



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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visibly classified according to an order designed to follow a step-by-step progression towards the most difficult of human wisdom. The esoteric nature of certain parts of the encyclopaedia, especially the last part of it, is a remarkable peculiarity of the *Rasa'il*. Another very conspicuous feature of the corpus is the great diversity and considerable eclecticism of its sources, together with the almost unparalleled scope of the matters involved.

In recent times several important studies have been devoted to the sources and contents of the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa'*, most notably by Yves Marquet, Ian Richard Netton and Carmela Baffioni. We also find a few studies in which the Ikhwan's way of classifying the sciences is briefly discussed or compared to other famous Muslim systems, such as those of al-Kindi (d. 873), al-Farabi (d. 950), Ibn Sina (d. 1037) or Ibn Khaldun (d. 1395). Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no significant attempt has been made so far so as to appraise the originality of the Brethren's own system. It is the aim of this paper to present some results of my current exploration of this topic.

Two Types of Classification of Sciences in *Rasa'il*

First of all, one must clarify which kind of classification we are talking about. For, on the one hand, there are those 51 or 52 epistles in the arrangement that has come down to us through the manuscript tradition and whose sequence may indeed qualify as a hierarchy of sciences in its own right. And then we have, on the other hand, the properly so called classification of sciences as the Brethren set it forth in Epistle VII, namely the one entitled 'On the Scientific Arts and their Aim'. Indeed, the two lists differ from each other in several places and certain discrepancies are even so serious that they alone would seem to bear witness to a historical process of re-elaboration.

It seems appropriate to begin with the classification of sciences which the authors themselves outline in the second half of Epistle VII. For us, the most important part of this text is the overall presentation of the sy



once again, is to find that all those fields are contemplated in their everyday applications only. There is no need, I think, to justify the presence of disciplines like crafts, trades, cultivation, breeding and the like, which are all clear examples of matters – should we say ‘arts’ or ‘sciences’? – whose interest does not overstep the bounds of this world. Yet the same must be said, we note, of the biographical and historical sciences, and even of magic, alchemy and the like, which are thus all regarded here as exclusively profane activities. In all, the group of propaedeutic sciences leaves us with the impression that it has been primarily set up so as to serve as a kind of lumber-room of mundane practices. But this could be regarded, after all, as a typical feature of *adab* literature.

Religious and Conventional Sciences

Passing to the second group of sciences, we first have to take notice of its heading and definition. The Brethren call this the group of religious and conventional sciences (*al-‘ulum al-shar‘iyyat al-wadi‘iyya*), and then explain that these are the sciences that ‘have been set up for the healing of the souls and for the quest of the hereafter’. The notiBc0.90.98 3 0 10.98 499.95164 540





mathematics could both be viewed as necessary preliminaries to the general study of philosophy.

Ikhwan's Division of Philosophy

Now we may focus on the way the Ikhwan further divide the group of philosophical sciences. It would be interesting to quote *verbatim* the passage of Epistle VII in which the Ikhwan explain and comment on each one of these subdivisions. For the sake of brevity, I shall here restrict myself to present that part of the text in the form of a table. *See Appendix, Table 2.*

This table calls for a few explanations. Aristotle's legacy is, of course, paramount. Not only the general structure, but even each part of entire sections such as logic or physics is purely Aristotelian in its very appellation. They will not retain our attention here. Nor shall I come back to the mathematical *quadrivium* of the first section, as I think enough of it has been said before. Definitely the most original section – and therefore the most interesting to look at – is the last one, which immediately strikes the reader with its non-Aristotelian elements. First of all, we learn that there is no such thing as one divine science, something to be validly compared with Aristotle's 'science of the beings as beings' or with the 'philosophia prima' of medieval scholasticism. Instead, what we are faced with here is no less than five different disciplines, including politics and eschatology, which do not seem to have much in common at first sight. What is more perceptible, it would seem, is a 897.42308 Tm(s)T 0 0 10.98 323.59047 469.84 o to0



two systems do not exactly match one another. In spite of its title, Section I incorporates the logical sciences, thus appearing as a combination of the two first sections of the classification in Epistle VII. As a consequence of this blending, the group of physical sciences is shifted to Section II of our list. As for the last group, that of divine sciences, it appears to have been split up into two different sections, dealing respectively with ‘the sciences of the soul and of the intellect’ and ‘the nomic, divine and legal sciences’. These are, to be sure, significant changes. But we immediately notice other differences, as, for instance, the great number of *rasa’il* whose titles do not frame with any of the subdivisions of Epistle VII.

In the introduction of his *La Philosophie des Ikhwan al-Safa’*, Yves Marquet attempted to find out, in various passages of the encyclopaedia, the evidence for concluding that ‘our Epistles keep the traces of a certain vagueness, both in the order of chapters, and in the number of Epistles in each section.’ Bringing forward a certain number of indisputable indications from the text itself, the French scholar could draw the following inferences:

- 1) At the time when the first epistle of the group of physical sciences was written – that is, the one on matter, form, etc. – only five epistles of Section I, and seven of Section II had already been compiled.
- 2) Some epistles from Sections I and II were later modified, whether it be by amplification or by splitting of their contents. In a former state, there was, for instance, only one epistle on logic.
- 3) Each one of the four Sections was subsequently extended or completed with the incorporation of new epistles.

Needless to say, the comparison of our two systems confirms each one of these points. The changes, already evident for the mathematical and the physical sections, tend to become even more prominent in proportion as we come closer to the end of the corpus.

This being said, it remains that the Ikhwan’s assertion that they have dedicated a specific epistle to each one of the subdivisions is, to a very large extent, valid. The encyclopaedia opens with the four sciences of the quadrivium (arithmetic in I, geometry in II, astronomy in III and music in V). The only peculiarity is that a *risala* on geography has now been intercalated between astronomy and music, but this is hardly surprising since geography



section. As for the science of politics and its own subdivisions, it would certainly be a mistake to assimilate it too quickly to what the Ikhwan report in their epistle L, on the species of politics.

So, how could these seeming oddities be accounted for? Well, at the risk of being a bit disappointing I would argue that these are typically matters which are best left unsolved for the time being. Surely, one could put forward chronological reasons, and assume, for instance, that a certain lapse of time must have separated the writing of Epistle VII – with its systematic and carefully reflected classification of the sciences – and the overall compilation of the *Rasa'il*. Those who, like Marquet, favour a longer chronology could certainly pretend that the authors of Epistle VII and those who put the final touch to that global undertaking were possibly not the same Ikhwan al-Safa'. In the present state of our information, one could even surmise that the arrangement of the *Rasa'il* in the form as we know it should not be ascribed to the authors themselves, but to later partisans or scholars. Yet all this is largely conjectural, and bound to remain so until we get a much clearer picture of the social, historical and epistemological context in which our *Epistles* began to be produced, collected and dispatched. As for so many other vexed questions about the Ikhwan, this kind of speculation will have much to gain from the forthcoming edition, on a truly scientific basis, of all the *Rasa'il* Ikhwan al-Safa'.

At any rate, the perfect correspondence between the classification of Epistle VII and the sequence of *Epistles* making up the actual corpus should be considered an unrealistic expectation from the very mo



the year AD 977, which means, most probably than it was written later than the *Rasa'il*. It is, of course, a pity that we do not have more of the works that al-Kin



Appendix

Table 1: the general classification of the sciences according to Epistle VII

I. The *propaedeutic* (sciences), that is, the sciences of education which have been set up mainly for the quest of subsistence and for the goodness of the living in this world, are of nine kinds:

1. writing and reading;
2. language and grammar;
3. calculation and operations;
4. poetic and prosody;
5. auguries and auspices, and the like;
6. magic, talismans, alchemy, tricks and the like;
7. professions and crafts;
8. sale and purchase, trades, cultivation and breeding;
9. biographies and histories.

II. The *religious and conventional* (sciences), that is, the sciences which have been set up for the healing of the souls and for the quest of the hereafter, are of six kinds:

1. science of revelation;
2. science of interpretation;
3. narratives and reports;
4. jurisprudence, norms and laws;
5. recollection, exhortations, asceticism and mysticism;
6. interpretation of dreams.

The learned in the science



Table 2: the division of the philosophical sciences according to Epistle VII

1. Mathematical sciences

- arithmetic
- geometry
- astronomy
- music

2. Logical sciences

- poetics
- rhetorics
- topics
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Table 3: The list of titles of the Rasa'il

Section I: the mathematical sciences (14 epistles)

1. Epistle I: On the number.
2. Epistle II: The epistle entitled *jumatriya*, dealing with geometry (*handasa*), and account of its quiddity.
3. Epistle III: The epistle entitled *asturunumiya*, dealing with the science of the stars and the composition of the spheres.
4. Epistle IV: On geography (*al-jughrafiya*).
5. Epistle V: On music (*al-musiqā*).
6. Epistle VI: On the arithmetical and geometrical proportions with respect to the refinement of the soul and the reforming of the characters.
7. Epistle VII: On the scientific arts and their aim.
8. Epistle VIII: On the practical arts and their aim.
9. Epistle IX: Where one accounts for characters, the causes of their difference and the [various] species of the evils which [strike] them; anecdotes drawn from the educational rules of the Prophets and cream of the morals of the sages.
10. Epistle X: On the Isagogè (*isaghujī*).
11. Epistle XI: On the ten categories, that is, *qatighuriyas*.
12. Epistle XII: On the meaning of the *Peri Hermeneias* (*baramaniyas*).
13. Epistle XIII: On the meaning of the Analytics (*anulutiqa*).
14. Epistle XIV: On the meaning of the Second Analytics (*anulutiqa al-thaniya*).

Section II: The sciences of the body and of nature (17 epistles)

1. Epistle XV: Where one accounts for the hylè, the form, the motion, the time and the place, together with the meanings of those (things) when they are linked to one another.
2. Epistle XVI: The epistle entitled 'the heavens and the world', with respect to the reforming of the soul and the refinement of the characters.
3. Epistle XVII: Where one accounts for the coming-to-be and the passing-away.
4. Epistle XVIII: On meteors.
5. Epistle XIX: Where one accounts for the coming-to-be of the minerals.
6. Epistle XX: On the quiddity of nature.
7. Epistle XXI: On the kinds of plants.
8. Epistle XXII: On the modalities of the comi



15. Epistle XXIX: On the wisdom of death and birth.
16. Epistle XXX: On what is particular to the pleasures; on the wisdom of birth and death and the quiddity of both.
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