

# On the Soul: The Floating Man

by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), various excerpts (~1020-1037 AD)

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first excerpt from *The Psychology of the Book of Healing: On the Soul*

(*Kitab al-Shifa: Tabiyat: ilm al-Nafs*) (~1020 AD)

translated by John McGinnis & David Reisman (2007)

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## 1.1. Establishing the Existence of the Soul and Defining It As Soul

1. We must first direct our discussion to establishing the existence of the thing we call a soul, and next to whatever follows from that. We say: We commonly observe certain bodies perceiving by the senses and being moved by volition; in fact, we observe certain bodies taking in nutrients, growing, and reproducing their like. That does not belong to them on account of their corporeality; so the remaining option is that in themselves there are principles for that other than their corporeality. The thing out of which these actions issue and, in short, anything that is a principle for the issuance of any actions that do not follow a uniform course devoid of volition, we call "soul." This expression is a term for this thing not on account of its substance but on account of a certain relation it has, that is, in the sense that it is a principle of these actions [i.e., "perceiving", "being moved by volition", "taking in nutrients, growing, and reproducing", etc.].

We will seek to identify its substance and the category to which it belongs later. For now, we have established the existence of something that is a principle only of what we stated, and we have established the existence of something in the sense that it has a particular accident. We need to move from this accidental thing it has to a point at which we can verify the thing itself, if we are to discover what it is, as though we had already come to know that there is a mover for something set in motion but we do not thereby know what this mover is itself. ...

7. For the purposes of establishing the existence of the soul belonging to us, here we have to provide a pointer that serves [both] as alert and reminder by hitting the mark with anyone who is at all capable of catching sight of the truth on his own, and also does not require straightening out his way of thinking, or hitting him over the head with it, or steering him away from sophisms.

So we say that it has to be imagined as though one of us were created whole in an instant but his sight is veiled from directly observing the things of the external world. He is created as though floating in air or in a void but without the air supporting him in such a way that he would have to feel it, and the limbs of his body are stretched out and away from one another, so they do not come into contact or touch. Then he considers whether he can assert the existence of his self. He has no doubts about asserting his self as something that exists without also [having to] assert the existence of any of his exterior or interior parts, his heart, his brain, or anything external. He will, in fact, be asserting the existence of his self without asserting that it has length, breadth, or depth, and, if it were even possible for him in such a state to imagine a hand or some other extremity, he would not imagine it as a part of his self or as a necessary condition of his self—and you know that what can be asserted as existing is not the same as what cannot be so asserted and that what is stipulated is not the same as what is not stipulated.

Thus, the self whose existence he asserted is his unique characteristic, in the sense that it is he himself, not his body and its parts, which he did not so assert. Thus, what [the reader] has been alerted to is a way to be made alert to the existence of the soul as something that is not the body—nor in fact any body—to recognize it and be aware of it, if it is in fact the case that he has been disregarding it and needed to be hit over the head with it. ...

## **5.2. Establishing That the Rational Soul Does Not Subsist As Something Imprinted in Corporeal Matter**

1. One thing about which there can be no doubt is that in the human is a thing and a certain substance that encounters the intelligibles through reception. We say next that the substance, which is the receptacle of the intelligibles, is neither a body nor something that subsists in a body in the sense of being a faculty in it or a form belonging to it in some way. If the receptacle of the intelligibles is a body or a particular magnitude, then the part of it that the intelligible form inheres in is either (1) a single, indivisible thing, or (2) a divisible thing, where the indivisible part of the body is unquestionably a limit akin to a point.

2. Let us first examine whether (1) it is possible for the receptacle [of the intelligible forms] to be an indivisible limit. We say that this is absurd, because the point is a certain terminus that is not distinct from the line with respect to position nor from the magnitude terminating at it, such that the

point would belong to it as something in which something could reside without being in some part of that magnitude. Quite the contrary ...

3. If the point were some independent thing that could receive any given thing, it would be a distinct individual and so the point would possess two sides. One side would be the part touching the line from which it is distinguished, and one side would be the part that is different from and opposite it. In that case, [the point] would subsist by itself as something separate from the line, and the line that is separate from [the point, x], would inevitably have a terminus, y, other than x, which touches x. Thus, point y would be the terminus of the line, not x. But the discussion about x and y is identical. This would lead to points that could be attachable to one another in the line, whether finitely or infinitely—the impossibility of this became clear to us in other places.<sup>1</sup> It is also clear that no body is composed by points being attachable to one another. It is clear also that no particular position can be distinguished for the point.

4. A gesture in the direction of a little bit of these arguments wouldn't hurt.<sup>2</sup> So we say that [if] two points touch one point on its two sides, then either the middle point separates them and so they do not touch, in which case it would follow that the middle point would be divisible, according to the axioms you have learned, and this is absurd. Or the middle point does not keep the sides of the two points from touching. In that case, the intelligible form would be present in all the points, and all the points would be like one single point, but we have posited that this one point is separate from the line. So, the line, due to its being separate from [the point], has a limit other than the point by which it is separate from the point; and so that [first] point is distinct from this [other point that is the line's limit] in terms of position. It has also been posited, however, that all points are the same in terms of position. This is a contradiction. It is therefore invalid to argue that the receptacle of the intelligibles is an indivisible part of the body.

5. The remaining option is (2) that their receptacle in the body is a divisible thing—if in fact their receptacle is in the body. So let us posit an intelligible form in a divisible thing. When we posit an intelligible form in something that is divisible in some way, the form is then accidentally divisible. In that

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the arguments of "Physics," III.4, pars. 2—5, where Ibn Sina refutes the idea that magnitudes can be composed of indivisibles.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Sina's use of "little bit" (jaraf) is a pun on the Arabic for "limit," (taraf) which he has been using.

case, the result must be either (2a) that the two parts [of the form] are similar, or (2b) they are dissimilar.

6. If (2a) they are similar, then how is the combination of the two different from them—given that the whole, as a whole, is not the part—unless the whole resulting from the two is not due to the form but to an increase in magnitude or number? In that case, the intelligible form would be a particular shape or number; but no intelligible form is a shape or number, since then the form would be a form represented in the imagery [faculty] not an intelligible form. Next, you know it cannot be argued that each of the two parts is itself the whole. How could this be, given that the second one is included in what is meant by the whole while extraneous to what is meant by the other part, when it is more than obvious that one of them alone cannot indicate the same thing as what is meant by the complete whole?

7. If (2b) the two parts are dissimilar, let us investigate how that could be and how the intelligible form could have dissimilar parts. There cannot be dissimilar parts unless they are parts of a definition, namely, the genera and the differences, but a number of absurdities result from this:

Each part of the body would also be subject to potentially infinite division, and then the genera and the differences would have to be subject to potentially infinite division. This is absurd. It is an established fact that the essential genera and differences of one thing are not potentially infinite. ...

If the genera and differences could have been actually infinite, they could not have been combined in the body in this form, for that would require that one body be divided actually into infinite parts. ...

Finally, not every intelligible can be divided into simpler intelligibles. There are intelligibles that are the simplest, and they are the principles for the composition of the rest of the intelligibles; and they neither have genera or differences nor can they be divided by quantity or account.

8. Therefore, the posited parts can neither be similar—each one of them being included in what is meant by the whole, when the whole results only by combination—nor can they be dissimilar. So the intelligible form cannot be divided.

9. Since the intelligible form cannot be divided nor can it inhere in some indivisible limit of magnitude, but there must be something in us that receives it, we have to conclude that the receptacle of the intelligibles is a substance that is not a body ... Rather, that part of us that encounters the intelligible form must be an incorporeal substance. ...

13. It is also correct for us to state that the posited intelligibles, each one of which the rational faculty can actually intellect, are potentially infinite. Moreover, it is correct for us to state that something that has a capability for a potential infinity of things cannot be a body nor a faculty in a body. We have demonstrated this in the preceding sections. Therefore, it is impossible for the thing itself that forms concepts of the intelligibles to subsist in a body in any way, or for its action to be generated out of a body or by means of a body. ...

#### **V.7. A Verification of the True Account of the Soul**

1. It has become clear from what we have stated that the different actions of the soul are attributable to different faculties, ... [e.g.,] the irascible faculty ... the appetitive faculty ... the faculty of perception ... This being an established fact, we say that these faculties must have a nexus that joins them all together and to which they are bound as a group ... [This is so] because when one faculty has no connection with another faculty, the activity of the first does not prevent the second from performing its own activity since the instrument is not common [to both], the location is not common, and there is nothing else in common to unite them. ...

2. Now this single thing with respect to which these faculties are joined as a whole is the thing that each of us sees as himself ... This thing cannot be a body [for the following reasons].

First, it does not necessarily follow from being a body as such that it is a gathering place for these faculties. If that were the case, that would belong to every body rather than to some thing *by means of which* [every body] comes to be such, since that thing is what primarily does the gathering together, that is, it is the perfection of the body inasmuch as it is a gathering place, and it is something other than the body. So the gathering place, then, is something that is not a body, that is, [it is] the soul. ...

4. [Furthermore], such a body [i.e., “the thing that each of us sees as himself”] is either (a) the whole body or (b) it is not the whole body. If (a) it is the whole body, then if it lost some part of itself, what we perceive to be us would not exist. It is not like that, however; for I would be myself even if I did not know that I have a hand or a leg or some other bodily member (as was stated earlier in other places). I suppose instead that they are my appendages, and I believe that they are instruments of mine that I use to fulfill certain needs. Were it not for those needs, I would have no use for them. I would also be myself when they did not exist.

Let us return to what was stated earlier on our part. We say: If a human were created in a single instant such that his limbs were separated from one another and he could not see them, and it happened that he could not feel them and they did not touch one another and he could not hear a single sound, he would not know that any of his organs exist, but he would know that he exists as uniquely a single thing despite not knowing everything else. However, what is unknown is not the same as what is known!

These bodily members that we have are really only just like clothes that, because they have always been associated with us, we have come to think of as parts of ourselves. When we imagine our selves, we do not imagine them bare; rather, we imagine [our selves] to have enveloping bodies. The reason for that is the permanent association [of the two]. The fact, however, is that we have become accustomed to stripping off and discarding clothes in a way we are not accustomed to doing with the bodily members, and so our belief that these are parts of us is more firmly entrenched than our belief that our garments are parts of us.

5. If it is (b) that such a body is not the whole body but rather one specific bodily organ, then that organ would be the thing that I believe to be me—unless what is intended in my believing that it is me is not that organ, even if it must have that organ.<sup>3</sup> If, however, what that organ is, namely, its being a heart, a brain, or some other organ or organs with this description, is identical to it or its totality is identical to the thing that I perceive to be myself, then my perception that I am must be my perception of that thing. But one thing from a single perspective cannot be both what is perceived and other than what is perceived [i.e., what would be doing the perceiving]. The situation is not like that anyway; for it is rather by sensing, listening, and

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<sup>3</sup> If it is the latter, then the organ would be just part, albeit an essential one, of what is identified as the self.

experiential knowledge that I know that I have a heart and a brain, not because I know that I am I. Thus, that organ on its own would not be the thing that I perceive to be me essentially but only me accidentally, whereas the aim in knowing about myself that I am me (that is, the aim that I intend when I say "*I sensed, I intellected, I acted, and I, as something different than these descriptions, joined them together*") is what I call "I."

6. Now, if someone said, "You also do not know that [the 'I'] is a soul," I would say that I always know it as the thing intended by what I call the "soul." I might not know it by the term "soul," but once I understand what I mean by soul, I understand that it is that thing and that it is what uses [bodily] instruments such as the motive and perceptive faculties. It is only as long as I do not understand the meaning of "soul" that I do not recognize [that]. That is not the case with the heart or the brain; for I may understand what is meant by "heart" and "brain," but I do not know that [they are the "I"]. When I mean by "soul" that it is the thing that is the principle of these motions and perceptions that I have and is what these [motions and perceptions] are traced back to in this whole, I recognize that either it is in actual fact the "I" or it is the "I" as something using this body. Then, it would be as though I now am unable to distinguish the perception of me as distinct from the mixed perception that there is something that uses the body, and that there is something that is joined with the body.

7. As for whether it is a body or not a body, in my opinion it is by no means necessary that it be a body, nor that it appear to me in imagined form as any body whatsoever. Instead, its imagined form appears to me to be precisely without any corporeality. So I will have understood some part of the aspect of its not being a body when I do not understand it to have any corporeality at the very same time that I understand [what it is]. ...

It is often the case that knowledge about something is close at hand but one overlooks it, and it becomes the very thing that is unknown and is investigated at the greatest remove. Sometimes knowledge that is close at hand is like the reminder, and despite the least amount of effort it was like something overlooked, and so awareness does not turn to pursue it because it weakly understands it, in which case one needs to take a remote position in relation to it. From [all of] this, it has become clear that these faculties have a gathering place to which all of them can be traced back, and that it is not a body, regardless of whether it is or is not joined with the body.

from *Remarks and Admonitions (Al-Isharat Wa'l-Tanbihat)* (~1037 AD)  
translated by Shams Inati, with some revisions by Ahmed Alwishah (2014)

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## **Part II: Physics ; Third Class: On the Terrestrial and Celestial Souls**

### *1. Admonition: Proof for the Existence of the Soul through Intuition*

Return to yourself and reflect. If you are healthy, or rather in some other state of health such that you discern a thing accurately, are you oblivious to the existence of yourself and do you not affirm it?

To me this [being oblivious and not affirming it] does not happen to an intelligent [person]. One's self does not escape even the sleeper in his sleep, and the drunk in his drunkenness, even though its representation to oneself is not fixed in memory.

If you imagine yourself to have been at your first creation mentally and physically sound, and it is assumed that your self is altogether in such a position and disposition as not to perceive its parts nor have its limbs touch each other—but separate and momentarily suspended in temperate air—you find that it is oblivious to everything except the fixedness of its individual existence.

### *2. Admonition: Concerning the Non-Intermediary Manner in Which the Soul is Apprehended*

With what you are you aware of yourself at that time, prior to that time, and posterior to it? What is it of yourself that you are aware of?

Is it one of your senses, is it your intellect, or a faculty other than your senses by which you are aware of [yourself]? If it is your intellect or a faculty other than your senses by which you are aware of [yourself], then are you aware of [it] by means of an intermediary or without intermediary?

I do not think in that case you are in need of an intermediary.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is without an intermediary [that you are aware of yourself]. It remains, therefore, that you are aware of yourself without the need for another

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<sup>4</sup> The reason is that it has been assumed above that your intellect and senses are not in a position in which they can perceive the soul. Therefore, they cannot operate as instruments or intermediaries for such perception.

faculty or intermediary. Hence it remains that you are [aware of yourself] by means of your senses or internal [power] without intermediary. (But that is impossible.) Reflect further!

### *3. Admonition: Regarding the Non-Sensible Nature of the Soul*

Do you gather that that which is apprehended of yourself is that [part of] your body that your vision apprehends? No, for if you were stripped of that part of your body, and [if] it were substituted for you, you remain yourself. Or is it what you apprehend by your touch? Again, no, [for] this is nothing other than external members of yourself, whose case is the same as that which was discussed above. Further, in the first place, we have supposed that the senses are unaware of their acts.

It is evident, therefore, that that which is apprehended of you is not then one of your organs such as the heart or the brain. How [could it be one of these organs] when the existence of such organs is not revealed to you except through dissection?

Nor is that which is apprehended of you the whole [of your body] inasmuch as it is a whole. This [must be] clear to you from what you observe by yourself and from what you have been warned about. Therefore, that which is apprehended of you is something other than those things that you may not apprehend when you apprehend yourself and that you do not find necessary for your being yourself.

Thus that which is apprehended of you is not one of the things that you apprehend by the senses in any way, nor one of the things that resemble the senses [such as the imagination] ...

### *6. Remark: Regarding the Unity of the Soul and its Relationship to the Body*

This substance in you is one. Rather, when verified, it is found to be you. This substance has branches and powers that spread in your organs.

If by some of your organs, you sense something, imagine, desire, or get angry, then the relation between this substance and these branches imposes a disposition on this substance, such that by repetition it produces some submission or habit and character that take hold of the administrative substance as fixed habits do.

Similarly, [this may] happen in a reverse manner. It often begins by the occurrence in [this substance] of a certain mental disposition, then the relation [between this substance and its branches] transports an affection from that disposition to the branches and [from them] to the organs. Reflect on how it is that if you sense the nearness of God, the mighty and illustrious, and think about his omnipotence, your skin shudders and your hair stands at an end.

These reactions and fixed habits may be stronger and they may be weaker. Were it not for such dispositions, the souls of some people would not have been, in accordance with habit, quicker than the souls of some others to become impudent and to flare up with anger. ...

*16. Remark: Concerning the Immateriality of Intellectual Substances*

If you now desire that it be made clear to you that the intelligible notion is not represented in that which is divisible or that which has position, listen then.

You already know that an indivisible thing may be joined to a multiplicity of things that do not necessitate this thing to become divisible in position. This is so if the multiplicity of these things is not the multiplicity of that which is divisible in position, such as the parts of the variegated. But a thing that is divisible into a multiplicity having various positions cannot be joined to an indivisible thing. It is inevitable that among the intelligibles there are indivisible concepts, otherwise the intelligibles would be constructed only of principles that are actually infinite, even though it is inevitable that in every multiplicity, be it finite or infinite, there is one in actuality. But if, among the intelligibles, there is that which is one in actuality and is intellected inasmuch as it is one, then it is intellected inasmuch as it is indivisible. Hence [the intelligible] is not represented in that which is divisible in position. [However], every body and every power in a body is divisible.

from *Epistle on the Ma'ad for the Feast of the Sacrifice*  
(*al-Risalat al-Adhawiyya fi amr al-Ma'ad*)  
translated by Ahmed Alwishah (2013)

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If a man reflects on the thing by which he is called 'he,' and [by which] he refers to himself as 'I,' he will imagine that that [thing] is his body and his flesh. But then if he reflects or ponders [he would find] that if his hands, legs, ribs, and the rest of his external limbs did not belong to his body, he would continue to have [what is conceived by] the concept [which he refers to as 'I']. Thus, he would know that these parts of his body are not included in the concept [which he refers to as 'I'].

Having arrived at this point, he will [further reflect] on [the separability] of his primary organs, such as the brain, the heart, and liver and etc., [from his 'I']. With respect to the brain, it is possible for one [to think that] part of it is separable, and yet the concept of [his 'I'] is affirmed. As far as the heart, it is not possible to assume [its separability] in reality, but only in imagination. For one can know that his self (*ānniyya*), which he refers to, existed without knowing that he has a heart, and [without knowing] how it is, what it is, and where it is ...

After further investigation, [we find that] the thing which [means that] a man [can be] considered to be a human is indicated by the concept of self (*ānniyya*), and this is his true essence; and it is the thing by which he knows that he is 'he'; that [essence] is, by necessity the soul.