



# The Necessity of Infinity

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

# The Necessity of Infinity

A Variant Reading of the Possibility of a  
Continuing Correspondence between Ibn  
Sina and Al Beruni

I.S. : In my dreams I am the falling man. We cross paths mid air, e on my way down, and the exalted one, ascending. And as I fall, I think, or imagine myself thinking.

A.B. : You are falling, infinitely falling, like as if from a high tower of which you neither know the end nor the beginning.

I.S. : I am falling, infinitely falling, like a waterfall, like a feather in a vacuum tube, like shrapnel, like money that has lost its value but not its shine, like a tarnished reputation, like a descending note in a minor scale, even like the forgotten touch of a forsaken lover. And as I free fall I think of the optimists who invented flying machines and the pessimists who invented parachutes. I think, I am amazed; I am unable to awake.

A.B. : I watch you fall. I think of our one thousand and eighteen year old exchange, of its tone, its cadence. Of how it leaves the shores of a lake in the mind, crosses a desert in will, a mountain of memory, two valleys of conscience, and arrives by the bank of a river that flows through the heart. I think of how it keeps arriving.

I.S. : Peace be upon the pigeon that carries this message.

A.B. : Peace upon the winds that add speed to its wings and the flight of our queries.

I.S. : Peace be upon the addressee, and upon every unknown reader and eavesdropper across time. Glory be to the first cause and the prime mover, sustainer of all worlds.

A.B. : Peace upon the messenger, his family and

companions, and all the rightly guided and even the misguided, guidance to the lost and patience to those who are not yet on their way. Mercy to all.

I.S. : Peace upon Aristotle and the named and nameless sages, and all their disputations, and even on the continuing disagreements woven with the thread of the hours and the days that unfold on the unrolled carpet of our conversations. Our carpet will fly through the seven heavens and achieve soft landings on the beaches of our questions. Peace be upon the voyage and the destination.

A.B. : Peace on all directions, on the astrolabe and the compass, on the azimuth and the circumference, and to every star and constellation, succor and comfort to every wandering voyager planet, pilgrim of the skies.

I.S. : I am the lingering shadow of Abu 'Ali Al-Hussein Abu 'Abdullah Ibn 'Ali Ibn Sina, servant of the canon, master of the pulse, doctor of entrails, formerly of Afshan, Gurganj, Rey and lately of Hamadan, where I sleep.

A.B. : And I, surveyor of Hind, the memory of Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Al-Birūnī, your special correspondent. Do you remember the audacities of our youth, Ibn Sina?

I.S. : Unforgettable. They were unforgettable. We looked at the circling heavens, and I asked you about the gravity and density of the sky. Did you not then dismiss Aristotle?

A.B. : Untangling myself from the net of sharp sidelong glances cast upon the waters of my gaze by the beauties of Khorasan, I turned to my pen and told you then and there, the sky, my friend, is where

it is. Neither falling down upon our heads, nor floating away like a patch of Dhaka muslin caught in the breeze. The truth flutters like a flag in the wind, listing sometimes this way, and sometimes that way. Sometimes, Aristotle, like you, got it right, and sometimes he got it wrong. Error is the birthmark of humanity.

I.S. : Your answers rustle like silk on my mind, they resonate like the harmonic arc of a well pitched interval in a musical scale, but they carry their sting to this day and I still smart from where and when they hit their mark. What were we then, friend? I had twenty-seven autumns to my name, and you had lit the flames of nowroz, the new day of spring, merely, what, eighteen times?

A.B. : But like a hermit crab turned to stone in the dry riverbed of the Amu Darya, our questions, despite our as yet beardless faces, were already fossils. We could date them by our letters, as the questions of today or yesterday or of the day after tomorrow, or we could choose to let them be as timeless as time. You have not given up Ibn Sina, on reading even stones and pebbles as if they were signs, open books in the library of time.

I.S. : If stone was once alive, with fur bristling and claw unsheathed, then life too can be petrified, and be sculpted into a sign awaiting a lucky reader. Someday, our smiles will be frozen. Our tears will carve dry riverbeds in shale. Like deep sea fish frozen into the rock of high mountains, we will be puzzles and anomalies awaiting the future paleontologist, who will plumb our depths at their summits.

Those who come after us will have chosen other stances, will learn meaner dances, for legs and wings

and elbows grown long with dangling. Their lives will be like song when compared to our prosaic chatter.

A.B. : Perhaps they will then open eyes on the palms of their hands to touch-see their way through the darkening. Perhaps they will taste with the skin and remember with the tongue. Perhaps they will be walking memories and sleeping prophecies who drink their fill of the wine stocked in the tavern of every necessary moment.

I.S. : Did I not write in my canon, that it is at the very pinnacle of pleasure that those fortunate to be women teach us what we need to know in our skin and in our sinew? That the truths of the body, of hunger, thirst, desire and pain can never be overridden by the conjectures of the idle mind. Without this desire for desire, life simply does not take hold, neither in the womb, nor in the mind. When we are fossils, Al Beruni, our futures will claim the fruits of all desire and lay out a garden where every hope will whisper its joyous secret.

A.B. : Is it not written, "O humanity, male and female, tribes and peoples we have made you so that you may know one another and delight in your knowing. The noblest among you are the righteous. The creator is aware, knows all that needs knowing."

It follows that we are enjoined to become stranger and more wonderful.

No one way of being man or woman, or even of being human is a marker of grace. The more we grow, the more we will be unrecognizable in our plumage.

We will unfurl the wingspan of existence to its farthest extent.

I.S. : So much for the future of life, let us return to an old question. What of the earth and its secrets? Were they forged in one instant or is the map still being drawn?

A.B. : Nature does not punctuate her discourse into paragraphs. There is no beginning, no middle, no end. The story of the earth is told in the prolongation of the tale. The creator is not an idler, satisfied with one prototype. There is tinkering, there are pauses, there is going back to the drawing board, and then another beginning again. The earth is made anew, again and again. And it is still being made by its own rumblings. Did you know that there are rocks on the ground that are billions of years older than the earth itself? They were made in the nursery of the universe.

I.S. : But where did the universe come from? Where in the nursery of time, in the tinker's workshop, was it hiding ?

A.B. : From the place to which nothing returns. From that clearing in the thicket where the void dances to the song of becoming.

I.S. : What was the creator doing before creation?

A.B. : Can we even ask a question about before what there was before there was before?

I.S. : What will the creator do after the curtains come down?

A.B. : Her workshop will stay busy. The angels will keep the tool-kit open. There could for instance, be a last minute appeal on the day of judgment, because, she is compassionate and merciful, and there is no plea that she will not consider.

I.S. : How now that you confer attributes to the formless. With what authority do you say she is, she was, she will be?

A.B. : Perhaps the day of judgment was set for today and then deferred again so that even you might take advantage of the opportunity given by the delay to know that if you invoke the third person singular masculine to address what is closer to you than the jugular vein you mark the formless with an arbitrary sign only of your choice.

Why turn to the rule book of grammar when you actually need the freedom of the lexicon? Is 'he' the antonym or the synonym of 'she' or 'you' or 'I' or 'we'?

I.S. : So let me return the question to you. Why say she?

A.B. : For the same reason as you say 'he' when you mean something beyond your ken, or the division of the ground of being into I and you and he. This game needs changing, this tendency to call upon him, he, his, whenever you don't know what to say. If the singular leaves you beside yourself you could always take refuge in division or multiplication. You could say 'they', at least sometimes.

I, on the other hand know and understand the inadequacy of a pronoun. I use a matricial error to come between me and the light of the world so that I might stand a moment in the shadow of the womb and the mercy of time. But what is your excuse for saying "he..."

I.S. : I hear and I obey. He is she is I is me is you. The ground of being is formless form. I am falling,

falling, falling.

A.B. : Let me hold you.

Let it then be declared that there is a rolling adjournment of the proceedings until matter and consciousness, body and spirit, you-ness and me-ness, and it-ness settle their dispute out of court. Until then, remember Hallaj and 'An al Haq', his claim to be truth. Perhaps, had he said 'Who am I to say that I am he?' then his question would also have been his answer, and the executioner could have gone to the tavern early.

I.S. : Who is the judge, who is the advocate and who defends the real in the court of the last question? Who is the executioner?

A.B. : I know that I am the plaintiff.

I.S. : I know that I am the witness, and that I am falling, falling, falling.

A.B. : Find a foothold while you fall, and let us ask again, because we can, "Who writes the obituary and casts the horoscopes of the stars? What stars are the stars born under?"

I.S. : The universe is not where it was. Stars are born and die everyday, their phantom signals bring dispatches from the infancy of time. The future shines through cracks in the darkness. The sun sprints, the moon leaps and we follow, breathless in our revolution, spinning like tops like players who have forgotten the rules of the game but know the sound of the starter's gun and the ribbon that marks the end.

A.B. : But is this the only arena? Is this the only game in town? Does the starter gun fire just once

and once alone?

I.S. : The solitude of the starter and the unique episode of the firing of the starter's gun is the melancholy inevitability of a finite universe. But if we admit to infinity, which we must, if we imagine the creator unlimited by bounds, then the possibility of eternity makes for the necessity of infinity.

**A.B. : If we take infinity into account, then, the existence of other worlds other than this world seems to be a necessity; a logical corollary.**

I.S. : And some day, God willing, we will set foot on them.

**A.B. : But, Ibn Sina, has Aristotle not refuted this argument in his Kitab al-sama' wa'l'Alam? Has he not made it clear that the existence of many worlds is not possible.**

I.S. : He argues that if there are other worlds, even one other world, then they, or that world must be either identical or different from ours.

In the first instance, if they were identical, they would be made up of the same elements that build our world. Now supposing there was another world, and it was made up of the same elements, then this would move and be at rest exactly as our world moves, or pauses, because it would follow the same laws. He then says that if that is the case, then the two worlds would be co-incident, and since that is not the case — we are not standing on two worlds, but on one — therefore, there can be no other world. He uses the conditions that other worlds would have to fulfill (in his view) in order to exist to negate the possibility of their existence.

**A.B. : If on the other hand, another world were made up of elements entirely different from ours, then it would be impossible for us to comprehend it, for it would follow laws of motion and rest completely different from what we understand. It could pass us by and we would not even know. Such a world would not only be eternally different from ours, but also be eternally separated from us. It might as well not exist.**

I.S. : Or so says Aristotle.

**A. B. : And what do you say, Ibn Sina?**

I.S. : With all due respect, my problem is that I do not think that the universe is an obedient schoolboy - subservient to the operations of logic and the laws of syllogism that Aristotle set down for us to memorize.

What if eternity and infinity, by their very boundlessness, throw aside the question of the familiar niceties of our way of thinking?

**A. B. : You mean, "What if the distinction between unity and abundance were simply a way to make pigeonholes for wayward thoughts?"**

I. S. : Yes, or let me put it this way, "What if the plenitude of infinity were able to embrace what is thought of as contradiction, but which I celebrate as the spur of doubt that stings the reluctant horse of certainty, egging it on, despite its obstinacy, towards the unknown.

**A.B. : If creation has infinite potency, as you insist it does, there is no reason for our tour through the universe to be a one-stop journey. There is no reason**

for creation not to be beset by doubts, fits and starts,  
and false starts, by interruptions and changes of  
direction, by being here and there, and everywhere,  
all at once.

I.S. : The necessity for life can find its place in  
nooks and crannies between a very large number  
of possibilities. It can take one alteration, amongst  
millions of repetitions, for life to change its course.

A.B. If what you say is true then what would we  
need? The light and warmth of a modest star at just  
the right distance?

I. S : If the sky is full of stars, then somewhere there  
is another star, another sun, and around it, there  
must be other planets, other clumps of gas and rock  
playing ball. One, or two, or three must be, not too  
far from a star, not too close. With ground to stand  
on, water to drink, a breeze, a moon, a decent sea,  
a sunset poised on the horizon, a sunrise waiting  
to happen, maybe once, maybe twice. Somewhere,  
hidden by the flaming corona of a distant star, there  
is another world. There must be.

A. B. : Someday, in the remote future, in the dusty  
Punjab, where I will write my book Al Hind, a man  
called Iqbal, whose name means fortunate, will  
fortunately write, or must have already written,  
(what time is it now, Ibn Sina) the poem that the  
voyagers to the stars will carry with them. Do you  
remember it? Can you predict it, Ibn Sina?

I.S. : Sitaron se aage jahan aur bhi hain  
Abhi ishq ke imtehan aur bhi hain

A.B. : Infinite worlds beyond the stars  
and so many lives to test in love

I.S. : Tahi zindagi se nahin ye fizayen  
Yahan saikdon karwaan aur bhi hain

A life-span is never enough  
and caravans are on their way

I.S. : Khana'at na kar aalam-e-rang-o-bu par  
Chaman aur bhi aashiyaan aur bhi hain

A.B. : Don't pitch your tent just here or yet  
Other meadows, other glades await

I.S. : Gaye din ke tanha tha main anjuman mein  
Yahaan ab mere raazdaan aur bhi hain

A.B. : Forsaken, alone in the world and astray  
was I, till comrades, you showed me my way

Did you not write of that most luminous ascent,  
Ibn Sina? Did you not dream the messenger's night  
journey?

I.S. : I heard of the messenger, peace be upon  
him, journeying through the night on the back  
of the winged mare with a smile. I heard of him  
reaching the farthest house, and then rising, like the  
evening star to the zenith of heavens. He met the  
predecessors and the intercessors, those who speak  
in chorus and in tongues. He met the healer and  
the seekers and he stood at the foot of the splendid  
throne that stretched beyond dimensions and the  
limits of even his own understanding. He was a  
man, and now he was a man. How many worlds  
must have opened at that ascent?

A.B. : Did you rise with him?

I.S. : He rose, I fell. I was the falling man. In my  
dreams, we are always crossing paths mid air, me on

my way down, him on the winged horse, on his way up. And as I fall, this is what I think.

I imagine myself falling, infinitely falling, like as if from a high tower of which I neither know the end or the beginning. I think to myself, I am formed in the fall; my limbs and extremities are present but do not report anything; my senses are mute and still I know that I am falling. Who is it that knows? Which part of me is this that is not the senses, not the limbs, not memory, not doubt or fancy. Is it in falling that I land on my soul?

**A.B. :** But Ibn Sina, this could be true if you were fully formed when you fell. Without blemish or history. Let us assume that you are an infant who has never fallen. Would he even know what it means to fall, before he has fallen? Even the sensation of falling through space requires a memory, and if you rely on your memory to think a thought, it means that even what you call your soul is formed in stages.

It is not perfect and whole; it grows, just like the body does. If that is so, then is the development of the soul not co-extensive with the accumulation of the body's experience?

**I.S. :** Once again, Al Beruni, you have thrown me. This time, I have truly fallen! And what a fall it is — to rise again will mean to rehabilitate sentience through the body's experiences and faculties. But where will this leave the question of what happens to us when our body gives way? What is it that awaits judgment and the last day when everything we are turns to dust?

**A.B. :** What if everyday is that day of days. What if everyday the angel blows his trumpet, the universe gathers to watch, and all our scattered deeds — frozen or quickened as memories — stand in queue,

only to disperse because the truth is all knowing, and compassionate. And it is out of mercy that the game continues. What remains? Deeds remain, and the act of recalling them remains. The soul is a question left by the memory of a life, waiting for an answer.

**I.S. :** My questions remain.

**A.B. :** You are a hungry soul.

**I.S. :** Our conversation remains.

**A.B. :** The carpet remains. The gathering always waits to assemble at a moment's notice. The pigeon is ready to fly when released from the pigeon-coop of our minds.

**I.S. :** Shall we then disperse?

**A.B. :** Only to continue.

**I.S. :** By the shores of the Oxus, in Hindustan, in the Gardens of Iram, in Hardamouth, in China or in the farther shores of unknown seas.

**A.B. :** Peace be upon the pigeon that carries this message.

**I.S. :** Peace upon the winds that add speed to its wings and the flight of our queries. Always.

