify al-Tawḥīdī's ideas

In order to shed light, the literal statements of al-Tawḥīdī must be taken as the bases to reconstruct the theory. The following ideas are explicitly stated in the text; therefore, they are not subject to controversy:

30. See note 8.

31. Al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā'*, pp. 330-331.

32. *Idem*, p. 334; the terminology employed by al-Tawḥīdī deserves a special attention due to its sufi connotations, such as the words *nūr*, 'light', *manāra*, 'lighthouse', *nawwāra*, 'enlighten' *šams*, 'sun'. They are symbols which represent the action of the 'aql on the *nafs*. Sufism had already turned a good part of the doctrine of Plotinus, who might have been the most important figure of mysticism in Antiquity, into its own. Many images and similes employed by Sufi authors can be found in the *Enneads*, as well as in Porfirius' description of Plotinus' ecstasy in his biography. Apart from the interest which may arise in following this literary and philosophical transmission, it is more relevant to this study to point out the high compatibility between Neoplatonism and Sufism to be mutually combined and enriched.

1. The *'aql*, as the *nafs*, is a divine force³³ (*quwwa ilāhiyya*), simple (*basīṭ*), undivided and immaterial; it always remains unique and undivided as its dignity in the natural hierarchy requires³⁴.
2. The *'aql* illuminates the *nafs* and enables a wide scope of intellectual functions: discernment and scrutiny, inspection, investigation and deduction, certainty and doubt, science and thought (*ẓann*, also 'opinion'), comprehension, viewpoint (*rawiyya*), improvisation (*badīha*, also 'improvisation' or 'instinct') and remembrance, intellection (*dhihn*), memory and creation of ideas, prudence (*ḥikma*), confidence and security (*tuma'nīna*)³⁵.
3. *Al-Ikhtiyār*, the "will", belongs to the *nafs*.
4. The fundamental aim of the *'aql*'s functions is filtering (*istikhlās*) the perceptions from the material world in order to extract the pure, immaterial knowledge which is appropriate for the nature of the *nafs*. Hypothetically, it might be inferred that the *'aql*'s is concerned with the material knowledge, whereas the *nafs* is concerned with the abstract, ideal knowledge.
5. The *'aql* cannot understand or apprehend itself; neither can the *nafs*. The reason why is that the *'aql* needs an external object of knowledge which cannot be itself since it is the subject. Therefore, the *'aql* has neither proper terms nor concepts to describe and completely comprehend its essence, therefore *al-'aql lā yu'qal*, "the understanding is not understood".
6. The destiny of the *'aql* after the body's death and its eternity are not mentioned.
7. The main produce of the *'aql* is judging or discerning between the acceptance or rejection of a concept or a statement. This judgement is based on knowledge.

The first difficulties appear when the text is asked about the relation of the *'aql* with the body (a compound) and the *nafs* (a simple substance), as well as about the destiny of the *'aql* after the body's death:

1. Is the relation between the *'aql*, the *nafs* and the body mediate or immediate? How does it occur in either case?
2. Does the *'aql* accompany the *nafs* towards Paradise or does it die with the body? If it accompanies the *nafs*, how is that possible: do they remain two simple

33. "The *'aql* is a divine force more simple (*absat*) than the nature (*tabī'a*), the same way as the nature is more simple than the elements and these are more simple than the compounds. And so on until the compounds end up in an absolute compound, and the simples end up in a final simple; and they are found in the extreme sides of what is called 'The All' (*al-Kull*), beyond which there is nothing to claim for, neither in neither this nor that side (*fa lam yakūn ba'da dālik maṭlab lā fī hādihā l-ṭaraf wā-lā fī hādihā l-ṭaraf*); and the *'aql* is the representant (*khalīfa*) of God, the receptor (*qābil*) of the pure emanation (*ḥayḍ*) in which there is no mixture and no spot of filth". *Idem*, pp. 332-333.

34. *Idem*, p. 333.

35. *Idem*, pp. 329 and 333.

substances which go together, or do they unify in a simple substance? In this latter case, when does this union happen and how is it possible? Otherwise, if the 'aql does not accompany the nafs, what is its destiny after death?

In order to contextualize the following hypothetical reconstruction, it is convenient to briefly present the philosophy of Plotinus and the development of Neoplatonism³⁶ among the Islamic thinkers who could have influenced al-Tawḥīdī, namely al-Fārābī, his disciples (al-Sijistānī) and Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'³⁷. Al-Fārābī developed an extensive and well-structured gnosiology in which he differentiates six kinds of 'aql. As well, al-Fārābī works with the concepts of "potentiality" (*bi-l-quwwa*) and "actuality" (*bi-l-fi'l*). This structuration and these two concepts are completely absent in al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology; hence, al-Fārābī must be discarded as a direct influence on al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology, although he may have influenced him in other aspects of his thought. Finally, it is likely that we will never know the extent of al-Sijistānī's influence on al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology, since his only standing work, *Ṣiwān al-ḥikma*, is a collection of aphorisms with no gnosiological content³⁸. Therefore, we are left with the Plotinus' Enneads to expose the bases of Platonism; and the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* to grasp a manifestation of Platonism in the Islamic thought which was surely familiar, in some way, to al-Tawḥīdī.

Plotinus' philosophy is chiefly a synthesis of Plato's and Aristotle's systems where all the elements of the reality are brought into being by means of hypostases. Each hypostasis is an emanation³⁹ from a superior, more perfect, more immaterial hypostasis; consequently, there are points of junction between the hypostases where they overlap and the essential characteristics of the superior hypostasis are imperfectly transferred towards the inferior one. The apex of these hypostases is the absolute "One", which was identified with God by the religious annotators, both Christians and Muslims. The emanations are derived from reflexive processes; for instance, the universal *nous* emanated from the One when the One per-

36. The influence of Aristotelianism on al-Fārābī's gnosiology is studied by Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", pp. 46-54.

37. As mentioned above, the text of *al-Imtā' wa-l-Mu'ānasa* clearly hints to a relatively close relationship between al-Tawḥīdī and Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' or, at least, a deep knowledge of their thought by al-Tawḥīdī.

38. Presumably, al-Sijistānī wrote numerous works on Aristotelian logic and gnosiology, but none of these have arrived to us. Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", p. 63.

39. In this regard, the use by al-Tawḥīdī of the term *fayḍ*, which can be exactly translated as 'emanation' and which gathers the nuances of 'fullness', 'overspill' and 'overflowing' of oneself towards the outside, is a doubtless proof of the Neoplatonism's influence on al-Tawḥīdī. One of the main pillars of Neoplatonism was, precisely, the concept of 'emanation', by which a hypostasis brings about an inferior one in a progressively degrading process which ends up in matter, the absolute degradation, deprived of essence and origin, for it is just negation.

ceived itself, or thought of itself⁴⁰. This scheme is replicated in each relation between the superior hypostases and their inferior ones.

Plotinus developed his Philosophy in full-detail in the *Enneads*, where he employs a bottom-up exposition: first, the matter, then the individual soul, the universal soul, the *nous* (which is equal to the universal *'aql*) and, finally, the absolute One. Al-Tawḥīdī reproduces the theory of emanation in his book, but he indifferently employs both bottom-up and top-down expositions – although they are never as detailed and complete as Plotinus'. The identification of God with the One is of course present in *al-Imtā' wa-l-mu'ānasa*.

The interrelation between *'aql* and *nafs* whilst they are in the human body can be better achieved. It is justified to deduce that the *'aql* enlightens the *nafs* in the material world, at the same time that the *nafs* plays a mediating role between the *'aql* and the body. In support of this argument, be considered the parallel relation between the body and the *rūḥ*, in which the passions that affect the body occur.

The underlying scheme of the relation between the hypostases is reproduced in every conjunction of diverse elements in the human body. Thus, the different elements act as “connectors” which link the superior elements with the inferior ones; these links are simultaneously influenced both by the superior and the inferior elements. Perhaps, due to the collective imaginary and cosmology of the cultural élite at the time, al-Tawḥīdī did not need to explain many aspects which were obvious in his mind and to which no one would oppose. These aspects, however, are not so evident for the contemporary reader. By contextualizing al-Tawḥīdī's thought within Neoplatonism's influence, however, there is a solid ground to infer that the *'aql* enlightens the *nafs* and the *nafs* enlightens the body. The relation between these three elements in the material world is, consequently, a mediate one, where the *nafs* is in the middle. Hence, it is a parallel relation to that of the universal mind (*nous*, *'aql*), the universal soul (*nafs*) and the matter (*hayūlā*) in the Cosmos (*al-'ālam*).

Furthermore, the text of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* can help to enrich the picture sketched by al-Tawḥīdī. The *Rasā'il* firstly differentiate the two meanings for the term *'aql*: it refers both to the first emanation from God and to the spiritual force (*quwwa min quwā l-nafs*) whose actions are the thinking, the opinion, the language, the discernment, the actions and other similar things. The *'aql* is consequently a force of the human soul (*al-nafs al-insāniyya*) and of the universal soul

40. This is doubtlessly a very superficial exposition, but it is enough to facilitate the comprehension of al-Tawḥīdī's text; it does not intend a detailed description of Plotinus' system.

(*al-nafs al-kullīyya*). Both the first '*aql* and *al-nafs al-kullīyya* are the two first existing beings, *al-mawjūdāt al-awwalīyya*⁴¹.

Therefore, the first meaning is equivalent to the *Nous* in the Plotinian system, the first emanation of the One when it thinks of itself. The second meaning supports the place of the '*aql* in al-Tawḥīdī's gnosiology: a filtering force which provides the *nafs* with the essential, transcendental knowledge of material things. In this way, it is understandable that al-Tawḥīdī states that the '*aql* emanates before the *nafs*, but it is subordinated to the later: he would be referring to two different realities.

The second question —the destiny of the '*aql* after the body's death—, it is remarkably more complex to answer due to the scarcity of evidences in the text. Al-Tawḥīdī is absolutely silent on this matter; as for the *nafs*, he asserts on several occasions that it is destined to Paradise and the bliss of God's contemplation. The main four controversial points can be summarized as follows:

1. The cognitive functions of the '*aql* are essentially interwoven with the material reality despite of their being superior activities which enlighten the *nafs*. However, al-Tawḥīdī attributes to the *nafs* other functions as *al-Ikhtiyār*, 'election' and *al-Maḥabba*, 'affection', 'love'. These attributes, however, can be easily linked to the judgment function (which belongs to the '*aql*), in the case of *al-Ikhtiyār*, and to the affective function of the *rūh*, in the case of *al-Maḥabba*⁴². A close imbrication of *nafs* and '*aql* in such functions might allow inferring another kind of imbrication; perhaps, an ontological union. However, *ikhtiyār* and *maḥabba* could also be translated as "will" in its two meanings of willing something and wanting something. In this regard, the will could perfectly be separated from knowledge and passions, though affected by them.

Another possibility is to understand that the *nafs* encompasses both the '*aql* and the *rūh*, as the rational soul encompasses the vegetative and the sensitive souls in the Aristotelian thought. Notwithstanding the plausibility of this hypothesis, it must be kept in mind that this distinction is never made in the text; furthermore, al-Tawḥīdī always insists on the essential difference between the '*aql* and the *nafs*, and he asserts that both have a divine origin (*quwwāt ilāhiyya*).

2. Regarding the correlation between the activity of the *nafs* and the '*aql*, al-Tawḥīdī specifically states that the function of the *nafs* is *ithārat al-'ilm min*

41. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. "Al-Risāla al-rābi'a", p. 232; in the *Rasā'il*, there is a strong Pythagoric influence: each hypostasis is identified with a number, being the Creator the one, the '*aql* the two, the universal *nafs* the three, the first matter the four, the nature is the five, the body is the six, the firmament is the seven, the elements are the eight, and the creations (*al-mawlūdāt*) are the nine. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. "Faṣl fī faḍīla", pp. 461-462.

42. Al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā'*, pp. 327 and 329.

mazannihi wa-istikhlāsihi min al-‘aqli bi-shahādatihi, i.e., the *nafs* is the final beneficiary of the cognitive processes of the ‘*aql*, which is hereby presented as a cognitive mechanism which enables the acquisition of knowledge by filtering the material perceptions and extracting the pure knowledge. Consequently, the ultimate location of knowledge is to be found in the *nafs*, where the purified knowledge is deposited. The ‘*aql* plays therefore an intermediary role, that of not being the owner of the knowledge, but its filter. From this perspective, the ‘*aql* seems to be reduced to a sheer tool with a scarce ontological entity, notwithstanding the amount of praises which are bestowed upon it during the chapter. A possible way to solve the question is to identify the ‘*aql* with the material knowledge, i.e., the perceptions; and the *nafs* with the abstract knowledge, the abstract ideas as they were conceived by Plato. The aforementioned distinction of the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* may help elucidate the question.

3. Both the vizier and al-Tawḥīdī exclusively deal with the immortality of the *nafs* but not of the ‘*aql*. Furthermore, al-Tawḥīdī states that the *nafs* does not remember its worldly existence, as this remembrance would mean a trace of matter in its spiritual essence. It can therefore be deduced that remembrance must be a function of the ‘*aql*, since it implies a direct relation with matter; as it happens with all the material perceptions, the ‘*aql* works as a filter to provide the *nafs* with the pure knowledge free of matter (*istikhlās*). If, according to al-Tawḥīdī, the *nafs* ascends to Paradise deprived of every trace of matter, it is difficult to ascertain the function that the ‘*aql* would develop there.

4. The unification of *nafs* and ‘*aql* must be also considered, at least hypothetically. This thesis is supported by the following excerpt: “so as the man is natural by the patent signals (*āthār*) of nature in his body, so he is spiritual by the patent signals of the *nafs* in his opinions and inquiries (*abḥāth*), in his claims and his needs (*ma’ārib*); and so he is provided with understanding by which he can distinguish and delve into [the matters], and examine, penetrate and deduce; by means of its [the ‘*aql*’s] certainty and its doubt”, and the other abovementioned functions of the ‘*aql*⁴³. It can be observed in this enumeration that the signals of the *nafs* in the human are identified with the functions of the ‘*aql*. This fragment supports the use of *nafs* as an encompassing term for the *nafs* itself and the ‘*aql*. However, the different usage of the term *nafs* either to only refer the *nafs* or to encompass the ‘*aql* and the *rūh*, does not seem to follow any logical rule.

In order to answer, at least partially, some of these questions, there are two hypotheses to be considered. These hypotheses are inferred from the assertions in al-Tawḥīdī’s text and complemented, when necessary, by the auxiliary sources

43. *Idem*, p. 329.

used above. I insist, however, on their hypothetical character, not being explicitly sustained by the words of the text. They are just an effort to reconstruct and systematize al-Tawḥīdī's thought – which could perfectly have never been systematized in the author's mind.

1 The first hypothesis is a hermeneutic deduction: the *'aql* is indeed an integral part of the *nafs* or they both constitute a single entity, where the *nafs* is the encompassing, essential entity, and the *'aql* is just one of its cognitive functions. Consequently, the *'aql* remains with the *nafs* in Paradise to enable its knowledge of God. However, it is difficult to justify how this essential unity occurs, for they both are divine forces (*quwwa ilāhiyya*) whose origin is therefore divine, too. Is it a compound of two simples (*basīṭ*) substances? How is that possible? Besides, it seems that the *raison-d'être* of the *'aql* is to illuminate the *nafs* in the material world, where it wanders lost and strained. Its function is like that of an intermediate between the world's material "impurity" and the *nafs*' divine "purity". As there is no matter whatsoever in Paradise, it is difficult to justify the existence of the *'aql* in a satisfactory way other than establishing an essential union with the *nafs*. But, even if this union happened, the *'aql* would remain idle in the Paradise, since there is no matter to filter there.

2 The second hypothesis is complemented by doctrines from the Neoplatonism, and it may offer a more comprehensive vision on the matter. This explanation is mainly an exegesis of the text in the light of Neoplatonism, but it only relies on Neoplatonism when the words of al-Tawḥīdī's text allow for it. Thus, the individual *'aql* might ascend back towards the universal *'aql* (*nous*, in Plotinus). Following Plotinus, the individual *'aql* emanates from the universal *'aql*, which becomes individualized at its contact with the imperfect matter; al-Tawḥīdī, however, states that it emanates from God (*quwwa ilāhiyya*⁴⁴); but *quwwa ilāhiyya* might also be understood as a 'divine force' not necessarily coming from God Himself, but by means of His will. Therefore, when the universal *'aql* enters in contact with material elements, it is 'polluted' by them and, as a result, individual, imperfect *'uqūl* emanate from this encounter. These individual *'uqūl* always long for their reencounter and reunification with their undivided origin; so, when they are liberated from matter (the human body), they can finally ascend and reunite with the universal *'aql*, whereas the *nafs* ascends towards Paradise where God *dwells* (as explicitly stated by al-Tawḥīdī).

To conclude this study, the last relevant point of al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology must also be properly analysed: the understanding's self-comprehension.

44. *Idem*, p. 332.

Al-Tawḥīdī is unambiguous in declaring the impossibility of self-apprehension for both the *nafs* and the ‘*aql* (*al-‘aql lā yu‘qal*). Again, there is an ambiguity in the use of the terms *nafs* and ‘*aql* as simultaneously subjects and objects of knowledge. Stating the impossibility of their self-apprehension implies the attribution of cognitive faculties not only to the ‘*aql*, but also to the *nafs*. If we take for valid the abovementioned hypothesis that the ‘*aql* operates with material perceptions and the *nafs* with abstract ideas, the ambiguity can be solved; but it always remains a hypothesis.

This ambiguity is also dissipated if we accept the hypothesis of the usage of *nafs* as an encompassing term for the ‘*aql*, as their impossibility of self-comprehension is formulated in two different paragraphs and, therefore, *nafs* would be referring to the ‘*aql*. The ‘*aql*, therefore, would be unable to understand the essential entity of the *nafs*.

The overextension of the *nafs* can be justified by the *Rasā’il*’s text, where the *nafs* has a more prominent cognitive role and the ‘*aql* is relegated to a secondary position. Thus, the five sensitive forces (*quwā ḥassāsa*) belong to the *nafs*, as another psychical forces: the imaginative force (*al-mutakhayyila*), the thinking force (*al-mufakkira*), the memorising force (*al-ḥāfiẓa*), the enunciating force (*al-nāṭiqa al-mukhbira*) and the active force (*al-quwwa allāti bihā tuẓhir al-nafs al-kitāba wa-l-ṣanā’i‘ ajma’*)⁴⁵. There would be still room for the filtering role of the ‘*aql*, but it is not stated. Al-Tawḥīdī could have been influenced by the pre-eminence of the *nafs* when he wrote his text. Otherwise, following Aristotle and al-Fārābī, the ‘*aql* may correspond to the intellectual part of the *nafs* which ascends to the skies after death⁴⁶.

However it might be, al-Tawḥīdī’s argument goes as follows: the *nafs* cannot comprehend itself because it is in a compound (the body), and a compound cannot know the unique⁴⁷. The same thesis is proclaimed for the ‘*aql*: it is unable to

45. Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’. “Faṣl fī ta’dād”, pp. 468-472.

46. In this regard, an Aristotelian influence on al-Tawḥīdī’s thought should be acknowledged. However, the high hypothetical character of this supposition must be kept in mind. There is no clear evidence in the text through which this identification can be solidly supported. Netton. “Al-Fārābī and his school”, p. 54, exposes the transmission of the Aristotelian conception of the soul and its influence on the Islamic thought.

47. “Because of the multiplicity by which he [the man] is many things [that is, a compound of many things], he is unable to comprehend (*idrāk*) what makes him one, i.e., human”, al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā’*, p. 329. Regarding the limitations concerning the cognitive capacities, I would like to draw the attention towards the coincidence of this point of view with the attitude of al-Tawḥīdī in other realms in which this modest attitude of his seems determined by social or even ethical parameters. This has been conveniently studied by Key. “The Applicability of the Term “Humanism”, pp. 94-102. Observing this modesty expressed in many ways and contexts is interesting to help reconstruct the personality of al-Tawḥīdī.

comprehend itself because it is the mean by which all the other things are comprehended. This idea is illustrated by a metaphor: so as a lamp lights the room, but not itself, so the *'aql* lights the *nafs*, but not itself⁴⁸. Hence the *'aql* remains as an instrument for the *nafs* whose essence cannot be apprehended.

This does not mean that al-Tawḥīdī did not concede the *'aql* any essence, but the text only refers at it as a *quwwa ilāhiyya*, which might be identified with a God's emanation. Apart from this succinct description, all the other functions associated to the *'aql* are only cognitive functions, whence the insistence on the instrumental activity being the *'aql*'s most distinctive characteristic.

Beyond this, there is nothing definite to say but by means of hypotheses. It might be that al-Tawḥīdī did not know, or did not establish, an essence for the *'aql*; or that he did not analyse it in-depth. It might also be that al-Tawḥīdī did not grant a significant relevance to the *'aql*'s essence, due to its scarce influence on al-Tawḥīdī's main field of interest: the social, literary and cultural affairs⁴⁹. The last possibility which should be considered is the probable deficiencies in the transmission of Neoplatonism, since al-Tawḥīdī's superficial analysis might have been motivated by his deficient knowledge on the doctrine.

Finally, the last passage of the night where the functions of the *'aql* are listed must be analysed, to present the grounds on which the translation of *'aql* as "the capacity of judging" is justified.

Besides the aforementioned functions attributed to the *'aql*, al-Tawḥīdī also states that *ṣanī' u l-'aql huwwa al-ḥakmu bi-qubūli l-shay'i wa-raddihi*, i.e., "the product of the *'aql* is the judgment to either accept or reject a thing". Thus, the *'aql* does not just filter the natural perceptions in order that the *nafs* acquires the

48. Al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā'*, p. 334; it must be remarked the strong similitude of this image with the sufi images, which so much abound in the comparisons made between knowledge and spiritual enlightenment with light. The close relation between al-Tawḥīdī and the sufi circles of the time is well documented (Netton. "Al-Fārābī and his school", p. 18), but it is difficult to know the exact source from which al-Tawḥīdī took this comparative figure. The universal character of the identification of knowledge with light turns it impossible to delineate a line of transmission. For instance, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. "Faṣl fī faḍīla", p. 462, draw a similar comparison when they speak about the degrees of knowledge of the *nafs*, the *'aql* and God: "[...] Besides this, the relation between the *nafs* and the *'aql* is like the relation between the moon and the sun, and the relation between the *'aql* with the Creator is like the relation of the sunlight (*nūr al-shams*) with the sun; and, so as when the moon gets filled by the sunlight its light corresponds to its light, so the *nafs*, if it receives the emanation of the *'aql*, gets its virtues completed and its actions correspond the actions of the *'aql*". The image, however, can even be traced back to Plato and his myth of the cave, where the light of the sun allows discerning the real aspect of the objects whose shadows had been projected on the wall.

49. Reymond, "L'intellectuel...", pp. 77-79. On the distinction between *Kalām* and *Falsafah* in the Islamic tradition and on the reasons why many scholars have confounded both concepts, I recommend again Hodgson. *The Venture of Islam*, especially "Book Two, Chapter 5: Falsafah and Kalam" (v. 1). Although this debate is nowadays overcome, this book offers an excellent presentation in order to understand the genesis of the two disciplines and their distinctive characteristics.

pure, immaterial knowledge; it also uses this knowledge to judge or discern between the acceptance and the rejection of concepts or statements⁵⁰.

However, we face again the ambiguity of the text, when we remind that fragment which says that the man is natural by the patent signals (*āthār*) of nature in his body, so he is spiritual by the patent signals of the nafs in his opinions and inquiries (*abhāth*), in his claims and his needs (*ma'ārib*); and so he is provided with understanding by which he can distinguish and delve into [the matters], and examine, penetrate and deduce, etc⁵¹. The arguments therefore to either identify the *nafs* with the *'aql* or to differentiate between them seem equally strong. We can only aspire to try to systematize what al-Tawḥīdī wrote as clearly as possible, with all his deficiencies and lapses, to enhance the study and understanding of the Islamic thought.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the shortness of the gnoseology exposed by al-Tawḥīdī and the text's ambiguities and lapses, al-Tawḥīdī's theory deserves a special interest due both to what it explicitly states and to what implicitly underlies in the text; furthermore, the underlying ideas and influences might be even more relevant than the literal text.

From an external point of view, al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology is a solid proof of the strong influence which Neoplatonism exerted on the Islamic thought at his time and how suitable this philosophical school was to be combined with Islamic ideas, at least with Sufism. As explained, al-Tawḥīdī may have become familiar with Neoplatonism either through his master, Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, or through the reading or hearing of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*. It might also be that both causes concurred.

This study intends to elucidate the transmission of ideas and the influence of the Hellenistic doctrines on the Islamic thought; it also intends to find which thinkers influenced on each other. The need of a more complete systematization of the History of Islamic thought is more than a solid justification for this research.

From an internal point of view, al-Tawḥīdī's gnoseology eminently presents a truly original aspect: the thesis of the impossibility of self-comprehension of the *nafs* and the *'aql*. It would be interesting for future researches to study whether this thesis survived and influenced on other thinkers. We cannot know, however,

50. The literal word of the text is *shā'y*, "thing", but I believe that "concept" or "statement" are more appropriate translations instead of the ambivalent "thing", especially in a gnoseological study.

51. Al-Tawḥīdī. *Kitāb al-Imtā'*, p. 329.

whether al-Tawḥīdī came accidentally upon this conclusion or, why not, intentionally after a sound ponderation. However it was, al-Tawḥīdī certainly distanced himself from the Hellenistic tradition which delved profoundly into the human knowledge and elaborated in-depth analyses of each of its mechanisms and their ultimate essence. Al-Tawḥīdī, contrarily, only describes their functions and denies the possibility of their self-comprehension; though the short argumentation consists of a simple metaphorical comparison (the candle), not of any logical deduction.

Finally, I would like to draw the attention towards the similitude of al-Tawḥīdī's theses with those of other posterior great thinkers⁵². His plain style and the short way through which al-Tawḥīdī arrives at his conclusions, makes us think whether Philosophy is nothing more than dealing with the same problem multiple times from multiple perspectives, the conclusion being already clearly dictated by our common-sense or our deep inward reflection. But this belongs to a different discussion. Whatever it might be the aim of Philosophy, the produce of the most conspicuous minds has undeniably influenced our conception of life to a substantial extent; for this, these thinkers are worth of being read and remembered in order to retrace the way upon which Humankind has come to be what it is.

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52. The similitude between this thesis and the developments of the European idealists in the XVIII and XIX centuries is remarkable, and it clearly differs from the common assumptions among Hellenistic and Islamic thinkers. Of course, this reflection does not intend to present al-Tawḥīdī as a precursor to thinkers as Kant, or as influencing on them. Much less does it intend to put the value of their works on the same level. Its only purpose is to draw the attention towards the similar attitude at the impossibility of objectively/conceptually knowing, or comprehending, our understanding beyond its perceptions and their conceptualization within it. As explained above, the "will" belongs to the functions of the *nafs*. Consequently, the *nafs* in al-Tawḥīdī is like the human's will in Kant and Schopenhauer, that ultimate reason beyond the causality principle which can be perceived or inferred, but never understood by our cognitive mechanisms. According to Schopenhauer, this "will" is also what ensures us our individuality and our distinction from the other beings, at the same time that it allows us to understand the ultimate reason which connects everything together (so does, in a certain way, the universal *nous* in Neoplatonism). Perhaps, this is only a coincidence in form and not in content, although it is difficult to wholly reject their coincidence on certain aspects. The parallelisms and similitudes existing in very different thoughts from very diverse cultures, epochs and civilizations must be properly considered, since they all express something intrinsically human whose knowledge is not conditioned by the time, but by the individual reflection. Both Kant and Schopenhauer, for instance, abound in references to the Greek philosophers who lived 2.500 years before them; in the case of Schopenhauer, also to the Indian *Upanishad*.

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