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MIR FENDERESKI

MIRFENDERESKI, Sayyed Amir Abu'l-Qāsem b. Mirzā Beg b. Ṣadr-al-Din Moḥammad Ḥosayni Astarābādi, renowned philosopher and mystic during the Safavid revitalization of philosophy (b. 970/1562-63, Mashad; d. 1050/1640, Isfahan). Mir Fendereski remains a mysterious and enigmatic figure about whom we know very little. He was famed as a teacher of Peripatetic philosophy, known as a dabbler in the occult and a powerful alchemist (Afandi, *Riāż al-ʿolamāʾ* V, p. 499), and recognized for his many travels to India and his interest in Indian philosophies and religions. Corbin considered him to be a key figure in the "School of Isfahan" as a mystically inclined philosopher (Corbin, *En Islam iranien* IV, p. 28), and more recently Babayan has characterized him as one of three figures, alongside Mir Dāmād and Mollā Ṣadrā, who espoused an "eclectic approach to God" (Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs*, p. 408).

Mir Fendereski was probably born around 970/1562-63, as we are told that he died in 1050/1640-41 at the ripe age of eighty. His grandfather was a prominent sayyed of Astarabad who fled the disturbances caused by the "black-robed ones" (*siāh-puš*) in his hometown and joined Shah Ṭahmāsp I (r. 930-84/1524-76) on campaign in Khorasan (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 153; Afandi, *Riāż al-ʿolamāʾ* V, p. 500). His father was born in the east of Persia, and it is likely that Mir Fendereski himself was also born there and possibly brought up, like his contemporary and friend Mir Dāmād, in Mashad. Nothing is known about his teachers. However, he would have been trained in the Peripatetic school, because we know that he taught the works of Avicenna in Isfahan, notably the

medical encyclopedia *al-Qānun* (The Canon) and the philosophical compendium *al-Šefā* (The Cure). He is said to have traveled in India on numerous occasions and was involved in the cultural project of translating Sanskrit works into Persian; this was initiated by the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 963-1014/1556-1605) and continued up to the time of his great-grandson Dārā Šokōh (d. 1069/1659) and the prominent courtier of Awrangzēb (r. 1068-1118/1658-1707), the Persian merchant and scholar Dānešmand Khan (d. 1080/1670). His notes on the Persian translation of the *Mahābhārata* (the *Razm-nāma*) and on the philosophical text *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭhā* complaining about the quality of the translation suggest a familiarity with Sanskrit. He was thus among a group of Persians who moved to the Mughal court in particular to engage with Indian thought. A couple of his associates emigrated to India (see INDIA xi.) during the time of Šāhjahān (r. 1037-68/1628-58): Ḥakim Dastur Eṣfahāni, who settled in Lahore in 1054/1644-45 and was known as a freethinker who believed in the unity of religions, and Ḥakim Kāmrān Širāzi, a man who referred to Mir Fendereski as his "brother" and who established himself in Agra in 1050/1640-41, studying Sanskrit, adopting vegetarianism and other signs of Brahmanical religion (Rizvi, *Socio-Intellectual History* II, pp. 220-22). Fendereski's students in Isfahan included Mollā Ḥosayn Ḵᵛānsāri (d. 1098/1686-87), who wrote glosses on the metaphysics of *al-Šefāʾ* and was himself a prominent teacher of Avicennism, the philosopher Mirzā Moḥammad Rafiʿā Ṭabāṭabāʾi Nāʾini (d. 1082/1671-72), the dervish-philosopher Rajab-ʿAli Tabrizi (d. 1080 /1669-70), and the jurist Moḥammad-Bāqer Sabzavāri (d. 1098/1686-87). Closely associated with ʿAbbās I (r. 995-1038/1588-1629) and later Ṣafi I (r. 1038-52/1629-42), he died in Isfahan during the reign of the latter in 1050/1640-41, leaving his library to him. It is said that he was buried in an iron casket because people were worried about exposing the body of such as profound alchemist to the earth (*Aʿyān al-šiʿa* III, p. 460). However, this seems to be a misunderstanding of the fact that he is said to have been buried in the Taḵt-e Fulād cemetery in Isfahan.

A number of works are attributed to him and remain on the whole unstudied. An examination of them may lead to our reassessment of his Avicennism and the impact of Indian thought on his ideas. A number of short treatises are attributed to him: on the reality of existence (*fī ḥaqiqat al-wojud*), on the relationship of the eternal God and incipient cosmos (*fī ertebāṭ al-ḥādeṯ be'l-qadim*), on alchemy, and on the ten Aristotelian categories (*fi'l-māqulāt al-ʿašara*). In a short treatise examining the notion of *badāʾ* (God's abrogation of an earlier decree of His) in Shiʿite theology, he argues like Mir Dāmād against

Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi's rejection of the concept and provides arguments based on narrations from the Imams as well as rational examinations of the question of God's knowledge and his decree to affirm the comprehensibility of the notion. Another treatise on motion (*fi'l-ḥaraka*) is divided into five chapters. In it, he discusses the Aristotelian proof for the existence of God from physics as the first Unmoved Mover who sets the cosmos of motive beings into motion. Chapter 1 examines the nature and essence of motion. Chapter 2 affirms the rule that every thing in motion has a cause for its motion. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the chain of causality of motion that culminates in the Unmoved Mover. The final chapter is a Peripatetic assault on the notion of Platonic forms, of interest especially because most of his contemporaries affirmed the existence of these forms. He argues that things that exist in this world owe neither their existence nor their essence and form to their archetypes in a higher intelligible world. Rather, the existence of motive things in this world owes its existence to the cause of their motion directly. What is particularly striking about this argument is the insistence that God's relationship to the cosmos and the creation of things are not issues of metaphysics as such but should be discussed in physics. In a related treatise that is a response to a question posed by Mollā Moẓaffar-Ḥosayn Kāšāni on whether there can be any equivocation or gradation in the notion of essence and essentials, he argues, consistent with the essentialism of a peripatetic, that essence or quiddity (*māhiya*) does not admit of more or less.

Like most other prominent Safavid thinkers of his time, he was a poet and composed a long philosophical ode (*qaṣida ḥekmiya*) in imitation of and response to the Persian Ismaʿili thinker Nāṣer-e Ḵosrow. The biographical sources also suggest that he was involved in the writing of court chronicles, but there is little evidence to corroborate this. Of particular significance are his works on Indian thought. He may have written a gloss on the translation of the *Mahābhārata* which was completed by a group at the court of Akbar led by the chronicler ʿAbd-al-Qāder Badāʾuni (946/1540-ca. 1024/1615) and which appeared with an introduction by the court ideologue Abu'l-Faẓl ʿAllāmi (d. 1010/1602) in 995/1587. He did write a gloss on the *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭhā* of Abhinanda that was translated into Persian by Neẓām-al-Din Pānipati during the reign of Jahāngir (r. 1014-37/1605-27). There are three well-attested manuscripts of this work. He also compiled a selection (*montaḵab*) from Persian translations of the *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭhā*.

Perhaps his best-known work is *al-Resāla al-ṣenāʿiya,* an examination of the

arts and professions within an ideal society. It encapsulates two approaches to the question of society: a Platonic ethico-political concern with describing an ideal social order and its political manifestation, and a metaphysical desire to establish a classification of the sciences and the order of their merit and utility. He begins with two premises: (1) the human being is a microcosm manifesting the variety of existence in the cosmos; (2) the complementarity of different parts of the body and their functions can be used as a metaphor for explaining different arts and functions within society; thus the polity is also a microcosm.

Just as the body has a head that directs it, so too must society have a head either in the form of a ruler or a prophet or even a philosopher (signaling the continuity with the Platonic tradition). The hierarchy of sciences and arts gradually rises from the basest profession, such as that of the blacksmith, to the loftiest of the philosopher. The work is then divided into two chapters that describe six key categories of arts, based on whether the subject of the art is universal or particular and whether the action entailed in the art has a virtuous or nefarious goal. For example, the ideal art is philosophy; because its subject, existence, is universal, and its goal of study is virtue through the pursuit of the good. Similarly at the other end, the art or profession that is most base is that of the blacksmith, because the subject of his art is particular and the goal is not virtuous, because he produces weapons and destruction. Like a number of earlier texts, the real significance of this treatise is that it combines a number of genres and subject areas: political and ethical thought, mirrors-for-princes, metaphysics, and the critical subject of the classifications of the sciences.

It is difficult to gauge Mir Fendereski's significance in the intellectual history of the late Safavid period. It does not seem to be the case that he initiated a philosophical tradition, nor did he write a systematic work, unlike his contemporaries Mir Dāmād and Mollā Ṣadrā, that may have been the school text of the tradition. He remains thus an enigmatic and mysterious figure about whom much study and analysis is still required.

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