

Chapter Ten

IBN BĀJJAH

Abu Bakr Muḥammad ibn Yahya ibn al-Ṣā'igh (c. 500-33/1106-38), generally called Ibn Bājjah and known as Avempace or Avenpace both in Latin and English, was a celebrated Spanish Muslim philosopher, commentator of Aristotle, scientist (i.e. physician, mathematician, and astronomer), poet and musician.¹ The significance of the title 'Ibn Bājjah' of which Avempace (Avenpace) is a Latin distortion is unknown. Ibn Khallikān derived it from a Frankish word meaning silver. The Arabic *misbah* 'Ibn Ṣā'igh' too means literally the son of a goldsmith.

He was born in Saragossa about the end of the fifth century H., i.e. before 1106 C.E.; the exact date of his birth is not known. He practised as a physician in his native city, but after the fall in 513/1118 of Saragossa to the Christians he resided in Seville and Xatina. Later he went to Fez in Morocco where he

1. There is a story given by Ibn Khaldūn in the *Muqaddimah* that once the governor of Saragossa was so moved by some of the verses of Ibn Bājjah that he almost tore his garments and swore that the young philosopher should walk back home upon gold. Ibn Bājjah, fearing lest this should not come off all well, put a gold coin in each of his shoes and walked home thus on gold (cf. *The Muqaddimah*, English translation by Franz Rosenthal, New York, 1958, Vol. III, pp. 443-4). Among other subjects Ibn Bājjah composed a poem on hunting: *Tardiyyah*; cf. G. Sarton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, Baltimore, 1931, Vol. II, Part I, p. 183. For his eminence as a musician, see H.G. Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music*, London, 1929, p. 222.

was made vizier at the Almoravid court. Here he was accused of atheism² and was poisoned to death in 533/1138 through the intrigue of his enemies.

The many-sided Ibn Bājjah wrote a good number of small treatises on medicine,³ geometry, astronomy, natural science, alchemy and philosophy. He criticised some of Ptolemy's assumptions in astronomy, thus preparing the way for Ibn Tufayl and al-Biṭrūjī. We may add that al-Biṭrūjī's criticism of Ptolemy's geocentric views later inspired Copernicus to propound his heliocentric theory.⁴ His treatise on music was as much appreciated in the West as al-Fārābī's in the East. Like the latter he was adept in playing on musical instruments, particular on 'ūd, i.e. lute.

In philosophy he wrote many treatises, a number of them on logic, a treatise 'On Soul,' another 'On the Union of Universal Intellect with Man,' 'A Farewell Letter,' and 'The Regime of the Solitary.'⁵

2 Some of the Muslim biographers have not hesitated to label Ibn Bājjah as an atheist; this is mostly because of his ultra-rationalism. Cf. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, edited by F. Wustenfeld, Gottingen, 1835-50, Vol. II, p. 372.

3. Ibn Bājjah's works on medicine, now almost lost, exerted great influence at least in the Muslim West. Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah counts Ibn Rushd among Ibn Bājjah's pupils; cf. his '*Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-A'ibbā'*' edited by A. Müller, Königsberg, 1884, Vol. II, p. 63. The greatest Muslim botanist and pharmacist, Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 646/1248), often quoted from Ibn Bājjah's treatise on materia medica; cf. G. Sarton, *op. cit.*

4. It is significant to note that Copernicus quotes among others from al-Biṭrūjī in his epoch-making work: *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*.

5. The last-mentioned three works are now available in the Arabic original as edited by M. Asin Palacois. This fact may be considered a correction on what we have said about the availability of Ibn Bājjah's works in this paragraph.

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To these may be added commentaries on Physics, Meteorology, Zoology and other works of Aristotle. The most famous of his philosophical treatises, in fact the only ones which have come down to us, are 'The Regime of the Solitary' and 'A Farewell Letter' which he wrote to a friend who was leaving Spain for Egypt. Both these works are, at present, known originally through their Hebrew translations; 'A Farewell Letter,' however, was also translated into Latin.⁶ His 'Regime of the Solitary' was perhaps inspired by the adverse circumstances and the uncongenial environment in which he was placed. His were the days of orthodoxy and obscurantism rather than of liberalism and enlightenment. As a philosopher and free-thinker all along he developed a keen-edged sense of loneliness—hence the title of his work: 'The Regime of the Solitary.'

In his metaphysical views Ibn Bājja is an attributive pluralist rather than a monist. According to him, there are three kinds of entities that may be considered ultimate, namely, matter, soul and intellect; in modern terminology they correspond more or less to matter, life and mind. To bring out the respective differentia of the three, Ibn Bājja observes that whereas matter is moved from without, intellect or

6. It was translated into Latin from Hebrew by Abraham de Blanes in the fifteenth century under the title *Epistola Expeditionis*. The Hebrew version of 'The Regime of the Solitary' is only a summary of the original by Moses ben Joshua of Narbonne to be found in the commentary on Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*; see below, p. 182.

spirit unmoved in itself confers movement upon others and soul occupies a middle position being that which moves itself. Thus matter is not free: its movements are not explained with reference to itself but with reference to intellect and soul. On the other hand, soul is free in its activities. Both intellect and soul, confer movement upon matter but, whereas soul may be moved by itself, intellect itself remains unmoved. There is no change in the latter; it is perfect. Its forms and principles are eternal; there is so to say a higher kind of necessitarianism in their working. Thus on the basis of his ontological views Ibn Bājjah could very well explain the determinism of Nature, the freedom of man's ego and the necessitarianism of reason.

The next problem that Ibn Bājjah considers at length is that of the relation between soul and intellect or spirit. According to him, the form of matter is the spiritual principle of the matter which may subsist apart from matter or material objects. Thus the universals subsist independently of the material particulars; they are separate substances, or spiritual entities.⁷ Like the Platonists Ibn Bājjah believes that the contemplation of these abstract forms of universals gives us a contact with the realm of the spirit and assists us in the apprehension of the ultimate reality. The first stage in the development of the

7. See, *Tadbir al-Mutawāhhid*, edited by M. Asín Palacios, Madrid, 1946, p. 19.

spiritual in man depends upon the comprehension of the spiritual, i.e. the rational in the material world. The next stage is to apprehend the *a priori* perceptual forms like those of space and time. Further developed, the ego of man comes to recognise the pure reason apart from the sense-experiences and apprehends the *a priori* principles such, for instance, as the fundamental laws of logic and the axioms of mathematics. According to Ibn Bājjah, the universal in the particulars, the *a priori* forms of sense-experience and the *a priori* principles of Pure Reason, are apprehended through intuition rather than through discursive intellect. The apprehension of these comes from above, i.e. from the active intellect. The highest stage in the development of the spiritual or the rational in man is to have a direct apprehension and contact with the purely rational reality or with the pure thought of the spirit, i.e. the so-called active intellect.⁸

Like most of the Muslim philosophers Ibn Bājjah describes *ittiṣāl* or the union of the human intellect with active intellect of which it is an emanation as a supreme beauty and the *summum bonum* of man's life. By the operation of the active intellect on the latent intellect in man the latter is awakened to the spiritual life, but eternal life consists in the complete union of man's intellect with the active intellect.

⁸ Ibn Bājjah's is a speculative mysticism and not an ascetic one. Union with the active intellect is thus a necessary prerequisite for a mystic's encounter with God. To this theme he devoted a separate treatise, viz. *Kitāb Ittiṣāl al-'Aql bi-l-Insān*.

On the basis of a theory like this, it is alleged, not much hope is left for individual immortality. But, according to Ibn Bājjah, the soul that notifies its existence in separate desires and actions in this world may continue to exist in life after death and may receive rewards or punishments. It is the pure reason or intellect alone which, being the same in all, will be merged into the active intellect in the life hereafter and would have no separate existence of its own. The reiteration of similar views is found later in Ibn Rushd.⁹

It is noteworthy that, like the Hegelians, Ibn Bājjah believes that thought is man's highest function. Through thought man comes to comprehend the ultimate reality.¹⁰ In the highest grade of knowledge which is self-consciousness, i.e. consciousness of the pure reason by itself, thought becomes identical with reality. Like Platonists he adds that our perceptual experiences of the particulars as compared with the purely conceptual experiences of the universals are deceptive. Ibn Bājjah has no special aspiration for

9. Ibn Rushd held Bājjah's above work on the union of the human soul with the active intellect in such high esteem that he wrote a commentary on it.

10. E. I. J. Rosenthal observes that 'if the attitude of the other *Falasifa* can rightly be termed intellectualism, his [Ibn Bājjah's] is undiluted rationalism': see his *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, Cambridge, 1958, p. 163. Ibn Bājjah certainly stands alone among the Muslim philosophers for his overemphasis on reason as an avenue for the knowledge of ultimate reality, yet one does not fail to find in him, as in Spinoza later, a deep quest for the intellectual love of God.

mystic ecstasy which for him is an experience of emotional nature communicable only through imagery and metaphor. He does not hesitate to separate himself from the orthodox theologians and the mystics. He feels sorry that al-Ghazālī should have emphasised mysticism and revelation at the expense of philosophy, for he regards the teachings of revelation as the figurative presentations of the truths which are more completely and clearly comprehended through pure reason.¹¹ This is quite in line with the Hegelian mode of thinking; no wonder, he was poisoned to death on the charge of atheism.

Ibn Bājjah's ethical views can be gathered from his 'Regime of the Solitary'. Moral action, according to him, is the action which belongs to the true nature of man. The action directed by reason is a free action, accompanied with the consciousness of a rational purpose. If somebody, for instance, breaks a stone to pieces because he has stumbled against it he behaves without purpose like the child or the lower animal, but if he does this in order that others may not stumble against it, his action must be considered manlike and directed by reason.

11. Ibn Bājjah does not deny the validity and great value of prophetic revelation; he, in fact, regards the Qur'ān as God's greatest gift to mankind. Yet he firmly believes in the possibility of man's comprehending the truths of religion in a 'natural way', i.e. through the natural light of reason. For Ibn Bājjah's conception of prophetic experience, see Saghir Hasan al-Ma'sumi, 'Ibn Bājjah on Prophecy,' [Proceedings of] *Eight Session, Pakistan Philosophical Congress* [1961], Lahore [1962], pp. 53-9.

In his ethics Ibn Bājjah occupied himself mostly with the problem of relation of man to society and concluded that to act in a rational way a man has to keep himself 'far from the madding crowd' and their lower enjoyments. The wise, however, can associate amongst themselves with mutual advantage.¹² An ideal society of wise men would grow up like plants in the open air without the need of a gardener's care. It is interesting to note that there is no need of physicians, psychotherapists and judges in a society of the wise. They behave as friends amongst themselves attached to one another through love. As friends of God, they would find a repose and bliss in their continuous search for the absolute truth.

12. Ibn Bājjah seems to subscribe to a kind of intellectual aristocracy in so far as he is interested only in the association of philosophers and exceptional men. Rosenthal observes that it is to gain the intellectual perfection and not merely 'to secure the necessities of life and live in peace with justice' that Ibn Bājjah would have men of varying natural disposition join in political associations; *op. cit.*, p. 162.