

Meryem Sebti, *Avicenne. Prophétie et Gouvernement du Monde*. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf (Islam, Nouvelles Approches), 2021, 314 pages. ISBN 9782204143172.

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The issue addressed in this book by Meryem Sebti, a researcher at the CNRS, Paris, is particularly significant for two reasons. First, until now, no monograph has so comprehensively explored Ibn Sīnā's understanding of prophecy—a topic traditionally relegated to the practical domain and not considered central to his metaphysics. Second, the issue of prophecy constitutes one of the defining features of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy that is distinctly Islamic. While the importance of Islamic philosophy is now widely acknowledged by specialists, the relationship between its unique richness—distinguishing it from its Greek background—and the Islamic religion has not yet been sufficiently examined.

Sebti's main contribution lies not only in her choice of topic but also in the close connection she establishes between prophecy and Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics. For Ibn Sīnā, the existence of the Prophet is not merely a possibility but a necessity—both socio-political and metaphysical. The book explores these two dimensions across two sections. The first section examines how the Prophet, through the three fundamental faculties of reason, imagination, and bodily activity, fulfills a threefold mediating function. The second section investigates the moral and political dimensions of prophecy, particularly in relation to the soul's spiritual development.

The first section, which focuses on the metaphysical role of the Prophet, demonstrates how he serves as the perfect intermediary between the sensible and intelligible worlds. The Prophet not only conveys revelation but also plays a pivotal role in the dual motion from the First Principle to corporeality and back to the First Prin-

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ciple. His existence is deemed necessary because he represents a model of perfection that all individuals should strive to emulate. His excellence in the three fundamental faculties—reason, imagination, and bodily activity—inspires others to cultivate and perfect their own intellectual, spiritual, and physical powers. According to Sebti, this is why the chapter on prophecy is situated at the conclusion of the *Metaphysics*.

Attributing such necessity to a particular individual within Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics presents a complex challenge. Sebti addresses the tension inherent in a metaphysical system that situates a historical figure at its core. Within the framework of emanation theory, the Prophet's existence among people arises as a result of divine providence, operating through a complex causal process. As Sebti demonstrates, Ibn Sīnā develops a dual causality theory involving the actions of celestial souls to explain why divine providence necessitates the Prophet. Chapter 10 of the *Metaphysics of the Healing* elaborates on the intermediary role played by celestial souls. These souls, being connected to bodies and thus endowed with imagination, enable the explanation of the particular within the metaphysical framework.

After discussing prophecy from a metaphysical and providential perspective, the first section examines its three dimensions: effects on intellect, imagination, and matter. The noetic dimension, in particular, plays a central role in both the process of emanation and the return to the First Principle. On the one hand, the Prophet, having fully realized his intellectual potential, represents the highest degree of receptivity achievable by the human intellect. Through intuition, he apprehends the middle term without requiring the preparatory reasoning necessary for others. His noetic mediation is vital because his knowledge is rooted in the principle of reality itself, rather than in human actions.

Sebti uses this model of noetic receptivity to highlight the distinction between Aristotle's physics, which conceives of substances as composites of matter and form, and Ibn Sīnā's notion of perfection, which pertains to immaterial substances. On the other hand, in the return to the First Principle, the existence of such a perfect individual enables others to achieve full intellectual perfection. As Sebti explains, for ordinary individuals, intellect is perfected through union with something already actualized, though this union is not guaranteed and requires preparation. For at least one individual, however, such a union must be certain, allowing him to convey knowledge of principles to others. Even if no ordinary individual attains this union, the Prophet ensures continuity with the intellectual realm.

Second, alongside its intellectual dimension, revelation involves the activity of imagination, which enables the Prophet to convey imitations of the invisible world.

Sebti highlights two distinct conceptions of revelation in Ibn Sīnā's works. In the *Metaphysics*, revelation is described as a sound from God that is not human speech. In *Kitāb al-Nafs*, however, prophets sometimes imagine that what they perceive is the transcription in words of this apparition. In this latter case, the sounds are not directly heard; instead, the Prophet imagines hearing them. Thus, far from being a passive transmitter, the Prophet actively transforms what is primarily visual into something audible through imitative representations. Imagination, as an active faculty of the soul, does not compose the forms themselves but rather their analogies (*tashbīh*) and representations (*tamthīl*). While the intellect—the first feature of revelation—reflects intelligible reality as it is, the imagination imitates the forms found in the imaginations of celestial souls. These celestial souls, in turn, imitate the intelligible forms that are the objects of celestial intellects. Sebtī also notes that certain elements of the revelation are influenced by the Prophet's personality and historical context.

For this reason, the Qur'ān requires interpretation, a task that can only be undertaken by a philosopher. The philosopher is uniquely equipped to distinguish between verses that descend through the Prophet's imagination and those that originate from the Active Intellect. Sebtī highlights that revelation, in Ibn Sīnā's framework, has two sources: celestial souls and the Active Intellect. This dual reception—through imagination and intellect—is necessitated by Ibn Sīnā's cosmological structure of celestial intellects and souls. As a result, not all parts of the Qur'ān require exegesis. Verses mediated by the intellect, in addition to those shaped by imagination, play a decisive role. This dual reception shapes the understanding of divine law: in the first case, its content demands interpretation, while in the second, it is universally applicable across all people and times.

Third, concerning the Prophet's influence on matter, Sebtī revisits the concept of dual causality. According to this framework, the activity of separate intellects is complemented by the secondary causality of celestial souls, akin to psychosomatic influence. This idea is crucial because it provides Ibn Sīnā's metaphysical system to account for phenomena such as miracles, prayers answered through supplication, and the effects of worldly actions on the hereafter. Divine causality and knowledge influence the sublunar realm through celestial souls, which possess knowledge of particular events. Thus, representations by the intellect or soul have the power to influence matter. For instance, the efficacy of prayer arises from the convergence of all causes under divine wisdom. The *Metaphysics* likens prayer to the resolution of an intellectual problem: just as the desire to solve a problem and its resolution originate in the

celestial realm so too does the desire to pray and the fulfillment of that prayer. Similarly, the healing power of imagination is explained through this principle. When the soul firmly envisions something, bodily matter conforms to the image. In fact, certain representations of the soul can exert a greater influence on matter than any science dependent on material tools. For example, a person declared medically incurable may recover if their belief in recovery is unwavering. If such forms are deeply rooted in a particular soul, they influence specific matter. However, if they arise within the universal soul, they can affect the very nature of the whole, resulting in miracles.

The three prophetic perfections—related to intellect, imagination, and material impact—correspond to the three levels of emanation in the supralunar realm: intellects, souls, and bodies. By actualizing these three perfections in the sensible world, the Prophet reflects the celestial realm's perfection on Earth. The harmony between the Prophet's intellect, soul, and body mirrors the interaction among intellects, souls, and celestial bodies. His body is governed by the influence of his soul, and his soul is directed by the influence of his intellect. The Prophet's superiority over the philosopher arises from this threefold perfection. While a philosopher's intellect may surpass that of others, he neither shares in the Prophet's imaginative faculty, which is linked to celestial souls, nor possesses the active power to influence matter.

In the second section, Sebti explores the moral and political dimensions of prophecy, highlighting the central role of Shari'a in the spiritual purification of the soul. God does not abandon humanity to its passions but instead provides guidance to lead people back to Him. Through the dual causality mediated by celestial souls, divine providence ensures the existence of an individual who secures both the continuity of the human species and its full perfection. Sebti defends the dual function of Shari'a: it is directed toward both the preservation of the city and the salvation of the soul. However, these two dimensions are not of equal importance: Shari'a's primary aim is the salvation of the soul, with the establishment of a virtuous city being a secondary objective. Sebti corroborates this hierarchy through the order of composition in the concluding chapters of the *Metaphysics*.

The third chapter examines the necessity of worship for purifying the soul before the death of the body. In this context, the Law aids in preparing individuals for their return to God, as true virtue lies in the purification of the soul. Ibn Sinā addresses *mu'āmalāt*—the social and legal aspects of daily life—only in the fourth chapter. This dual nature ensures the perfection of Shari'a, enabling individuals to live in a city where their passions are regulated. Humans live in society out of mutual de-

pendence, and divine law is essential because it unites the moral and political dimensions of human life, which are inseparable. However, as Sebtî points out, the collective dimension serves the perfection of the individual. For this reason, she argues that Ibn Sīnā does not develop a genuine political science.

The primary function of the law is not merely to address the practical issue of living together in the city but to provide continuous guidance that reminds humans of their true nature. Revelation prevents humans from succumbing to passions such as desire and anger, which obstruct the full exercise of the rational soul. By controlling these passions, revelation enables people not only to live harmoniously together but also to fully utilize their potential. For this reason, Sebtî argues that Ibn Sīnā's ethics is rooted not in philosophy but in the Qur'an. Ethics, according to Ibn Sīnā is closely tied to politics because jurisprudence is not a theoretical science. Moral propositions cannot serve as premises for demonstrative syllogisms. For example, the idea that "justice is good" does not derive its truth from reason alone. The philosopher cannot independently determine ethical norms through reason; they must be revealed by God. Revelation is necessary because practical reason cannot deduce ethical principles on its own. Without the law, injustice would prevail, threatening the survival of the human species. Since ethical principles do not concern universals, human reason cannot serve as their ultimate source. However, this does not imply that the law consists of universal, mathematically verifiable truths. While acts of worship are timeless, the portion of the law dealing with social transactions is subject to historical processes and must therefore be interpreted.

As noted in the introduction, the value of Sebtî's work lies in its meticulous grounding of the metaphysical necessity of prophecy for the coherence of Ibn Sīnā's system. Two dimensions—one theoretical and the other practical—demonstrate the indispensability of revelation and prophecy for guiding souls back to God. The central tensions explored in this study arises from integrating the particularity of prophecy into a metaphysics primarily focused on universals. This tension underscores the challenge of reconciling divine revelation with the tools of reason. Sebtî's analysis illustrates how this intersection between metaphysics and revelation generates as a philosophically productive interaction. On the one hand, Ibn Sīnā incorporates religious elements such as prophecy, prayer, and worship into the domain of reason. On the other hand, his rational approach to these elements—situated at the limits of reason—enables him to transcend his Greek sources. This interaction not only results in conceptual innovations but also emphasizes the importance of studying such topics for advancing the field of Islamic philosophy.