Appendix 3

Translated Excerpts from Qūnawī’s Epistemological Texts

As already indicated, the topic of knowledge is one to which Qūnawī returns time and again, with much of the Iʿjāz in particular – as well as the treatises addressed to the Avicennian philosopher, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī – being taken up with questions concerning its nature and branches, the characteristics and limitations of the rational faculty, and the possibility of knowing things as they truly are beneath outward appearances or mental constructs. In several instances, moreover, such questions are expressly linked to the theme of man’s exitus and reitus. As demonstrated by the excerpts below, Qūnawī identifies the desire to know things in their transcendent essences as one of the defining traits of those human beings whose inner disposition qualifies them to achieve the perfection specific to man.

In our first passage (taken from the Iʿjāz al-bayān) Ṣadr al-Dīn observes that the perplexity and anxiety born out of the quest for certitude is intrinsic to the human condition. Such intellectual angst, however, can be resolved, not by adhering to rationalist schools of thought, but only at a stage beyond reason:

“Know that wandering in error (dalāl) is essentially identical with perplexity (ḥayra), of which there are three degrees: the first concerns the perplexity of the novices (ahl al-bidāyāt) from among the generality of men (min jumhūrī-l-nās); the influence of the second is evident in those who occupy the middle rank from among the folk of insight and veiling (al-mutawassiṭūn min ahli-l-kashfi wa-l-ḥijāb); while the authority of the third concerns the great verifiers. Now, the first and most general perplexity is due to the fact that man is intrinsically poor and needy (faqīr ṭālib bi-l-dhāt), such that not a single breath passes without his seeking to meet some need or another, owing, as we have said, to his inherent indigence. At the same time, one should realise that the ultimate object of this constant seeking is none other than that perfection which is the goal of the seeker. This same fundamental quest [for perfection] has manifold branches connected with the attainment of lesser goals which are not actually ends in themselves, as for instance is the case with the quest for
food and drink and other such contingencies as are sought in order to derive some individual benefit or to avoid some harm of an equally individual nature. Which of these [lesser] goals the individual strives towards will be determined by his prevailing concerns (himam), his propensities, the pull of his various natural affinities and other factors, all of which have been comprehensively dealt with earlier on.

However, so long as man fails to determine one direction to pursue [above all others] or one chief goal to strive towards, or a doctrine or belief to adhere to, he will remain in a state of perplexity and anxiety. This is because he is conditioned and bound by his very nature; i.e. by his individual modality, his state and most of the circumstances that he finds himself in, such that he has no intrinsic independence from something to lean on, to bind himself to, and to put his trust in ... Thus, the first step towards dispelling this first kind of perplexity is that of actually determining the preferred goal. The next step is that of knowing the path that leads to this goal, followed by entry upon this path. Then comes knowledge of all that may be of help in attaining the goal, and, finally, knowledge of any likely obstacles and of how best to overcome them. Wherefore, if all of these conditions are fulfilled, this perplexity vanishes.

After experiencing this perplexity and endeavouring to discover what it is that he requires [in order to feel at peace], and after finally settling upon that which he regards as his rightful goal and true path, man's state will fall into one of two kinds: either he will be sufficiently satisfied with that which [he has chosen to adhere to] such that there remains no desire within him to seek any further – as is, more often than not, the case with the generality of believers and the members of the different religious communities (ahl al-iʿtiqādāti wa-l-nihal) – or there will still remain a certain restlessness within him, in which case – although still putting his trust in a certain state and a particular direction – you will nonetheless see him scrutinising [the basis of that trust] from time to time, and even glancing elsewhere, with a view to the possibility of finding something more complete than that which he has already grasped, and more rewarding than that which he is presently pursuing, or has already achieved. Thus, if he finds anything that troubles him [within his present refuge], and if he subsequently has his eyes opened to something else, he passes into the circle of the second degree.

Here too, however, his state will be the same as in the first, inasmuch as it must fall into one of two categories: either he will be perfectly at ease with the new state of affairs in which he has anchored his trust, such that he feels no desire to seek beyond that, or there will still remain within him a certain restlessness which stops him from feeling entirely settled [with his new-found refuge], especially when he sees that the people of middling capacities, who