AERIAL AND RESPIRATORY ATMOSPHERES OF AVICENNA'S FLYING PERSON

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Introductory Words

Persian philosopher Avicenna (980–1037) is famous for his thought experiment referred to as the Flying Person Argument (also known as the Floating Person, the Suspended Person or the Person Suspended in Air Argument). In his studies, Nader El-Bizri has examined this thought experiment in connection with phenomenological philosophy. According to El-Bizri, this Suspended Person Argument could be understood as "Avicenna's *reduction*" and "*epoché*."[1] In this presentation I will focus on phenomenologically interpreting the aerial-elemental and respiratory[2] atmospheres of Avicenna's thought experiment. In trying to interpret the almost entirely forgotten aerial, elemental and respiratory contexts of the Person Suspended in Air Argument, I will make particular use of Gaston Bachelard's phenomenologically oriented imaginary aerial thinking.

[1] Nader El-Bizri, "Avicenna's *De Anima*: Between Aristotle and Husserl," in *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 78–82 and 85.

[2] My article concentrates solely on the phenomenological and spiritual dimensions of breathing and thus I will not speak of Avicenna's immensely important studies on respiratory medicine. If one is interested in his views on respiratory medicine, see, for example, Seyyed Mehdi Hashemi and Mohsin Raza, "The Traditional Diagnosis and Treatment of Respiratory Diseases: A Description from Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*," *Therapeutic Advances in Respiratory Disease* 3 (December 2009): 319–328; Tina Williams, "Invisible Experiences: A Philosophical Exploration of Breathlessness," (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2019), 71–73.

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What Could the Flying Person Argument Be About?

What could Avicenna's story of the person suspended in air tell us? Over the centuries many have wondered as to the meaning and purpose of this thought experiment. Avicenna scholar Dag Nikolaus Hasse writes: "It is part of the attractiveness of the Flying Man that its meaning and purpose are rather difficult to understand."[3] Because of these difficulties in comprehending the meaning, Tommaso Alpina writes: "As for the purpose of the experiment, there is disagreement in the scholarship."[4] According to Jari Kaukua, Avicenna uses the Flying Man Argument as a pointer or a "reminder to make us pay attention to something that is and has always been there [experientially] for us but that we seldom take heed of [...]. Although the argument may be *per impossibile*, it is still used to point out something present to the reader's experience"[5] that we have a "tendency to neglect [...] in favour"[6] of other aspects of our experience. As I have previously mentioned, El-Bizri connects Avicenna's argument with phenomenological reduction and *epoché*. According to El-Bizri Avicenna's "*epoché*, as exemplified by the 'Suspended Person Argument,'"[7] "provides access to the *Ur-Ich*, that is not the *Ich* [self] of solipsism nor of relativism, but rather that of an anonymous universality and a pre-personal originary ground that underlies all positing."[8] Avicenna's *Ur-Ich* as the "primordial self" (*al-awal*)[9] is compared by El-Bizri to "Merleau-Ponty's consideration of the primordial subject that is beneath the subject, whereby being is already being oriented."[10]

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3 Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West: The Formation of a Peripatetic Philosophy of the Soul* (London and Turin: The Warburg Institute, 2000), 81.

4 Tommaso Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 71.

5 Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 34.

6 Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, 35.

7 El-Bizri, "Avicenna's *De Anima*," 85.

8 El-Bizri, "Avicenna's *De Anima*," 82.

9 El-Bizri, *The Phenomenological Quest: Between Avicenna and Heidegger* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 14.

10 El-Bizri, *The Phenomenological Quest*, 149–150.

Having said all this in preparation for an interpretation concerning the flying or floating person suspended in air, let us turn to Avicenna's own words about this thought experiment.

So we say: one of us must imagine himself so that he is created all at once and perfect but his sight is veiled from seeing external [things], that he is created floating/flying in the air or in a void so that the resistance of the air does not hit him – a hit he would have to sense – and that his limbs are separated from each other so that they do not meet or touch each other. [He must] then consider whether he affirms the existence of his essence or his self (*dhat*). He will not hesitate in affirming that his self or essence exists, but he will not thereby affirm any of his limbs, any of his intestines, the heart or the brain, or any external thing. Rather, we will affirm his essence or his self without affirming for it length, breadth or depth. If it were possible for him in that state to imagine a hand or some other limb, he would not imagine it as part of his essence or his self or as a condition of his essence or his self. You know what is affirmed is different from what is not affirmed and what is confirmed is different from what is not confirmed. Therefore the essence or the self whose existence he has affirmed is specific to him in that it is he himself, different from his body and limbs which he has not affirmed. Thus, he who takes heed has the means to take heed of the existence of the soul (*al-nafs*) as something different from the body – indeed, as distinct from any body – and to know and be aware of it.[11]

So what could this most famous version of Avicenna's Flying Man Argument as phenomenological *epoché* reveal to us if we were to read and interpret it as carefully as possible in the most preparatory manner inspired by Hasse, Kaukua and El-Bizri? Let us take seriously that Hasse says that the "meaning and purpose [of the thought experiment] are rather difficult to understand." Where should one put one's focus on this story which has so many aspects to it? Which aspects of our experience do we have a deep tendency to neglect? Could some of these aspects of our experience be those that even the scholars who study

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[11] Avicenna quoted by Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy*, 35. I have also used translations of Avicenna's Flying Person Argument that can be found in El-Bizri, *The Phenomenological Quest*, 151; Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima*, 80; Federico Campagna, *Technic and Magic: The Reconstruction of Reality* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 203, and Michael Marmura, "Avicenna's 'Flying Man' in Context," *The Monist* 69 (July 1986): 387, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27902982.

Avicenna's thought experiment have a tendency to neglect? According to Hasse, scholars have debated if the story of Avicenna is most essentially about 1) "the incorporeality of the soul," 2) "the independence of the soul from the body," 3) "the existence of the soul," 4) "the self-awareness of the soul" or 5) "the substantiality of the soul."[12] For certain we can say that Avicenna's Person Suspended in Air Argument is essentially about the phenomenon of *al-nafs* (which can be translated as "soul") and the relationship between *al-nafs* and the body, but all these scholarly interpretations Hasse mentions neglect several aspects which are, in my view, truly important; perhaps even more important than those aspects that traditionally and normally have been emphasized and discussed by Avicenna scholars.[13]

If Hasse listed the typical scholarly theories of what Avicenna possibly wants to reveal about the soul with his thought experiment, then another Avicenna scholar, Peter Adamson, crystallizes the usual perspective of how scholarly discussions frame the Flying Person Argument. Adamson writes:

> [the flying] person is in a state of total sensory deprivation. Furthermore, he has just been created, so he has no memories of prior sensory experience. Avicenna asked what a person in this situation could know. A strict empiricist would say, 'nothing', thinking that all our knowledge comes directly or indirectly from sensation. But Avicenna thought that the flying man would be aware of his own existence. He took this as a pointer, not only to the ineliminable self-awareness that belongs to each human soul, but also to the soul's immaterial nature. After all, Avicenna reasoned, the flying man's soul is aware of itself, but not of his body.[14]

As scholars have emphasized the "total sensory deprivation" as a lack of something and debated these above-mentioned questions concerning the soul, they have not at all taken seriously the idea that the person or the self in this thought experiment is "floating in the air," "flying

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12 Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima*, 81.

13 For example, Dag Nikolaus Hasse, Tommaso Alpina, Jari Kaukua, Nader El-Bizri, Michael Marmura, Jon McGinnis, Dimitri Gutas and Peter Adamson are among these Avicenna scholars.

14 Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84.

in the air" or "floating ... in a void," nor that this could be something essentially important. None of the Avicenna scholars mentioned have said anything meaningful about the phenomenon of floating or flying as a way of being. What could be the purpose or meaning of floating or flying in the air in Avicenna's thought experiment?

Another truly important aspect in this story is that the person or the self is only in relation to either the element of air or the void which makes it possible that the person can float. Thus we must ask: what kind of relationship is of a purely aerial relation? Or what kind of relationship is a relation with emptiness or voidness? And what kind of purely aerial encounter is it to exist in the element of air when all "the resistance of air" and wind have been bracketed out in order that the flying person does not feel or experience any kind of resistance or hit by the air? Would this not also mean that the elemental atmosphere of air where the person floats is immense, at least experientially immense, in order that there would not be anything blocking or obstructing the float or the flight or anything else affirming to him "any external things" or objects? This experience of spatial relationality with the immense air would not prove affirmation of "length, breadth or depth" as there is no length, breadth or depth in such immensity or vastness. The experience and knowledge about such spatial measures become possible only in a sensory perceptual dialogue between the perceiving self and the perceived things, between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. The perceiving self is not only in a perpetual dialogue with things that are of different sizes, shapes, boundaries and surfaces and that are to be found near and far, left and right, up and down, front and rear, etc., but also in a constant dialogue with itself in which its eyes gaze at different parts of the body that are at different distances from its eyes and each part of its body work in collaboration with other parts.

Also none of the scholarly studies have pondered how does the flying person stay alive? I do not mean how he finds something to eat or drink. The person can fly or float in the air for quite a long time without need for nutrients. I am referring to the need for breath. Breathing is our most essential relation with the air. What would it mean if the flying person's fundamental relationship with the air were breathing? Could it perhaps be that Avicenna's Person Suspended in Air Argument

is essentially about respiration? And if this were the case, what would this then mean?

In my opinion, all these questions that Hasse and Adamson raise concerning the soul in its incorporeality/immateriality, independence from the body, existence, self-awareness and substantiality should be examined only after one has truly pondered the questions and problems that I have just raised. It is also truly important that these questions and concerns mentioned by Hasse and Adamson should be examined not only after we have deeply pondered these aerial and respiratory questions but they actually need to be asked within the atmosphere that we have been provided access to by these newly formed aerial and respiratory questions.

The Flying Person within the Atmosphere of the Bachelardian Aerial Imagination

Let us begin to explore these aerial and respiratory questions in dialogue with Bachelard. As a thought experiment, Avicenna's Person Suspended in Air Argument is essentially connected with imagination. This thought experiment begins with the words: "one of us must *imagine himself* so that he is created all at once and perfect …" The whole story about the flying person moves within the reign of imagination. According to Bachelard, the most primordial form of imagination is what he calls "elemental imagination."[15] Bachelard divides the realm of elemental imagination into four essentially different reigns depending on four elements: the elements of fire, earth, water and air. He calls these four types of elemental imagination: 1) the imagination of fire (igneous imagination), 2) the imagination of earth (terrestrial imagination), 3) the imagination of water (aquatic imagination) and 4) the imagination of air (aerial imagination).

Bachelard's book *Air and Dreams* is a study devoted to the aerial imagination. In this book Bachelard says: "everything that passes through

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[15] Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 2002), 26.

air is dynamically and substantially aerial."[16] So if any phenomenon is imagined to pass through air in an essential manner, this phenomenon belongs to the reign of aerial imagination. As Avicenna's flying person is imagined to be "floating/flying in the air" it is "dynamically and substantially" an elemental and imaginary "aerial phenomenon,"[17] and if this Bachelardian aerial perspective is taken truly seriously as I will take it, this imaginary aeriality of the flying person is the most essential feature of its existence or its way of being. The imaginary flying in air is actually, according to Bachelard, the essential feature of aerial imagination. For aerial imagination, "flight is not a technique to be discovered, it is a matter to be transmuted; it is the fundamental basis for a transmutation of all values. Our *terrestrial* being must become *aerial*. Then it will make the whole earth *light*. Our own earth, within us, will be 'the light one.'"[18] This imaginary aeriality and becoming aerial is essentially connected with breathing as Bachelard also says about this aerial becoming: "let us become as aerial as our breath."[19]

These ideas of becoming are influenced by Bachelard's reading of Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values" within the reign of aerial imagination. In this Bachelardian project of "aerial ethics,"[20] the transmutation of all values changes them into aerial values. For example, freedom as a value transforms into what we can call "aerial freedom."[21] When we are able to understand that freedom is essentially a phenomenon of air, according to Bachelard, we begin to witness how the atmosphere of air itself "frees us from our attachment to matter."[22] One of the ultimate questions of aerial ethics and aerial freedom is: "how freely one breathes."[23] In the Bachelardian aerial interpretation of Nietzschean

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16 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 30n5.
17 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 9.
18 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 142.
19 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 241.
20 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 146.
21 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 117.
22 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 136.
23 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 140. In relation to Nietzsche's will to "breathe freely," see, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 118 and 126; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 72, 92, 184, 256, and 260.

thinking, the ethical task of becoming a superhuman (*Übermensch*) in an aerial manner is a project of going beyond (*über*) and transmuting terrestrial and earthly weight and matter and becoming "an aerial being" who is "free," "aerial" and a "joyous spirit" who breathes "an air of the heights, a strong air."[24] He becomes "the master of [winged] lightness"[25] and is always ready to fly to the summits of "immense" "superhuman joy."[26] Thus we learn to live and "float" "in the air, by the air, for the air … [and] free as the air."[27]

How would Avicenna's Person Suspended in the Air Argument reveal itself to us if it were interpreted within the Bachelardian reign of aerial imagination? The thought experiment begins as follows:

> So we say: one of us must imagine himself so that he is created all at once and perfect but his sight is veiled from seeing external [things], that he is created flying/floating in the air or in a void so that the resistance of the air does not hit him – a hit he would have to sense – and that his limbs are separated from each other so that they do not meet or touch each other.

Avicenna demands that we individually imagine his thought experiment. Within the atmosphere of aerial imagination I will listen carefully to Avicenna's call and I will personally and intimately imagine it step by step. When Avicenna demands that "one of us must imagine himself so that he is created" in a new aerial manner, his way of imagining is in harmony with Bachelard's aerial imagination in which the dream of "flight is not a technique to be discovered, it is a matter to be transmuted; it is the fundamental basis for a transmutation of all values. Our *terrestrial* being must become *aerial*." Bachelard has a similarly demanding voice when he says that "our *terrestrial* being must become *aerial*." In Bachelardian terms, we must imagine the fundamental transmutation from terrestrial being to aerial being. When Avicenna demands that I imagine that I am created all at once and perfect but my sight is veiled from seeing external things, this means that I am freeing or liberating myself from my terrestrial way of being. The external things that I see

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24 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 135 and 140.
25 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 142.
26 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 136.
27 Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 28 and 145.

are part of the terrestrial. Visual perception connects us ceaselessly with terrestrial beings. Avicenna also demands that I imagine that while I float in the air that my limbs are separated from each other so that they do not meet or touch each other. Within the reign of aerial imagination, Avicenna's demand takes me further away from my terrestrial way of being, that is, from my bodily existence of touching and sensing. In his thought experiment, Avicenna is truly transmutating all values as he is shifting from terrestrial values to aerial values. What does it mean to become aerial? Bachelard suggested that it means to "become as aerial as our breath."

The Flying Person within the Judeo-Islamic Atmosphere of Nephesh and Nafs

What could be the meaning of Avicenna's demand to imagine myself "created all at once and perfect"? How can I aerially imagine myself in that kind of way? Do these words "created all at once and perfect" refer to something? This expression "created [...] perfect" refers to the *Quran*'s creation of human being in which God created him perfect. The *Quran* says: "Recall when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am going to create a human being from a ringing clay made of decayed mud. When I form him perfect, and blow in him of My spirit (*ruh*)'" (Quran 15:28–29).[28] Elsewhere in the *Quran* the following is said about God's perfect creation: God "gave everything its perfect form. He first created man from clay [...] Then He moulded him; He breathed from His Spirit (*ruh*) into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!" (Quran 32:7, 9)[29] It is important to understand that these Quranic verses follow and are based on the creation story from the *Old Testament*: "And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (*nephesh*)." (Gen 2:7) Both of these stories

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[28] *The Qur'an*, trans. Mufti Taqi Usmani. https://quran.com/32.
See also *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, trans. M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163.

[29] *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, 264.

describe the beginnings of the relation between "the divine breath and the earthly clay"[30] in human existence.

In order to understand this relation as well as the relation between these Biblical and Quranic creation stories and their relation to the *nafs* that plays an important role in Avicenna's thought experiment, let us quote the following words from Golam Dastagir:

> Etymologically, the term *nafs* is derived from the term *nafas*, meaning 'breathing'. In early Arabic literature, by *nafs* is meant 'self,' or 'person,' while the term *ruh* denotes 'breath,' or 'wind.' In Islamic theology, the notion of the soul is referred to as *nafs*, though often confused with *ruh*, and the concepts of *nafs* and *ruh* seem, to a greater degree, similar to the Biblical concepts of *nephesh* and *ruach*.[31]

The Hebrew *nephesh* and *ruach*, which are cognates of the words *nafs* and *ruh*, also have deep respiratory meanings. According to linguist and rabbi Ernest Klein the most primary etymological meaning of *nephesh* is "breath, breath of life." The other meanings of this word are "soul," "person, human being" and "self." Etymologically, the term *nephesh* is derived from the term *naphash*, meaning "to blow, to breathe." In relation to Klein's etymological study of the term *nephesh*, Róbert Bohát writes: "etymology and lexicography agree that [*nephesh*] is 'a living, breathing being', 'a breather' in short."[32] Similar to the Arabic term *ruh*, the Hebrew *ruach* also means "breath" and "wind" as well as "spirit." As etymologically the Arabic *nafs* and the Hebrew *nephesh* both derive from words that mean "breathing," it is highly interesting to mention that Bachelard calls the word "soul" (*âme*) "a word of breath."[33] In ref-

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[30] William C. Chittick, "The In-Between: Reflections on the Soul in the Teachings of Ibn 'Arabi," in *The Passions of the Soul in the Metamorphosis of Becoming*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 30.

[31] Golam Dastagir, "Nafs," in *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism*, ed. Zayn R. Kassam et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 519.

[32] Róbert Bohát, "'My Soul Knoweth Right Well': the Biblical Definition of Soul (heb. '*nefes,*' Gr. '*psyche*') and the Epistemology of Embodied Cognition – an Ancient Source of a Modern Concept?," in *The Soul in the Axiosphere from an Intercultural Perspective, Volume One*, ed. Joanna Jurewicz, Ewa Maslowska, and Dorota Pazio-Wlazlowska (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 167.

[33] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xx. The translation has been altered. See Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'Espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), 4.

erence to this, he quotes Charles Nodier's truly insightful words: "The different names for the soul, among nearly all peoples, are just so many breath variations, and onomatopaoeic expressions of breathing."[34]

With the help of these etymological investigations, we can now give one possible interpretation of Gen 2:7 which would say: "And the LORD God formed man (*adam*) of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living, breathing being (*nephesh*)." *Adam* ("man") originated from *adamah* ("ground" or "earth"). Thus we could also interpret that in the creation God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man as an earthling became a living breather (*nephesh*)." In his book *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, theologian Hans Walter Wolff ponders the meaning of the word *nephesh* in Gen 2:7. In his view, *nephesh* in this verse of the *Old Testament* should "[c]ertainly not [be translated as] soul." Instead of "soul," Wolff emphasizes "breath" as he writes: "*Nephesh* is designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not have *nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*."[35] I still want to bring in Etan Levine who relates Gen 2:7 explicitly with air as he writes: "human life derived from the air when God 'blew into his nostrils the breath of life.'"[36]

After all of these various aspects that complement each other, I wish to give an initial interpretation of Gen 2:7 which would say: God formed man (*adam*) of the dust of the ground (*adamah*), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life that is His breath/air/wind/spirit (*ruach*); and man became a living, breathing being, that is, a breather (*nephesh*). As Wolff said "man does not have *nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*," this would mean in my interpretation that, according to Gen 2:7, human being does not have a breath, but is at the most primordial level a breathing being and lives as a breather, as one who

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[34] Charles Nodier quoted by Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxn1. In reference Nodier's words it is interesting to hear what Hans Walter Wolff says about the etymological and onomatopoeic roots of the Hebrew *nephesh*. According to Wolff, this word's root *psh* could be understood as "an onomatopoeic representation of the violently hissing breath." Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 13.

[35] Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 10.

[36] Etan Levine, *Heaven and Earth, Law and Love* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 12.

breathes. This respiratory way of being, which derived from "the common air"[37] (*ruach*) when God "blew into his nostrils the breath of life," is the fundamental principle of human existence.

Now if we compare our possible interpretative formulations of Gen 2:7 with Bachelard's aerial imaginative formulations "our terrestrial being must become aerial" and "let us become as aerial as our breath," we will see that they are not very far from each other. Let us combine these two formulations of Bachelard into one aerial imaginative formulation that says: *our terrestrial being must become as aerial as our breath*. If one were able to transform one's terrestrial being into a being that is as aerial as our breath, such a person could be called, in Bachelard's words, "a great breather."[38] We can also take note that both Gen 2:7 and Bachelard use the verb "to become." Gen 2:7 uses it in the past tense and Bachelard in the present tense with the auxiliary verb "must." So in a sense, according to Gen 2:7, what man has already become Bachelard in his aerial imagination says we must become. Human being as an earthling or a terrestrial being has already become by the grace of God, that is, by the breath of God a breathing being, a living breath-soul, a breather. If we truly take seriously within the Bachelardian aerial imagination the Biblical creation story as that *which we always already are*, then Bachelard's Nietzschean inspired ethical project of becoming as aerial as our breath can be called with a catch phrase taken from Pindar, Nietzsche and Heidegger: *become what you already are!*[39]

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[37] William Glen Moncrieff, *Soul: Or the Hebrew Word Nephesh and the Greek Word Psuche* (Edinburgh: William Laing, 1864), 3.

[38] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, trans. Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 180. In relation to this idea that somebody could be "a great breather" in a manner similar to when we say that somebody can be a great thinker, a great musician or a great swimmer it is very interesting that around 1959 Marcel Duchamp tells an interviewer the following: "Art was a dream that became unnecessary ... [Nowadays] I spend my time very easily, but I wouldn't know how to tell you what I do ... I'm a *respirateur*—a breather." Duchamp quoted by Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 106.

[39] Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 155 and Babette Babich, "Nietzsche's Imperative as a Friend's Encomium: On Becoming the One You Are, Ethics, and Blessing," *Nietzsche-Studien* 33 (December 2003), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110179200.29.

The Flying Person within the Atmosphere of Phenomenological Reduction

Could we interpret that *becoming what you already are* is perhaps also one of the key elements of Avicenna's Person Suspended in the Air Argument? Let us return to Avicenna's Flying Person Argument. Before we dived into the respiratory depths of Judeo-Islamic creation stories, our last question concerning Avicenna's thought experiment was: what could be the meaning of Avicenna's demand to imagine myself "created all at once and perfect"? We mentioned earlier in this article that El-Bizri understood the Flying Person Argument as Avicenna's phenomenological reduction or *epoché* that "provides access to the *Ur-Ich*" as the primordial self. Merleau-Ponty says: "Phenomenology is only accessible to a phenomenological method."[40] This method is the method of reduction which means a perpetual return to the beginning. In the "Preface" of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty wonderfully describes the role of the philosopher as a phenomenologist whose task is to enter into the methodological atmosphere of phenomenological reduction:

> the philosopher is a perpetual beginner. This means that he accepts nothing as established from what men or scientists believe they know. This also means that philosophy itself must not take itself as established in the truths it has managed to utter, that philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning, that it consists entirely in describing this beginning, that radical reflection is conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation.[41]

In his thought experiment concerning the flying person, in his own unique way Avicenna truly enters into the phenomenological atmosphere of the perpetual beginner. Within this atmosphere, his task is to return to the beginning of everything. This beginning of everything as our "initial, constant and final situation" is the Judeo-Islamic creation story that Avicenna says that we must return to as imaginative beings. It is not enough that this creation of human being has already taken place

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[40] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), lxxi.

[41] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, lxxviii.

and that it has been established, for example, within various religious orders as part of their belief system and dogma. That is not enough. We must return to this event at the beginning of our life, that is, to this starting point of our existence as human beings and reimagine it as deeply as possible. Human beings have a strong tendency to become forgetful of what takes place in this creation story and of how it is that our conscious and normal life is dependent on this beginning that is our "initial, constant and final situation" whether we want it or not.

It is not enough that somebody else returns to this phenomenological beginning. We have to do it ourselves. As previously mentioned, the meaning of Avicenna's words "one of us must imagine himself so that he is created all at once and perfect" are that one has to do it, that is, imagine it himself and not accept anything as established from what ordinary people and the so-called experts, for example, theologians or philosophers believe they know. We have already read the creation story of Gen 2:7 within an etymological context and the Bachelardian atmosphere of aerial and respiratory imagination and interpreted it to say: God formed man (*adam*) of the dust of the ground (*adamah*), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life that is His breath/air/wind/spirit (*ruach*); and man became a living, breathing being. Alternatively we also stated: God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man as an earthling became a living breath-soul, that is, a breather. In my interpretation of Gen 2:7, my train of thought goes well together with these words of Bohát: "I strove to 'hear' the meaning of the root word 'breathe' or 'breath' [of *nephesh*] constantly as would an ancient Hebrew speaker, whose mother tongue was used in the [Biblical] text."[42] The creation story of the *Quran* (15:28–29 and 32:7, 9) has its foundation on Gen 2:7 as it tells: "Recall when your Lord said to the angels, 'I am going to create a human being from a ringing clay made of decayed mud. When I form him perfect, and blow in him of My spirit/breath/wind (*ruh*)'" (Quran 15:28–29). I would like to bring up two important aspects of the original story. The first one is the invitation or commandment to "recall" again and again the creation story. The second aspect is that human beings are formed perfect by

[42] Bohát, "My Soul Knoweth Right Well," 167.

God. Both of these points can be found in Avicenna's thought experiment. To imagine oneself created again is recalling the creation story in a true phenomenological sense as in it one is returning to the beginning of everything. So Avicenna in the Quranic manner recalls the perfect creation of human being in his thought experiment about the flying person. In other Quranic verses on the creation of human being are said: God "gave everything its perfect form. He first created man from clay ... Then He moulded him; He breathed from His Spirit/Breath/Wind (*ruh*) into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!" (*Quran* 32: 7, 9)

Let us first connect these Quranic words together with the words from Gen 2:7 and then ponder the possible meanings when Avicenna's Person Suspended in Air Argument is read within the etymologico-respiratory atmosphere of *al-nafs* and the Judeo-Islamic creation story. As Gen 2:7 is the foundation of these Quranic ideas about the creation of human being from clay and God's breathing being the true beginning of human existence, in my opinion, we can interpret that Avicenna reads Gen 2:7 together with the *Quran* 15:28–29 and 32:7, 9. This verse (*Quran* 32:9) says: "He breathed from His Spirit/Breath/Wind (*ruh*) into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!" Now if this verse would be read together with Gen 2:7 it would say something like this: In the creation/beginning of man, God breathed from His *ruh/ruach* into man and he received the breath of life and he became *nafs/nephesh*. God gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful! What Bohát said about ancient Hebrew speakers can also be said about Arabic speakers like Avicenna.[43] So to paraphrase Bohát, Avicenna constantly heard the root word "breathe" or "breath" of *nafs* and *nephesh* and of *ruh* and *ruach* when he read the *Quran* and the *Old Testament*. If he were to have interpreted

[43] Persian Avicenna spoke Arabic fluently and wrote most of his works in Arabic. Dimitri Gutas writes about Avicenna's use of the Arabic language as follows: his "language is ornate, with frequent use of rare words culled from literature, while the syntax at times is complex to the point of obscurity, pushing the regular paratactic structure of Arabic to its limits ... The whole is breathtaking and quite a tour de force; there is nothing like it in Arabic philosophical literature." Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 382–383.

Gen 2:7 as the foundation of the Quranic creation stories in a manner similar to the way in which I have interpreted them in this article, we may provide a new interpretation of the meaning of the Flying Person Argument. So let us read together the etymologico-respiratory atmosphere of *al-nafs* and the Judeo-Islamic creation story.

We should recall when God formed man from the dust of the ground. He created man perfect and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. He became a breathing being, that is, a breather. God gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful! Man does not have *nephesh/nafs*. He is *nephesh/nafs*. He lives as *nephesh/nafs*. According to Wolff the word *nephesh* should not be translated as "soul" because *nephesh* is not a soul as understood by the Western tradition's notion of "soul" (for example, Platonic or Cartesian). Man is a breathing being, a breather. He lives as a breathing being, as a breather. Levine wrote that "human life derived from the air when God 'blew into his nostrils the breath of life'" and this "breath of God" is that "non-earthly quality ... what sets human beings apart from the plants and beasts."[44] I am not sure if this "non-earthly quality" sets us humans apart from rest of the creation, but what is at least important in Levine's words is that the common air as the breath of God is a "non-earthly quality" that defines essentially who we are as human beings. I would suggest that these Judeo-Islamic insights should be the starting point when we begin to interpret what Avicenna is trying to tell us.

Concluding Words: The Flying Person Within the Atmosphere of Air and Breath

It is important to remember that in the beginning of this article I quoted Hasse who said: "It is part of the attractiveness of the Flying Man that its meaning and purpose are rather difficult to understand." Kaukua also said that this thought experiment is "a reminder to make us pay attention to something that is and has always been there [experientially] for us but that we seldom take heed of [...]. Although the argument may be *per impossibile*, it is still used to point out some-

[44] Levine, *Heaven and Earth, Law and Love*, 12.

thing present to the reader's experience" that we have a "tendency to neglect ... in favour" of other aspects of our experience. Perhaps the meaning and purpose of the Flying Man Argument is so difficult, cryptic and mysterious that no Avicenna scholar, at least to my knowledge, has even imagined as a thought experiment that which it is reminding us of and which has always been experientially there for all of us since the creation or beginning of man is that man is a breather within the aerial atmosphere of divine breath where we all float. As we can see, Kaukua uses the wording that the thought experiment is "a reminder" of something that "we *seldom* take heed of." The word "seldom" appears also in the Quranic verse 32:9 which says: "He breathed from His Spirit/Breath/Wind (*ruh*) into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!" I have mentioned it already few times but have not yet examined it. Now is the time! What could the meaning of this verse be? How should it be interpreted? Does it have some kind of relation to the flying man? The verse says that we have been given amazing perceptual, emotional and intellectual faculties that we generally take for granted. We are seldom truly grateful for the wonderful gifts we have been given as human beings.

But what happens in Avicenna's thought experiment? Let us again begin to imagine and dream within the Avicennian and Bachelardian reign of aerial imagination: We are all created at once and perfect which means that in this creation God has given to us "hearing, sight, and minds" and other human faculties like touch. But we are deprived from all of them as Avicenna says: "sight is veiled from seeing external [things]" and "limbs are separated from each other so that they do not meet or touch each other." And at the same time we are "created floating/flying in the air." With regard to this Adamson says: "The human is in mid-air, his sight veiled and his limbs splayed so that he is not touching his own body. There is no sound or smell. In other words, this person is in a state of total sensory deprivation."[45] After all of this, Avicenna says: we "will not hesitate in affirming that [our] self or essence (*dhat*) exists." The Arabic word *dhat* means both "self" and "es-

[45] Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World*, 84.

sence." El-Bizri translates *dhat* also as the "essential self."[46] So it could also be said that we affirm that our essential self exists. What could our essential self be which reveals itself after total sensory deprivation? How could we have any sense of it? "A strict empiricist would say," as Adamson said, ["that there is nothing to affirm as] all our knowledge comes directly or indirectly from sensation." But to quote El-Bizri, Avicenna could reply: "the primary encounter with being or existence does not rest on sensible experience or sensory perception."[47] But what is left of the Quranic verse 32:9 after all this deprivation? "He breathed from His Spirit/Breath/Wind (*ruh*) into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!" (*Quran* 32:9) Avicenna has not demanded that we imagine that we would be deprived of God's *ruh* which He breathed into us. In the words from Gen 2:7 God breathed into us "the breath of life; and man became a breather (*nephesh*)." How seldom we are grateful that we have been given "the breath of life" and that we are breathers! We are created in the air, into *ruh* or *ruach* as that is where we breathe. We cannot be breathers if we are not surrounded and penetrated by air. Now we are able to affirm that our essential self exists, that is, that our essential self is breathing, which makes us breathers.

After we have affirmed and recognized our essential self as breathing, as respiratory self we have, in Avicenna's words, "the means to take heed of the existence of *al-nafs* as something different from the body." We have already earlier interpreted *al-nafs* as a cognate with *nephesh* as a breathing being, a breather. We could make a preliminary interpretation of what it means that our essential self as *al-nafs* (the respiratory self) is different from the body. The body (which includes, for example, the perceptual faculties) in the Flying Person Argument means all our relations to the terrestrial and earthly, that is, to that clay, dust of the ground from which everything is created. The body connects us to the world that we can see, hear and touch. On the contrary, *al-nafs* (the breath, the respiratory self) connects us directly to the invisible air that is the "non-earthly" atmosphere of our experience and from which, ac-

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[46] El-Bizri, *Phenomenological Quest*, 14
[47] El-Bizri, *Phenomenological Quest*, 162.

cording to Levine, our human life derives. Breathing connects us with the *ruh*. We could also say again in a preliminary manner that our essential self as *al-nafs* cannot be anything other than a flying man or a floating person, because it is our first and most primordial relation with the air, which in terms of Bachelardian aerial imagination is considered pure lightness (weightlessness) and freedom from matter. The breath (*al-nafs*) flies or floats in the air. The body as seeing and touching connects us with the terrestrial world of weight and gravity. Terrestrial matter weighs us down. The lightness of the air ascends and elevates us. Within the aerial imagination of Bachelard, "flight is freedom [from the terrestrial world.] [...] [B]ird personifie[s] free air [...] [and to be truly free is to be] free as a bird in the air."[48] For Avicenna, who is a philosopher with immense aerial imagination, "[t]he bird is a symbol of [*al-nafs*] set in its flight of liberation."[49] This aerial flight of *al-nafs* within the depths of the non-earthly atmosphere of *ruh* (the Breath of God) is Avicenna's reduction to the phenomenological beginning that is the *Ur-Ich* as our essential respiratory self. The greatest task of aerial ethics is to be a perpetual beginner whose motto of immense superhuman joy is: become what you already are!

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[48] Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 77.

[49] El-Bizri, *Phenomenological Quest*, 198.

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