Malak wa-falak.

Noetic and Angelic Terminology in al-Ḡazālī’s Maqāṣid and Tahāfut al-falāsifa

Marco Signori

The convergence between the heavenly intellects of philosophical cosmology and the angels of the various religious traditions is a distinctive feature of medieval thought, in all three monotheisms. Existing scholarship on this central issue, however, is still scanty, especially with regard to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ḡazālī (d. 1111), who rather plays an arguably crucial role in the shaping and diffusion of this key tenet. Focusing on the several occurrences of the terminology of «angel» [malak] in the Maqāṣid al-falāsifa [MF] (32 cases) and the Tahāfut al-falāsifa [TF] (36 cases), two of the most prominent philosophical works penned by al-Ḡazālī, the paper shows that the trend to employ religiously inspired lexicon when discussing falsafī issues is a typical trait of al-Ḡazālī’s mature engagement with philosophy. Indeed, the angelic terminology in the MF is preponderant with respect to Avicenna’s more purely noetic lexicon, as employed in the fundamental source for the MF, the Persian summa Dānešnāme-ye ‘Alā’ī. In the paper, I will give specific attention to one of the most characteristic claims of the MF (and the TF) about the issue of heavenly movers, i.e., the explicitly acknowledged possibility of translating the «language of the group [of the philosophers]» [luḥat al-qawm] into the «tongue of Revelation» [lisān al-šār]. In the wake of Richard Frank’s landmarking Creation and the Cosmic System and his emphasis on crucial similarities between al-Ḡazālī’s and Avicenna’s cosmologies, the issue at stake attests al-Ḡazālī’s recognition, qua philosophizing theologian, of an underlying agreement between the Peripatetic cosmology of intellectual movers and the revealed picture of the world, in which the angels act as ministers and intermediaries of God’s action on reality. Furthermore, the attention to lexicon also points at a distinctively Gazalian via media, which paves the way for further developments in the genre of hikma. This seems indirectly confirmed by the recurrence of statements echoing al-Ḡazālī in Ṣaraf al-Dīn al-Masʿūdī’s Commentary on (Avicenna’s) Glistening Homily [Ṣarḥ al-Ḥuṭba al-ğarrā], recognized by recent scholarship as an important milestone in the ideal path that connects al-Ḡazālī to Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī.