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Redemption through knowledge:
The Ismāīʿlī reading of the Neoplatonic metaphysics in the *Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ*
of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (4th century H./10th century C.E.)

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0. Introduction[1]

Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī was a prominent leader of the *daʿwa al-ismāʿīliyya* who lived in the tenth century C.E. Even though almost no details about his life are currently known, from some statements made by him in allegedly his last book –the *Kitāb al-iftiḫar*– and from the information given by subsequent authors (Poonawala 2000, VII-IX), it can be deduced that he spread the word across a large region within the lands of the Abbāsid rulers, both about the imminent return of the *qāʾim* from his period of occultation (*ǧayba*) and about the authority of the Fatimids as his legitimate *ḫulafāʾ* (Madelung *EI*², 662-663; Madelung 1961, 109; Halm 1978, 16; Stern 1961, 107).

Although it is not clear from his texts whether the Fatimids were seen by him as *ḫulafāʾ* as well as imams (Kamada, 2), the texts of al-Sijistānī represent a conciliatory position between those Ismāīʿlīs who rejected the authority of the Fatimids and decided to continue waiting for the return of the *qāʾim* and those others who, on the contrary, declared that the Fatimids were not only vicars but at the same time imams (Walker 1993, 140). Even though "al-Sijistānī's relation to the Cairo *daʿwa al-ismāʿīliyya* continues to be an unresolved question" (Alibhai, 147), since he was probably one of the main leaders of the *daʿwa* of his time (Daftary 2004, 13; Kamada, 3), to study his texts means to approach the richness of one of the thinkers who defined the main characteristics of the *ismāʿīliyya* during the tenth century (Walker 1993, 19).

Al-Sijistānī's extant works might be seen as a door to the history of the relations between Ismāʿīlī thought and Neoplatonism. Even accepting that it is almost impossible to know which was the "original" Ismāʿīlī thought –or as it is sometimes labelled, the "pre-philosophical" version of it– (Stern 1983, 3-29; Halm 1996, 75-83), it is possible to argue that Neoplatonism was one of the most important "philosophical" influences on al-Sijistānī's own perspective.

The aim of this introductory research is to present, from a broad point of view, the most important elements of al-Sijistānī's Ismāʿīlī reading of Neoplatonic metaphysics in one of his extant works, the *Kitāb al-Yanābī*[2]. His "historical" reading of Neoplatonic metaphysics concludes in a "political philosophy", the most important elements of

[2] From now on the *Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ* will be mentioned as "KY." The paragraphs correspond to Corbin's edition.

which are still to be studied. This research can certainly contribute to discussing the generalised idea that "a correlate of the mystical dimension of Neoplatonism is its apolitical outlook" (Alibhai, 68-69) (on this topic, see Schall, O'Meara, Ousager, Miles). However, and maybe even more interesting, al-Sijistānī's reading of Neoplatonism is fascinating because, at the same time, al-Fārābī was also pursuing a "political" reading, probably of the same texts –but from a Sunni perspective. A future comparison between key aspects of al-Sijistānī's and al-Fārābī's readings of the Arabic Neoplatonic metaphysics might be very valuable in order to develop the hypothetical assumption that the philosophical foundations of Šī'ī Islam link it much more closely linked to the "Neoplatonic paradigm" than its Sunni counterpart. Last but not least, al-Sijistānī's reading might also be considered a precedent of the political reading of the Arabic Neoplatonic texts pursued in Safavid Iran (on this, see Di Branco 2014).

1. Neoplatonism

When talking about al-Sijistānī, what does "Neoplatonism" stand for? If "Neoplatonism" is accepted as a historiographical category, which can certainly be discussed (Catana, 166-200), its meaning should be historically contextualised.

1.1. *The Neoplatonic texts*

When "Neoplatonism" is used in relation to al-Sijistānī's thought, it refers mainly to three groups of texts. The first group is the so-called "Arabic Neoplatonic Corpus." This group is made up of the "Arabic Plotinus" and the "Arabic Proclus." The texts of the "Arabic Neoplatonic Corpus" are the translated and adapted versions of Plotinus and Proclus that were created in ninth century CE Baghdad by the so-called "circle of al-Kindī" (Endress 1997, 43-76).

As is well known, since the beginning of their dynasty, the Abbasid caliphs supported a huge translation movement (Bennison, 158-202) that was, in fact, a whole social and historical phenomenon (on this, see Gutas 1998). In the ninth century, there were two main translation groups. One was led by Abū Zayd Ḥunayn Ibn Isḥāq al-Ibādī (who died ca. 873), a Christian Arab. The other one was the above-mentioned "al-Kindī circle", overseen by Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb Ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī (who died ca. 870). Al-Kindī and the circle of collaborators that he gathered around him worked under the rule of caliphs Abd Allāh al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833) and Abū Isḥāq al-Mu'taṣim (r. 833-842).

The group of al-Kindī –of which three members' names are known– produced several works (D'Ancona 2003, 80). Some of these were translations of Aristotle's works, such as the *Metaphysics* (translated by Usṭāt), *De caelo*, *Meterologica* and *De partibus animalium* (translated by Yaḥyā Ibn al-Biṭrīq), and others were translations of Plato, such as the *Timaeus* (also translated by al-Biṭrīq). Moreover, Ibn Nā'ima al-Ḥimṣī undertook a set of translations from Plotinus and Proclus. Together, these translations became a type of a "metaphysical file" used by al-Kindī (Zimmermann, 131) and they were the main source of Neoplatonism in Islamic medieval philosophy (Adamson, 23-26).

This "Arabic Neoplatonic Corpus", as it was called, is made up of two different groups of texts: the Arabic Plotinus and the Arabic Proclus. The Arabic Plotinus texts have reached us today in the form of three works, largely based on *Enneads* IV, V and VI. The first one is the short version of the *Uṯūlūğiyā Arisṭuṭalīs*, generally named as the short version of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*. The second is the *Risāla fī al-ilm al-ilāhī*. The third and last text is actually not a text but a group of fragments attributed to "*al-šayḫ al-yūnānī*", which are collectively referred to as the *Sayings of the Greek Sage*. The fragments of the *Sayings of the Greek Sage* have three sources. Almost all the sayings are taken from one manuscript, discovered, published and translated by F.

Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1952, 461-492; 1953, 370-400; 1955, 42-66). Besides this Oxford manuscript, other fragments were found and translated by G. Lewis (Henry & Schwyzer, xxxii-xxxiv). The remaining fragments (also translated by G. Lewis in Henry & Schwyzer, 478-485) are taken from two different texts. The first is the *Muntaḫab ṣiwān al-ḥikma*, an abbreviated version of the *Ṣiwān al-ḥikma*. The second is the *Kitāb al-milal wa-l-niḥal* of al-Šahrastānī. Both texts probably have the same source: the *Siwān al-ḥikma*. From this source, they quote a certain number of sayings attributed to the aforementioned *"al-šayḫ al-yūnānī."* Moreover, the manuscript Oxford, MS Marsh 539 (edited in Wakeling 2014) contains the *Sayings*.

The consistency in style of these texts indicates that they were probably composed by the same person. Their restriction to the latter three books of the *Enneads* suggests, considering that these treatises were taken out of their original chronological sequence and re-ordered by Porphyry, that the translator's source was Porphyry's edition of the *Enneads*. Moreover, Porphyry's order is always preserved when the Arabic version moves from one treatise to another (D'Ancona 2003, 73-74).

Nevertheless, there are still many unknown issues about these translations and, in many respects, these issues affect the way in which their historical and philosophical influences on Ismāʿīlī thought are understood. Firstly, it is still unknown whether the source was the original Greek version or a later Syriac translation (Brock, 293-306). Secondly, in relation to that, it is also not known whether the Arabic Neoplatonic Corpus was a creation –that is, an adaptation– fully made in Baghdad or a translation of an earlier text, maybe a commentary by Porphyry himself on the *Enneads* (D'Ancona 1995, 142-143, 145; 1993, 12ff.; Taylor 1998, 241-264; Adamson 2002, 20-21). Thirdly, it is not known whether the misattribution of these texts to Aristotle happened at the time of translation or later (Zimmermann, 118-125; Adamson, 8). Finally, it is unknown whether the different works that came to us are the consequence of an accidental reconstruction (Zimmerman, 128) or the result of a voluntary process of edition executed by al-Kindī and his group (D'Ancona 2003, 86; Adamson, 17).

The Arabic Proclus is the second group of texts produced by al-Kindī's circle, and it was probably written after the Arabic Plotinus (D'Ancona 1995). It is currently known because of two main, different, texts. The first is the *Kitāb al-ḫaīr al-maḫḍ*, a paraphrase of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. The second is a group of twenty separate Proclean prepositions discovered by G. Endress (Endress 1973; Adamson, 22-23). However, since then, other fragments based on Proclus' texts have been discovered (a list of them can be found in Wakeling 2011, 1078-1081).

The second group is made up of two texts, probably written on the basis of the Arabic Plotinus and Proclus texts: the *Kitāb Amūniyūs fī ārā' al-falāsifa bi-iḫtilāf al-aqāwīl fī al-mabādi' wa fī al-bārī' ḫalla waʿalā wa huwa –haḏa al-kitāb–* and the long version of the aforementioned so-called *Theology of Aristotle*.

The *Kitāb Amūniyūs* is a doxographical collection of various opinions of the ancient Greeks on certain theological issues. It currently exists in one unique manuscript. On the one hand, the opinions quoted in the text in the name of several philosophers seldom correspond to their actual teachings. On the other, they do provide important elements of Neoplatonic doctrines. The *Kitāb Amūniyūs* might be itself the work of an Ismāʿīlī compiler, with its "author" not the Ammonius named in the text but maybe an Ismāʿīlī thinker with Neoplatonic interests. The *Kitāb Amūniyūs* is mentioned as a source for Ismāʿīlī thought (De Smet 2014b, 491-518; Walker 1993, 40) and for the specific thought of al-Sijistānī (Walker 1993, 82, 85, 176-178; Al-Sijistānī Walker, 128, 136, 152, 161, 180).

The long version of the *Theology* is also considered as a source for al-Sijistānī's thought (Walker 1993, 41-44, 80, 86, 96, 177-180). However, it has also been said that the long version of the *Theology* might have an Ismāʿīlī background (Pinès, 7-20). Consequently, the issue of their relationship with Ismāʿīlī thought is on the table. Therefore, it is important to be careful not to see as "causes" what in the end might be discovered to be "consequences" (De Smet 2007, 490). Last but not least, the doctrines of the "pseudo-Empedocles" should be mentioned too (De Smet 2007, 490; on the pseudo-Empedocles, see De Smet 1998), mainly considering the references to "Empedocles" made by al-Sijistānī (Walker 1993, 34).

1.2. *The "Neoplatonic" paradigm*

Secondly, Neoplatonism in relation to al-Sijistānī's thought might be also considered as a sort of metaphysical paradigm. Although it is important not to create a "stereotypical image" of what is being labelled as "Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonism" (De Smet 2007, 483; Alibhai, 87-88), this "Neoplatonic paradigm" could have been identified by al-Sijistānī with a broader one: a "philosophical" perspective, that one proposed by "the philosophers" (*al-falāsifa*) (for a analysis of the relationship between philosophy and Ismāʿīlism, see De Smet 2012).

Nevertheless, as happens with "Neoplatonism", "philosophy" might also seem to be a "historiographical category" too, and, thus, its meaning should be contextualised. As a very incipient approach, it is possible to understand the term "philosophy" from three different viewpoints. Firstly, it is possible to use the term "philosophy" to refer to "the philosophers" more than to "philosophy" (*falsafa*) itself, as referring to a specific historical and social movement (Adamson, 3). Nevertheless, "emphasizing al-Sijistānī's Neoplatonism does not locate him formally with the philosophers, in part because he himself rejects any explicit connection with them" (Walker 1993, 32). Secondly, the term "*falsafa*" refers to a textual tradition that, in al-Sijistānī's time, might be mainly understood as a tradition of translations and adaptations of Greek and Syriac texts. However, al-Sijistānī does not only "dialogue" with these texts. As P. Walker says,

> [He] saw in this theological tradition of the Greeks an immensely fruitful source of ideas, concepts, and words. Its vocabulary (in Arabic translation) became his; its primary concepts provided him key answers for some of his major problems; and its internal conflicts infected his discourse and that of others who shared a similar desire and interest in speaking philosophically about such topics as God, creation, the soul and salvation (Walker 1993, 36).

Thirdly, "philosophy" might be understood from a broader perspective. In this sense, "philosophy" might refer to different intellectual traditions with different understandings about the character of knowledge and its ontological status, including, but not limited to, *falsafa* (Campanini, 58-60).

1.3. *The Neoplatonism of al-Sijistānī*

As P. Walker states, and although this situation has since evolved, "in the absence of previous studies, al-Sijistānī's writings could be looked at in several ways, any of which ought to prove fruitful" (Walker 1993, 69). As previously stated, this introductory essay approaches al-Sijistānī's thought within the framework of a broader research that looks to him in the context of the history of the transmission of Neoplatonic ideas and texts. It is nevertheless important to remember that this is an analytical perspective, because "in searching for the Neoplatonist within his writings, elements of his Ismāʿīlī teachings

took a less prominent place than they might when viewed from a wider and more comprehensive perspective" (Walker 1993, 145).

As is known, several authors such as S. Stern, W. Madelung, H. Halm, F. Daftary and Sh. Kamada argue that Neoplatonism would have been initially introduced into the core of Ismāʿīlī thought by the Eastern branch of the *daʿwa al-ismāʿīliyya* –which was against the Fatimid rule– while for its Western branch –engaged with the Fatimid power– it would not have been decisive until the time of al-Muʿizz (Madelung 1961, 112; Halm 1978, 135-136; Daftary 2007, 166). Therefore, these researchers consider al-Nasafī to be the one who introduced Neoplatonic ideas into Ismāʿīlī thought (Stern 1960, 79-80; Madelung 1961, 102-103; Madelung *EI²*, 203; Madelung 1988, 96; Daftary 2004, 13; Daftary 2007, 113; Kamada, 1). On the other hand, D. De Smet argues that the Ismāʿīlī doctrine was born as a sort of "hybrid" in which Neoplatonism would have been present from its very beginning (De Smet 2007, 487-488).

More specifically, P. Walker claims that although "much of this difference [between al-Sijistānī's thought and "Islamic philosophy in general"] is attributable to Neoplatonism" (Al-Sijistānī Walker, 18), his work, "though heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, was likewise not bound to its every dogma" (Walker 1974, 8). In the opinion of F. Daftary, al-Sijistānī was "particularly influenced by Neoplatonism, and continued the philosophical trend started by al-Nasafī" (Daftary 2007, 155) because he "amalgamated Ismāʿīlī theology with Neoplatonism and other philosophical traditions into elegant and complex metaphysical systems of thought" (Daftary 2004, 21). This is the same idea of Sh. Kamada, who says that al-Sijistānī's thought should be characterised as "Neoplatonic Ismāʿīlīsm" (Kamada, 1 and 29, note 53).

M. Campanini says that "from a philosophical point of view, al-Sijistānī can be considered as a Neoplatonic who tried to integrate the theological Islamic principles with Greek philosophy in a very original way" (Campanini, 34). Moreover, he argues that al-Sijistānī might have become influenced by Neoplatonism through al-Fārābī (and therefore not directly through the texts made in Baghdad?) (Campanini, 121). For his part, M. A. Alibhai argues that "the Neoplatonism represented by al-Sijistānī cannot be explained by those versions found in Islamic and (Arabic) pre-Islamic Neoplatonisms" (Alibhai, xii-xiii) and characterises al-Sijistānī's thought as "a development of Neoplatonism within Islam" (Alibhai, 56). From his point of view, "al-Sijistānī uses Plotinian conceptions to support his prophetology" (Alibhai, 85).

From the point of view of I. Poonawala, al-Sijistānī "strived very hard to harmonize Šīʿīsm and Neoplatonism and at the same time to Islamicize the basic Neoplatonic vocabulary by equating certain key Qurʾānic terms with this vocabulary" (Poonawala 2000, XII). As he says, as a consequence of al-Sijistānī's works "Neoplatonism was made part of the Ismāʿīlī doctrine [...] [and] it became the cosmological foundation of their political movement" (Poonawala 2000, XXII).

As J. Schlanger argues, while the big dilemma of "Neoplatonism" might be seen as the problem of explaining the movement from oneness to multiplicity, the difficulty of "monotheistic Neoplatonism" lies in clarifying the relationship between creation that is willed and necessary emanation and between absolute transcendence and the conjunction between transcendence and immanence (Schlanger, 43-44). In this respect, it might be said that "Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonism" has its own dilemma. As well as the fact that the "Neoplatonic" philosophical problem deals with the relation between oneness and multiplicity, and the "monotheistic Neoplatonic" dilemma does the same with the relation between freedom and necessity, and transcendence and immanence, the "Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonic" problem deals mainly with what can be understood as the tension between universality and particularity. Although this tension might be found in

many aspects of al-Sijistānī's theoretical construction, it is in the way in which he understands the individual soul's redemption, within the framework of his metaphysical model of causality, where it is most clearly visible.

P. Walker argues that al-Sijistānī's KY, "more than any other work by him, reveals in its choice of themes the dichotomy between his Neoplatonism and his Ismāʿīlīsm" (Al-Sijistānī Walker, 21). Consequently, since this research aims to approach al-Sijistānī's thought within the framework of the transmission of the Neoplatonic ideas, this paper will focus on the problem of the individual soul's redemption as it is understood by the KY.

As P. Walker says, al-Sijistānī "was both a partisan and a philosopher; his message was at once theoretical and practical; and his ideological program envisioned not only an intellectual goal but a social one as well" (Walker 1993, 69). On the one hand, from a "Neoplatonic-minded perspective" it might be read as an individual, timeless and universal return movement of the soul from the sensible world to its spiritual original dimension, without any mediation except for its own inwardness. On the other hand, from an "Ismāʿīlī-minded perspective" it might be read as a collective and historical process, mediated by the *daʿwa al-ismāʿīliyya*. This tension between universality and particularity, and more specifically between mediation and the absence of it, can from some point be understood as the philosophical reading of the well-known dilemma of "how to conceptualize the essential necessity of adhering to the law in the face of its obvious obsolescence after the truth has been disclosed" (Alibhai, 164). This should remind the reader that although the issue of the soul's redemption will, here, be understood mainly from a philosophical perspective –that is, attending to the problems characterised as "philosophical" by the philosophical tradition– for al-Sijistānī, both the consequences and the reason to focus on them were not just theoretical but, in fact, mainly practical.

2. The metaphysical causality of the *Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ*

The philosophical construction of the KY is developed upon a model of metaphysical causality in the framework of which the author argues that worldly reality is a consequence of a process that can be labelled as "meta-causality" and three processes of ontological, historical and natural "causality." The origin of everything that exists is a first absolute, non-numerical unity (§ 116), ontologically previous to every duality (§ 70), including the duality between being and non-being, and therefore beyond every attribute (*iḍāfa*, pl. *iḍāfat*) (§ 46). Nothing can be its own cause (§ 169): through an origination from nothing (§ 149), from this unity multiplicity comes (§ 45). God creates through a command (*amr*), which is the divine word (*kalima*) that expresses God's will (*irāda*).[3] When it expresses itself –that is, when it becomes manifest– this divine command becomes the creation (*ibdāʿ*).[4]

The command of God establishes the creation (*qāʾima* [...] *ibdāʿ*) from nothing, even if nothing exists (*laysa yūḫad*) in the non-being (*fī al-laysi*) before the origination from being (*min aysiya*) of the first originated being (§ 163). The main unique characteristic of divine "origination" is its lack of any mediation. While every spiritual

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[3] Explicit reminiscences of the Qurʾān can be found here, for example, of 2:112, 3:47 and – fundamentally– of 36: 82.

[4] As far as I understand, these are different names for one sole reality: the distinction between them is valid only from an epistemological perspective. This is why al-Sijistānī says that the command of God is completed when it gives birth to the universal intellect. Ontologically, when the command of God exists it is because it has already expressed itself as the divine word, containing his will, into creation. On the contrary, M.A. Alibhai reads this distinction from an ontological –and not an epistemological– point of view (Alibhai, 133).

or sensible "creation" creates, passing something from potentiality to act, divine "origination" originates directly in act (§ 50). As Corbin says, this imperative *amr* essentially distinguishes God's "origination" from any kind of human "creative initiative" (Al-Sijistānī 1961, 45, note 92).

The first being originated by the originator is the universal intellect (§ 50), whose "cause" becomes a complete cause (§ 163) only when it originates its effect, giving birth to a complete being: the universal intellect, in which everything is (§ 34). God's will creates at the same time only one thing –the universal intellect– and everything at once, giving birth to a reality that is inexorably characterised by duality (§ 26).

On the one hand, there is a major, structural duality: the dual link of the universal intellect –where, as it was said, everything is. The universal intellect is doubly linked, and this is why it might be called a "mediator" (Kamada, 16). In its most inward dimension –its *huwiyyah*, that dimension that belongs exclusively to it and which does not flow (*fāḍa*) to its effect, the universal soul (§ 24)– the universal intellect is the creative divine word itself (§ 24). In this respect, M. A. Alibhai says:

> *Huwiyyah* is clearly used as an epistemological term: the *sābiq*'s *ma'rifah* is *huwiyyah*, indicating that its knowledge of its own *'aysiyāt* is the knowledge of its being an originated thing (*mubda'*) (that is, an *ays*), and this is what its *ma'rifah* amounts to: that it has an originator (*mubdi'*) who is beyond its grasp, no more than that" (44).

This "recognition"–as a possible translation for *ma'rifa* in this context, taking into consideration that al-Sijistānī explicitly denies that the originator can be "known"– constitutes, for the universal intellect, its inward dimension. The inward dimension of the intellect implies "recognition" of the fact that it has been originated –that it is a *mubda'*–, that it has an originator –its *mubdi'*–, and that it has an identity –that he is himself a *huwa*– (*Cfr.* Alibhai, 45), but –as Corbin says– there is not possible "knowledge" beyond this understanding of itself and the "act" for which it was given existence (*Cfr.* al-Sijistānī 1961, 53, n. 105). However, this inward dimension defines the universal intellect not only epistemologically but also ontologically, since it is the point where the command, the word and the will of God, and its own creation, are the same reality.

On the other hand, since the universal intellect is the origin of the whole spiritual and sensible reality, a world of duality is born from the universal intellect: everything that it is in that world, "it is" and simultaneously "it is not" that which it is. The superior horizon (*ufuq*) of the universal intellect is the creative divine word, not as an exterior reality but as the universal intellect's most intimate dimension. This superior horizon of the universal intellect extends up to the sensible universe made up of matter (*hayūlā*) and form (*ṣūra*) (§ 31). At the same time, the universal intellect itself is the superior horizon of the whole reality that flows from it.

Moreover, this double link of the universal intellect –and consequently of everything, because everything is "in" the universal intellect– with that which is superior, and with that which is inferior, might be also read from the point of view of what is received –from the superior– and what it is given –to the inferior. This is pointed out by M. A. Alibhai, who says:

> The primary meaning of the term *zawḫiyya* [a term that comes from *zawḫ*, as it appears in the KY] is that it refers to the ultimate origin of the thing, in so far as it is a thing, in the Plotinian primaries, *'aql* and *nafs*. Although al-Sijistānī turns

to the counting system to formulate the cosmological meaning for the term, the use of the terms *sābiq* and *tālī*, which are invariably employed in an *ifāda*/*istifāda* context, casts the sense of the term in the overall framework of guidance and divine assistance [*ta'yīd*]. To speak of a *šay'* is thus not only to recognize that there is *zawḥiyya* in it, but to recognize that the thing is constantly receiving assistance from the *sābiq* (32).

Everything that exists –be it spiritual or sensible– is a result of four operations carried out by the four pillars of reality: the universal intellect, the universal soul, the speaking-prophet (*nāṭiq*, pl. *nuṭaqāʿ*) of each historical cycle and his corresponding founder (*asās*). In the universal intellect exists everything of what it "will" be (§§ 38, 109). Being the vortex of everything that "is", its own operation provokes the manifestation of that reality that already exists in it. This operation –which is the universal intellect itself, as M. A. Alibhai states when he says that "the *ʿaql*'s very substantiality includes within itself this *ta'yīd* function" (84)– is the "inspiration", "encouragement" or "assistance" (*ta'yīd*) thanks to which those who received it are in direct contact with the divine, although this immediacy never implies –as emphasised by Corbin– that they become one with the source of the *ta'yīd* (Al-Sijistānī 1961, 19, n. 23).

From the universal intellect, two causal chains are born, and everything that exists is made up through these two causal chains. As the text says, the first unity trusts the universal intellect to guard "the two worlds", that is, both the spiritual and the sensible world, both that world which is beyond the human being as well as the human one proper (§ 2). The causal ontological chain gives birth to reality at its different levels of manifestation –both spiritual and natural. The universal intellect is the cause of the "universal soul" (*al-nafs al-kullīa*) (§ 88). What she receives from the universal intellect through its "inspiration" is used by her as a basis for her proper operation: the "constitution" (*tarkīb*) of the sensible world made up of matter and form. Paradoxically, although the universal intellect is itself pure actuality, everything that exists "in" the universal intellect does so in potentiality. The universal intellect is pure actuality because it is everything that it can be. When things are "in the universal intellect", they are in act too –because they are not different from the universal intellect itself. However, they are in a state of potentiality themselves because they "still" are not what they "will" be when they become manifest in the sensible world.[5] The seed planted –in potentiality– in the universal intellect germinates in the universal soul thanks to the inspiration of the universal intellect. As the text says, he warms (*saḥana*) and refines (*laṭafa*) her in order to make her emerge from potentiality to actuality (§ 13). Afterwards, this seed becomes an actual compound of matter and form thanks to the composition made by the universal soul –and this is how, from the movement of the universal soul, the natural world (*al-ʿālam al-ṭabīʿa*) is born –with its own causal order: the physical chain of causality. It is only from this very moment –that is, with the movement of the soul that gives birth to the sensible world– that time is born.

The historical chain of causality is a hierarchy structured by certain limits (*ḥudūd*, sing. *ḥadd*). Unlike the ontological one, the historical chain is temporal. Even though the eternal time of the universal soul is beyond this chain of causality, since history is reduced to the succession of messages addressed to the human being by the seven "speaking-prophets", and "human time" is history, human time might be identified with this second causal chain. There are seven historical cycles: the six prophetic cycles that

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[5] Beyond its linguistic expression, this difference is "modal" and not "temporal."

go from the first *nāṭiq* –Adam– to the last one –Muḥammad– plus the incipient last cycle of redemption (§ 155).

Just as the first link of the ontological causal chain is the soul, the first link of the causal historical chain is the speaking-prophet. Like the universal soul, each speaking-prophet is "inspired" by the universal intellect. The operation that the soul pursues on the basis of what she receives through inspiration is the "constitution" (*tarkīb*) of the sensible world. Similarly, the operation that each speaking-prophet does on the basis of what he receives through the inspiration is the "composition" (*ta'līf*) of a *šarī'a* that regulates human life. While the "inspiration" is outside time, the *šarī'a* of each speaking-prophet is particular. Each *šarī'a* composed by each speaking-prophet has a double aspect –an inner and an outward one (§ 3).

Although each *šarī'a* is relative to its specific time, the inspiration from where it comes is unique –and, therefore, it is possible to find the original significance of it. Each speaking-prophet is joined by a founder who –as the *nāṭiq* also does, as Corbin says (Al-Sijistānī 1961, 96, n. 187)– not only understands the exterior (*zāhir*) dimension of the *šarī'a* but also its inner (*bāṭin*) meaning. Although the founder does not have the same kind of access to the inspiration as the speaking-prophet, it is thanks to its direct link with the universal intellect that he has the authority –and even the mandate, Corbin argues (Al-Sijistānī 1961, 110, n. 227)– to unveil the "original understanding" (*taw'īl*) of the *šarī'a*, contrasting (*baraza*) its exterior dimension with its true meaning (§ 141).

In al-Sijistānī's vision, history progresses towards the redemptive time. Humanity is moving towards the final cycle. The current one is that of the Islamic revelation. The speaking-prophets are those who summon (*da'ā*) the *qā'im* (§ 157). Consequently, they –the speaking-prophets– have a specific mission: to establish the respective regulatory practices (*al-siyāsāt al-namūsiya*) (§ 27) for each time, "opening" –funding– governments based on the sacred law (*al-siyāsāt al-šar'īa*) (§ 140). The speaking-prophet of this cycle is Prophet Muḥammad, who brings the specific *šarī'a* needed by the society of this time.

The mission of the founder completes the mission of the speaking-prophet. He is the "key" not only to definitely establishing the governments initially founded by the prophet (*al-siyāsā al-nāṭiqia*) but also to completely understanding everything that is born both from the universal intellect (*al-aysiyāt al-aqliya*) and from the universal soul (*al-markabāt al-nafsiyat*) (§ 140). Thanks to the founder, its *umma* can ultimately understand the *šarī'a* (§ 134). However, each historical cycle is not completed only by the speaking-prophet and its founder. Both are succeeded –within the framework of the causal historical chain– by the completers –the imams– who maintain (*qāwama*) the summon (*al-da'wa*) to the four principles (§ 29).

In the Islamic historical cycle, the knowledge that Alī as the founder of this cycle receives from the universal intellect is inherited by the imams. In the first cycles, the seventh imam becomes the speaking-prophet of the following cycle, transcending the *šarī'a* of the former period with the introduction of a new one. Nevertheless, the seventh imam does not become the speaking-prophet but the *qa'īm* of the last era. In this hierarchy, the seven imams are succeeded, after the occultation (*ǧayba*) of the seventh one, by seven vicars (*ḫulafā'*) who represent them until the day of the resurrection (*yawn al-qiyāma*). These vicars are the summit of the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya*, a structured organisation made up of "missionaries" (*du'ā/du'āt*, sg. *dā'i*).

The first causal chain –which is born from the universal intellect and made up firstly of the universal soul and secondly of the physical causal chain subsumed under it– expresses the "Neoplatonic" metaphysics. The second causal chain –which is also born from the universal intellect, and in each historical cycle is made up of its corresponding

speaking-prophet and his founder, integrating the different members of the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya*– expresses the "Ismā'īlī" metaphysics.

Since the "Ismā'īlī" chain is a historical –and therefore human– one, from a temporal perspective it is subordinated to the "Neoplatonic" chain. However, from an ontological, timeless perspective both causal chains, and the operations carried out by the universal soul and by each one of the different speaking-prophets, are parallel.[6] Firstly, because the universal intellect spills out towards both the universal soul and the speaking-prophet of each cycle. The operation that the universal soul carries out "composes" the natural world where human beings live. Nevertheless, it is the specific operation carried out by each speaking-prophet that is the one which makes the world "human." Secondly, because the "historical" causal chain also depends on the "ontological" causal chain: the "ontological" causal chain reaches its definite fulfilment only thanks to the "historical" causal chain. It might be said that the regulatory mission (*min al-siyāsā*) (§ 177) of the speaking-prophets have two main characteristics. In the first place, it does not depend completely on the human being –those addressed by it– but on God. As the KY argues, the speaking-prophet exerts his authority (*malaka*) in the sensible world, transforming it (*qalaba*) as he wishes it (*šā'*), and running (*dabbara*) as he wants (*arāda*) the matter (*amr*) of the servants of God through divine revelation (*waḥy*) (§ 180).

The "marvellous regimes" (*al-siyāsā al-ajība*) not only manifest in the human world the benefits provided by the *'aql* and the *nafs* but they also fulfil (*kamāl*) the spiritual world (*al-'ālam al-rūḥāniya*). God's messengers (*rusul*) –all of them, not only those who, being law-givers, are called "*nuṭaqā'*"– put to service the spiritual world and extract the benefits contained within it in order to use them as tools (*min ṣāni'*), manifesting those human orders, those regimes through which the spiritual world is completed (*kamāl*) (§ 187).

Although the ontological causal chain includes –from a metaphysical point of view– the historical causal chain, only through the second is the first one completed. Even if the process that moves towards the arrival of the *qā'im* is carried out through the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya*, the redemptive advent will represent the fulfilment not only of human history but of divine creation as a whole.

3. Redemption through knowledge: mediation and participation

In the KY, al-Sijistānī states that man can take two different paths in life: he can use the world as an instrument (*'āla*) to acquire knowledge (*'ilm*) or he can feel that the sensible world is enough to him and become, therefore, a mere instrument of the world itself (§ 99). While sensual pleasures never last, true knowledge is eternal (§ 128). Whenever al-Sijistānī refers to true knowledge as the reward of the afterlife (§ 128) or implies that it is a reward in this same life (§ 136), knowledge is always indicated as the true goal for a human being.

If it can be said that in the KY there are two main kinds of knowledge,[7] the difference between them is not because of what is known –the object of knowledge– but because of the source of knowledge. On the one hand, there is sensible and intellectual

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[6] M. A. Alibhai argues that, "the human being accepts what the messenger conveys precisely because the human *'aql* already knows it" (154). It might be interesting to read this point within the context of the paradoxical relation between the temporal and the ontological, timeless understanding of both causal chains. Even if from an ontological point of view both chains are parallel, it can be said that since from a temporal point of view the metaphysical chain comes first, the human intellect "naturally" knows what it will later learn from a intellectual, spiritual perspective.

[7] This excludes *aql*'s "knowledge", since it does not have any possible counterpart (that is, it would be ontologically impossible for the *'aql* to ignore anything at all).

knowledge. This sort of knowledge is primarily based on what is acquired through the senses (§ 188) –although there are different levels of intellectual sophistication– and can be increased: one can effectively learn more, make progress along this path (§ 129). On the other hand, there is inspired knowledge. The main characteristic of it is that it is independent of the senses (§ 188) because it does not depend only on the specific characteristics of an individual person but also on the inspiration that comes from the universal intellect to the particular soul (§ 186). As P. Walker explains, "*tay'īd* is the way essences are signified in the soul of the inspired" (Al-Sijistānī Walker, 189). The inspired person has access to a deeper dimension in comparison to the epiphenomenal one that can be known through sensible knowledge or intellectual speculation (§ 185).

The essential characteristic of reality –be it spiritual or sensible– is mediation. Reality arises gradually through the mediation of the different levels of the abovementioned ontological chain: the universal intellect and the universal soul. Each superior level condenses, includes the lower levels: the universal intellect is everything that the universal soul is but the universal soul is not all that the universal intellect is. The superior levels of reality project themselves into the lower ones through the mediation of several intermediary stages. The inspiration of the universal intellect cannot reach the natural world without mediation: it needs to go through the universal soul (§§ 177-178).

Given that reality consists of a process of mediation, and it is itself structured in the different levels made up of that mediation process, a key notion is that of "participation." David C. Schindler defines it as follows:

> To speak of metaphysical participation is to say that one thing has what it is *with* and indeed *after* and in *pursuit of*, another: it has its reality, in other words, by virtue of something other than itself (1).

Everything that exist "participates" (*šāraka*), with greater or lesser intensity, and always through the mediation of the immediate superior levels, of the source of reality: the universal intellect. As S. Magnavacca states, when something "participates" in something else, it expresses by way of its particularity what universally belongs to another (504). This ontological participation is the condition of possibility of epistemological participation –that is, knowledge.

Those who want to know need to move (*taḥaraka*) in order to acquire their desired knowledge. To move always implies to search (*ṭalaba*) for the desiderated object of knowledge, and only when a soul finds what she is looking for can she find her redemption (*ḫalāṣa*), her accomplishment (*fauz*) and her repose (*rāḥat*) (§ 59).

The validity of this search –that is, the legitimacy of knowledge– is based on two points. Firstly, from the point of view of the cognisable object, on the intrinsic rationality of the universe. As the KY says, there is a "sublime order" (*al-tarkīb al-laṭif*) (§ 98) in the world because the universal intellect guides the universal soul in the activity through which she composes it (§§ 58-59). Secondly, from the point of view of the subject of knowledge, on the fact that partial, individual souls are a part of the universal soul. As P. Walker argues,

> Soul is, in fact, the point of contact between individual human thoughts or thinking and the world of intellect. In acquiring the intelligibles, we participate in that world, but only because our souls are a part of universal soul is this posible (Al-Sijistānī Walker, 154).

To a certain extent, in the KY there is a parallelism between knowing and being. When a particular intelligence acquires a certain knowledge, it is participating in known reality. The known object becomes co-extensive to (*imtadda min*) the subject of knowledge (§ 77). Firstly, the levels of knowledge are also the levels of the self: the inner reality of a person is conditioned by their knowledge. Secondly, however, the levels of knowledge are the levels of the soul's participation in known reality. Consequently, the KY defines each human being as a "microcosm" (*al-ʿālam al-ṣaġīr*) (§ 86). This is why true knowledge is not a matter of "interpretation" but of "description." There is not "one" possible interpretation (among others): "the [Ismāʿīlī] doctrine is true because it is a description, not an interpretation, of the cosmos" (Alibhai, 146).

It is true that for al-Sijistānī "salvation lies in adhering to certain views about some selected topics and accepting them as the only description and interpretation of these topics" (Alibhai, 150), and that "salvation follows the acquisition of this true knowledge" (Walker 1993, 141). However, this is not a dogmatic statement, but a consequence of what can be described as the performative power of knowledge.

Nevertheless, this parallelism between knowing and being does not imply that reality is "transparent" for a human being's knowing activity. There are two significant limitations to "participation" and, therefore, to knowledge. On the one hand, a human being cannot participate in the most refined dimension of the universal intellect –its *huwiyyah*– and, consequently, he cannot acquire any knowledge of it at all (§ 84). The universal intellect is never co-extensive to a particular intellect. On the contrary, it remains always "unblemished" (*mujarrad*) (§ 53).

On the other hand, there is an ontological limitation that also involves an epistemological one. As the distance between the originated being and the universal intellect grows through the process of mediation, more intermediary levels are needed for the making of reality, and the originated being becomes covered with "shells" (*qušūr*, sg. *qišr*) (§ 2). These shells cause the human being to become even more immersed into the corporality of his own body to which he is –as a being made up from matter and form– already tied. Consequently, its most inner dimension, its "sublime form" (*al-ṣūra al-laṭīfa*), becomes a "hidden form" (*al-ṣūra al-jafiyya*) –hidden behind the veil of these shells. These shells take man away from the superior levels of being. By cutting his ties with the universal soul and the universal intellect, these shells make it more difficult for him to participate in the superior levels of reality and knowledge. As reality grows apart from its source, to gain access to it becomes harder and harder (§ 131).

As has been said, there is an underlying duality across the whole of created reality. The *ifāda/istifāda* duality expresses itself as reality unfolds. The universal soul longs (*šāqa*) for the universal intellect, and prime matter reflects this longing. At the same time, the universal soul also recognises its own incapacity (*ʿajz*) to fully reach the universal intellect, and the prime form reflects it (§ 62). The particular soul is a part (*ḫuzʾ*) of a whole (*kul*) –the universal *nafs*– from which it has become manifest and to which she is going to return (*ʿāda*) (§ 85).

The universal soul is called the substance (*jawhar*) of the particular soul, because it is its most essential dimension (§ 95). Since a fraction (*ḫuzʾ*) of a universal (*kul*) performs the action of that universal, it might be said that the particular soul imitates (*iḥtaḏā*) the actions of the universal soul. Therefore, the particular soul longs for the universal soul too. This life is, for every human, a journey (*sulūk*) towards its own wholeness (§ 35).

The KY says that every particular soul has the possibility of participating equally (*muštaraka*) in the full understanding (*iḥaṭah*) of the primary intelligibles (§ 53), that is, of participating in the superior levels of reality and knowledge. Moreover, it seems that this depends only on the individual, particular soul, because this appears to happen when the particular soul forgets the sensible world and enters onto the path (*sulūk*) to her own spiritual world (§ 33).

However, as previously stated, "mediation" is the main characteristic of originated reality. From an ontological perspective, the whole of reality is originated through a mediated process that starts from the universal intellect and continues through the particular soul. Consequently, not every particular soul can equally participate in its universal dimension (§ 90). Although the universal intellect's inspiration shines equally for everybody, it depends on each particular soul what she can receive (§ 65). The purer (*aṣfā*, *ṣāf*) the substance of its soul (*jawhar nafsihu*) becomes, the more an individual wishes (*šahā*) or longs for the sublime (*laṭif*) (§ 137). According to the extent to which the substance of a soul is purified, she is elevated to the object of her desire (§ 137).

As well as "mediation" being the main characteristic of originated reality, from what the KY argues, it might be understood that the absence of mediation will be the distinctive sign of the time that will come on the day of the resurrection (*yawn al-qiyāma*).[8] Even though the particular soul tries to understand the universal soul, from where it comes (§ 89), this intention will only be fulfilled when the *qaʾīm* arrives. The spiritual mediation will not be needed because the benefits from the universal intellect will reach human beings directly –without the intermediation of the universal soul, the speaking-prophets or the founders. Moreover, neither human, historical nor temporal mediation will be needed, because everybody will "understand" these benefits without needing authorities or laws. The *qāʾim* will be the only gate to the spiritual world and its benefits. The consequence of him reaching his position (*manzila*) –that is, becoming the *qāʾim*– will be the emerging of a form that will be able to receive all the spiritual goods (*al-fawāʾid al-ʿaqlīya*) without composition (*taʾlīf*) or catalogation (*tartīb*) (§ 165).

However, even if, from the point of view of al-Sijistānī, "mediation" is the main characteristic of the present reality and "the absence of mediation" will be that of redemptive time, several passages seem to imply that some kind of "direct" access to the spiritual dimension of the universal intellect is possible for all humans at any moment of their lives –that is, even while living within this mediated reality.

Even if "the spiritual messenger, who is the source of guidance internal to the human being [that is, the particular soul], and the corporeal messenger, who is the source of guidance external to the human being [that is, the speaking-prophet], convey the same message" (Alibhai, 84), on the basis of the two chains of causality, it might be possible to find a dichotomy between a "vertical" and a "horizontal" process of "knowledge" and "redemption" (Walker 1993, 138).

In the "vertical" process, the path (*sulūk*) is a movement of individual redemption, beyond human time. The soul returns (*ʿāda*) from a sensible way of existence to a spiritual one without any other "mediation" but her own inwardness, as a result of the knowledge that she acquires (that is, that she receives from the universal intellect) and that constitutes soul's redemption in itself.

In the "horizontal" process, the path is a movement of collective redemption, at the very heart of which is history. The soul participates in the *daʿwa al-ismāʿīliyya*, and it is

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[8] It might be interesting to read this in the light of the so-called *ḥadīth al-ḥaqīqa* of imām ʿAlī, where he says: "The ultimate truth/reality is the disclosure of the majesties of glorification without indication" (*al-ḥaqīqa kašf subuḥāt al-ḥalāl min ġayr išāra*). On the history of the *ḥadīth al-ḥaqīqa*, see Corbin, 1971.

only thanks to this mediation that she can aim to participate in the metaphysical collective that, when the redemption time comes, will receive the "spiritual benefits" (*al-fawā'id al-'aqlīya*) as a reward for her awaiting commitment. The redemptive advent will imply the end of mediation: the *qa'īm* will give a complete explanation (*bayān*) that will unveil the true essence (*huwiyya*) of each thing (§ 131), the journey of each particular human soul will reach its destination, and each particular soul will become "pure knowledge" (*al-'ilm al-maḥḍ*) (§ 91). As P. Walker argues, "all portions of soul –that is, every individual particular of soul, meaning here each person– would collectively move from a state of potentiality to one of actuality" (1993, 135) (for a different approach to the topic of the soul's fate, see De Smet 2014a).

The question is: if a human being can reach the universal dimension without any intermediation but his own soul, why would he need to "participate" in the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya*? Or, in other words: while the human being is waiting for the arrival of the *qa'īm* and the end of mediation, is the path (*sulūk*) that should be followed to become free from the shells that overwhelm his sublime form (*al-ṣūra al-laṭīfa*) an immediate or a mediated path?

The idea that "al-Sijistānī's Ismā'īlī commitments call for ascribing to the prophets and the imams an authority over the individual's own mind [or it can be said, "individual's own soul"] which al-Sijistānī's own ontology cannot justify" (Alibhai, 85) can certainly be discussed. On the contrary, even though the above-mentioned dichotomy is not explicitly solved in the KY, the perspective sustained for al-Sijistānī is indeed based on his ontological viewpoint. In the sensible world, the incapacity of the human being to reach the level of the universal intellect prevails even over his longing (§ 104). Thus, each human being, to participate in spiritual reality, must participate in a metaphysical structure that can distinguish between truth and falsehood: the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya* (§ 131).

M. A. Alibhai suggests a possible interpretation key when he argues that "instead of the soul turning inward and upward toward the One, it is the idea of divine assistance (*tay'īd*), the transmission of the divine wisdom and divine guidance from upper to lower levels, which becomes the cornerstone of Ismā'īlī Neoplatonism" (70). That is, since the particular soul is a part, a fraction of the universal soul, it can by itself return to its universal dimension. However, due to the intrinsic limitations that it suffers because of it corporeal way of existence, it needs the assistance that flows from the spiritual superior levels of reality through the mediation of those who are, in such a way that can acquire the benefits without needing, in turn, a second stage of mediation: the members of the human, historical chain of causality.

However, this should not be read as a "dogmatic" axiom. On the contrary, the fact that there is a metaphysical structure that mediates between the spiritual and the human realms is a consequence of a core point of al-Sijistānī's ontology: the so-called "homology" between the spiritual and the human dimensions, between the a-historical and the historical (*Cfr*. Corbin 1983: 157; Kamada, 13). The key idea to understanding what this "homology" means is the already highlighted concept of "participation." Just like the universal soul, each speaking-prophet fully participates in the spiritual dimension –and so does each founder. Consequently, they both express –in their respective ranks– what is only purely expressed by the universal intellect.

The image of an infinite set of mirrors can be used to understand this process. Only the universal intellect is a perfect mirror that reflects almost perfectly the originator. What is under the realm of the universal intellect reflects only imperfectly what was already reflected by the universal intellect, and this deficiency grows as the originated reality moves away from its source. This deficiency itself is the ontological difference

that characterises each being –spiritual or corporeal– making each one different from another. Although man's spiritual substance is able to make direct contact with the spiritual realm, because of its current corporeal existence such knowledge must come within the framework of *ifāda* and *istifāda*. The "horizontal" process completes, therefore, the "vertical" one. This is why P. Walker says that the essence of the so-called "third realm" –the normative world (*'ālam al-waḍ*)– "exists, not as a form of natural law, but as a kind of sacramental grace" (Walker 1993, 125). Only the grace of the true knowledge can free each human being from the shells that condemn him to the corporeal sphere, taking him to the intelligible, spiritual realm where he will eternally remain when the redemptive era arrives. This knowledge does not represent only a taste of the eternal but a summons to it too. The human realm –the most pure and sublime of it– is the transmission channel of this knowledge. By being so, it brings the spiritual closer to the human, but at the same time, moves the human towards and closer to its source.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of this preliminary essay is to serve as an introduction to the Ismā'īlī reading of the Neoplatonic metaphysics developed by Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī in his *Kitāb al-Yanābī'*.

The first originated being that God creates –the universal intellect–is entrusted with the care of two worlds: the universal and the particular human one. Both of them –and their specific chains of causality– are born from the universal intellect's operation. On the one hand, the intellect's inspiration creates the universal soul, who pursues the "composition" of the physical universe made up of matter and form. This first chain of causality –made up through the operations of the universal intellect and the universal soul– gives birth to the "spiritual" and "natural" worlds. On the other hand, the inspiration is transmitted to the speaking-prophets.

Both chains are born out of time, because the universal intellect exists out of time. However, while the time of the first chain is an "eternal time", the time of the second one is a "human time." The second chain of causality –human history as a whole– develops itself through seven historical cycles, each of which is characterised by a speaking-prophet inspired by the universal intellect. Just as the universal soul uses inspiration to constitute the natural world, each speaking-prophet uses it to compose a specific *šarī'a*.

Each *šarī'a* has a double meaning. Its external meaning is different in each historical cycle, because it depends on the characteristics of the people who receive it. On the other hand, it has a trans-historical, inner meaning, which is revealed by the "founder", who carries on its "original understanding" –the only path through which authentic knowledge can be acquired.

In a broader sense, "knowledge" is identified by al-Sijistānī as the road towards redemption. There are different kinds of knowledge. While the sensible and the intellectual depend on each person, there is a specific kind of knowledge that depends not only on the particular soul but also on what she receives from the universal soul – through the mediation of the speaking-prophet and the founder. This knowledge is acquired by becoming inspired by the spiritual dimension when "participating" in it.

As a consequence of its corporeal existence, the individual, particular human soul cannot participate directly in the spiritual realm only by retreating into herself. In its most inward dimension, the universal intellect and his cause are only distinguishable from an epistemological perspective. However, the particular soul needs, in order to reach the universal sphere that she imperfectly mirrors, to go beyond herself,

participating in an intermediary structure that can receive and understand the true knowledge that comes from the spiritual, intellectual realm.

This participation is both "historical" –since the interpretation of this knowledge is a "living sacrament" and its dispensation is the main function of the human causal chain: the *da'wa'* (*Cfr.* Walker, 1993, 130)– and "ontological" –given that it is the key to accessing the spiritual realm. Therefore, at the core of the Ismā'īlī reading of the Arabic Neoplatonic metaphysics lies the idea that "participation" does not just happen from the top to the bottom –as in Neoplatonic metaphysics– but also from the bottom to the top. "Participation" is not only the road downwards –the reason why each particular soul is how it is– but also the way back to the spiritual realm.

Although the whole of reality is born from an "ontological" chain, the "historical" one is the origin of the specific human dimension of reality. From the top to the bottom, all beings "participate" –through the mediation of the different ontological levels– in the spiritual dimension because every particular soul is a fraction of the universal one. However, in the *Kitāb al-Yanābī'* this "participation" can only be completed through an inverse process which is not only "ontological" –that is, between the individual and the universal soul– but also "historical." The Neoplatonic movement of return can only be achieved through the mediation of a human historical structure in which each particular soul must participate in order to reach what through her own capacities she cannot.

As stated by M. A. Alibhai:

> The political character of Neoplatonism among the Ismā'īlīs reaches its most extreme when it is made part of the political doctrine of the Ismā'īlī movement, whose aim was not merely social reform in the manner of a Ṣufī order (*ṭarīqa*), but the establishment of <a> state with the Ismā'īlī imam as the *ḫalifa* [...]. The Ismā'īlīs were doing something different with their Neoplatonic legacy: they were making it part of the political state; hence Neoplatonism had a radical role among the Ismā'īlīs (Alibhai, 69).

Since in the *Kitāb al-Yanābī'* there is a parallelism between knowing and being, knowing is not a matter of "interpretation" but of "description." This parallelism reflects the one that exists between the two causal chains –the ontological and the historical– and has a key consequence: the metaphysical justification of the leadership role of those who not only "know" but also "embody" the wisdom that is the key to redemption –the *da'wa al-ismā'īliyya*.

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