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QŪNAWĪ: THE DISCIPLE SON¹

Abstract

Abū al-Ma'ālī Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad b. Ishāq al-Qūnawī nacque probabilmente a Konya nel 605/1209 e morì nel 673/1274. L'influenza che Ibn al-'Arabī esercitò su Qūnawī fu decisiva e lo *shaykh al-akbar* riservò questa particolare formazione esclusivamente a lui, forse proprio perché il compito del suo erede spirituale e interprete era già stato “previsto”.

In questo intervento tratteremo uno dei punti fondamentali del pensiero di Qūnawī, basandoci sulla prima epistola del carteggio che si concentra proprio sulla questione del *rappporto tra conoscenza filosofica e illuminazione divina*, questione che si ritrova nell'opera del nostro sufi e che lo contraddistingue all'interno del pensiero sufi in generale, collocandolo nella scuola ibnarabiana.

Abū al-Ma'ālī Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad b. Ishāq al-Qūnawī was born probably in Konya in 605/1209 and died in 673/1274. The influence that Ibn al-'Arabī exerted on Qūnawī was decisive and the shaykh al-akbar reserved this intense education and this particular training exclusively for him, perhaps precisely because the task of his spiritual heir and interpreter had already been “foreseen”.

In this intervention we will trace one of the fundamental points of Qūnawī's thought, relying on the first epistle of the correspondence that focuses precisely on the question of the relationship between philosophical knowledge and divine illumination, a question that is found throughout the work of our Sufi and that it distinguishes it within Sufi thought in general, placing it within the Ibnarabian school.

¹ The use of a simplified transliteration of Arabic words in the present article is an editorial decision, see *supra* the introduction to the volume.

Abū al-Ma‘ālī Sadr al-Dīn Muhammad b. Ishāq al-Qūnawī was born probably in Konya in 605/1209, and died in 673/1274. At the age of seven or eight years old Sadr al-Dīn lost his father, Ibn ‘Arabī married his mother, and the young Qūnawī was adopted and raised at the service and companionship of the *shaykh*².

Around the 620/1223, Ibn ‘Arabī travelled through Egypt, when Qūnawī was about twelve years old. There the young boy was hosted by the *shaykh* Awhād al-Dīn Kirmānī (m. 635/1238), an intimate friend of Ibn al-‘Arabī from Kirmān, who became his teacher. That’s what Ibn al-‘Arabī said to Kirmānī: *You know very well the love I have for Sadr al-Dīn, he is really like a son to me. Even more than that! He is related to me as my son, my disciple, and my student.*

Kirmānī supervised the spiritual steps of Qūnawī until he was able to reunite with his first master. The doctrines and the traditional persian chains of transmission of Kirmānī, became for Qūnawī complementary to the instruction received by Ibn ‘Arabī, so much that he states: *I tasted the milk from the breasts of two mothers*, meaning Eastern and Western wisdom³.

In 624/1227 Qūnawī returned to Damascus to find Ibn ‘Arabī, with whom he will resume studying *‘ilm al-hadīth* and the traditional Islamic sciences. The influence that Ibn ‘Arabī exerted on Qūnawī was decisive. From September 1229 until March 1232 our author was constantly busy with the master’s main texts; analyzes and discusses with him no less than forty-four works, including the complete text of the *Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*. The *shaykh al-akbar* reserved this intense education and this particular training exclusively

² The various sources and the biographical information relating to Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī are collected in the study *Il calamo dell’esistenza. La corrispondenza epistolare tra Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī e Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (The Calamus of Existence. The Epistolary Correspondence between Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī and Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī)*, edited and translated from Arabic by Patrizia Spallino and from Persian by Ivana Panzeca, Fidem, Barcelona-Rome 2019, pp. 17- 37 and I would suggest that the reader refer to this text.

³ Cfr. C. Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī ou La quête du Soufre Rouge*, Édition Gallimard, Paris 1989, p. 273.

for Qūnawī, perhaps precisely because the task of his spiritual heir and interpreter had already been “foreseen”.

Among his other teachers and doctrinal points of reference, the sources cite: Kamāl al-Dīn al-Qafsī al-Iskandarānī; the *shaykh* Sharaf al-Dīn al-Sulamī who in 626/1229 issued for him in Aleppo an *ijāza* (permission to teach) for Muslim’s *Sahīh* (most correct sayings). This intense learning path gave him a prestigious position as a master in the field of *ahadīth* experts.

If we look at the geographical and historical context in which Sadr al-Dīn was born and lives, we find that at that time Anatolia was ruled by the Seljuks of Rūm, a dynasty that prospered economically and culturally, which experienced its splendor in the first half of the thirteenth century in all cultural fields: art, architecture, literature, religious thought and science. In addition, Qūnawī spent an intense period of time in Damascus and Cairo, cities that represented the center of the cultural ferment of the Ayyubid dynasty, thus being able to take advantage of one of the most brilliant moments of Islamic splendor.

During this period intellectual exchanges were intertwined at high levels, and Qūnawī’s contemporaries were scientists and scholars of the caliber of Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (d. 672/1273) or poets like Ibn al-Fārid (576-632/1181-1235), ‘Attār (d. About 638/1234) and also spiritual masters such as Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 620/1221), Abū Hafs al-Suhrawardī (d. 631/1234) and the great Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273) to which he was particularly attached.

But Qūnawī also witnessed the defeat of his hometown in 1243 and the siege of the seat of the caliphate, Baghdād, sacked in 1258 by Hulagu Khan. In 630/1233 he went to Egypt with the intention of visiting Ibn al-Fārid, but was disappointed as he found him already ill and at the end of his life. In compensation, he met the mystic and poet ‘Afif al-Dīn Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291) and together they went to ‘Abd al-Haqq Ibn Sab‘īn (613-669/1217-1270), a scholar who was known as a Sufi and philosopher.

Apparently he was not with Ibn ‘Arabī at the time of his death in Damascus in 638/1240. Despite the death of the master, the type of spiritual and intellectual relationship that united the two is not interrupted, on the contrary it is transformed and intensified. It was at that time that Qūnawī inherited the role of the major interpreter of Akbarian doctrines.

In 635/1255 there was a vision in which he meets Ibn ‘Arabī who initiates him in the high spiritual stages, and this event is also reported by him in the *al-Nafahāt al-ilāhiyya*:

I saw the Shaykh (may God be pleased with him) in the night of 17 Shawwāl 653/19 November 1255 in a long event. There passed between me and him many words and I told him in the course of the conversation that the effects of the Names derive from the predications [ahkām], and the predications from the states, and the states are particularised from the Essence in accordance with the predisposition, and the predisposition is an order which is not caused by anything else. He was extremely delighted by this explanation, and his face beamed with joy and he nodded his head. He repeated some of my words and said: Excellent, excellent. I said to him: Master, you are the excellent one as you have the ability to make the human being arrive at the point where he can perceive such things. By my life! If you are a human being, the rest of us are nothing. Then I came close to him and kissed his hand, and said to him: There remains one thing I need. He said: Ask. I said: I desire realisation [tahaqquq] in the manner of your witnessing of the self-revelation of the Essence continually and eternally. I meant by that the attainment of that which came upon him from the essential self-disclosure, beyond which there is no veil and without which there is no establishment for perfection. He said: Yes ...⁴

The time from 627/1229 to 630/1232 and then 634/1236, spent in the company of his teacher, had seen Qūnawī entirely dedicated

⁴ Cfr. J. Clark, *Towards a Biography of Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī*, in “Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society” 49 (2011), p. 21.

to the study of the works of Ibn ‘Arabī with explicit esoteric themes such as: *Kitāb ‘anqā al-mughrib* (*The book of the fabulous griffin*), *Kitāb al-isrā’* (*The book of the nocturnal journey*), *Kitāb maqām al-qurba* (*The book of the proximity station*) and above all the *Fusūs al-hikam* (*The bezels of wisdom*), that the *shaykh al-akbar* transmitted to his adept in a session in which he was the only auditor; all of this testifies how Qūnawī occupied the role of a privileged recipient of the akbarian doctrines, and a recipient prepared to teach future initiates. The explanation of the *Fusūs al-hikam* is for example transmitted to the student Jandī (d. 699/1299) who, during the exposition given by Qūnawī, is invested with the inspiration that comes from the world of mystery. As soon as Qūnawī understood what was happening to Jandī, he said that he too had asked Ibn ‘Arabī to comment on the prologue, and that his master had passed on to him the marrow of the quintessence reserved for those who are endowed with intellect, producing in him a strange effect thanks to which he was able to grasp the content of the entire work.

‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Jāmī (d. 898/1492) also reports that the question on *wahdat al-wujūd* (uniqueness of Being) cannot be understood rationally and according to *sharī‘a* except through the study of works of Qūnawī. In fact, all his writings tend to clarify the key ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, to frame and specify them up to elaborating the famous definition of *wahdat al-wujūd*, an expression which, as is well known, provided a relevant weapon to the critics of Ibn ‘Arabī⁵.

⁵ About the term *wujūd* Claude Addas has said (C. Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabī ou La quête du Soufre Rouge* ... cit., p. 249): *En l’espace de quelques lignes, il peut apparaître avec une désarmante pluralité d’acceptions: comme nom verbal de wajada, trouver, comme désignation de l’univers créé par opposition à son Créateur, comme exprimant le concept d’existence ou comme s’appliquant stricto sensu à l’Être (= actus essendi). Cette polysémie, qui est un des plus périlleux privilèges de la langue arabe, est sans aucun doute en partie responsable des contresens commis – par les adversaires d’Ibn ‘Arabī mais aussi par certains de ses défenseurs – sur l’interprétation de la notion de wahdat al-wujūd (locution qui, rappelons-le, n’est pas employée par Ibn ‘Arabī: elle semble utilisée pour la première fois, assez rarement d’ailleurs, par Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī dans le Miftāh al-ghayb et les Nafahāt*

Instead of the allegorical and symbolic language of Ibn ‘Arabī, interwoven with poetic verses and references to the first Sufi masters, he substitutes a style that is in some ways more explicit, scientific and clear-cut, without neglecting literary forms and knowledge of the poetic field.

In 643/1245-46 he returned from his travel between Damascus and Cairo, where he held lessons on the explanation of the mystical poem *al-Tā’iyya* (Poem rhymed in *tā’*) by Ibn al-Fārid, a teaching activity that continued in Syria and in Anatolia.

Then Qūnawī went back to Konya, where he entered into the good graces of the ruler of the time Mu‘īn al-Dīn Sulaymān (d. 675/1277), who guaranteed him protection and great comforts. He spent his last years teaching, instructing his students on the works of Ibn ‘Arabī and commenting in particular on the *Fusūs* and the *Futūhāt*.

On the Friday after the prayer, he used to invite his students of religious studies and the Sufis to discuss some problems or points that was abstruse for them. His methodology was based on debate, he let everyone discuss, even at the cost of strong diatribes, but he remained silent to finally close the issue with a few essential words.

Major Works

Qunawi’s writings, although they are considered easier to approach in the Sufi environment than those of the master Ibn ‘Arabī, are certainly not characterized by simplicity. First of all, an important factor specified by the author himself must be taken into account: they are the product of divine inspiration and not of rational thought; this implies that they are aimed above all at the circles of

ilāhiyya, puis par Ibn Sab’īn et surtout par Farghānī dans son commentaire de la Tā’iyya d’Ibn al-Fārid. Mais c’est, croyons nous, Ibn Taymiyya qui, avec une intention polémique, en généralise l’usage comme désignation emblématique de la métaphysique akbarienne).

initiated students and that the texts are affected by that particular ecstatic “taste” of the particular spiritual states that were granted to Qūnawī.

Moreover, more than once Qūnawī himself complained about the limitation of human language that does not allow to express these particular states and the impossibility of explanations and clarifications to those who remain outside the contemplative experiences. But at the same time, our author feels the need and the importance of externalizing, and sometimes transcribing, at the request of his students, his personal paths and the states experienced.

Qunawī’s major works are:

Miftāh ghayb al-jam‘wa tafsīlihi (*The key to the unmanifest aspect of the synthesis and its particular manifest*). One of the most widely read texts of Sufi metaphysics in both the Ottoman and Persian circles.

Al-Fukūk fī asrār mustanadāt hikam al-Fusūs (*Unveiling the secrets hidden in the wisdom of the Fusūs*); text also known as *Fakk al-Fusūs*, or *al-Fukūk*.

It is the last complete work of Qūnawī written at the request of the students who wished to clarify the doubts encountered by the reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fusūs*.

I‘jāz al-bayān fī ta’wīl Umm al-Qur’ān (*The inimitable nature of the divine exposition in the interpretation of the Mother of the Koran*). Also known as *Tafsīr al-Fātiha*.

Al-Murāsālāt. The correspondence between Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī and Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī. The two scholars, known respectively as a Sufi and an Avicennian philosopher, seem to escape this categorization since each of the two masters and integrates the perspective of the other. We therefore find a philosopher who intervenes

on questions of Sufism and a Sufi who juggles well between philosophical theories.

The discussion is structured in different sections.

1) A first letter of preamble written in Persian language. Qūnawī here expresses the desire to open a correspondence with Tūsī.

2) There follows the treatise in Arabic by Qūnawī entitled *al-Risālat al-muḥsiha* ‘*an muntahā al-afkār wa sabab ikhtilāf al-umam* (Treatise that expresses the extreme limits of thought and the cause of the contradictions of religions).

3) Qūnawī exposes his questions to the interlocutor. These essentially concern the study of being and in particular: existence (*wujūd*), the intrinsic truth (*haqīqa*) of God, quiddity (*al-māhiyya*), general (*‘amm*) and common (*muštarak*) being. The question of unity and multiplicity. The nature of the soul, the body, the celestial forces and all things. Pain and spiritual joy, emanation, the chain of causes and effects, the concept of finite and infinite, substance and matter.

4) A letter of thanks in Persian from Tūsī to Qūnawī.

5) The answer in Arabic of Tūsī, in which the philosopher exposes his philosophical point of view on each question posed.

6) Another letter in Persian by Qūnawī introducing the last treatise.

7) Qūnawī’s *Al-risāla al-hādiya* (*The Treatise of Right Guide*), which has the value of a counter-response to Tūsī.

Philosophical Knowledge and Divine Illumination

In this intervention we will trace one of the fundamental points of Qūnawī’s thought, relying on the first epistle of the correspondence that focuses precisely on the question of the *relationship between philosophical knowledge and divine illumination*, a question that is found throughout the work of our Sufi and that it distinguishes it within Sufi thought in general, placing it within the Ibnarabian school.

Philosophers and Sufis refer to a different approach and to a different reading of reality, even if both currents ask themselves about an essential question, namely which is the most reliable method for obtaining knowledge on the *nature of things and of God*. To these two categories of thinkers is added that of theologians, the theorists of the *kalām* school, who tend to invalidate the theories of Sufis and philosophers based on the idea that the truth can be found in the Koranic revelation and that both intellectual knowledge that you reveal them, they risk turning out to be deceptive or illusory.

In general, the *falāsifa* (or rather the *peripatetic philosophers*, categories which include authors such as al-Kindī, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā) argue that the intellect (*al-'aql*) is a sufficient guide to man in order to understand the reality of things and achieve complete truth. They affirm this possibility by admitting a type of illuminative knowledge that derives from active intellect, but they strive for a rational knowledge that every man can achieve thanks to the functions of his own mind, regardless of divine help.

The Sufis, on their part, and in this the *shaykh* Ibn 'Arabī will reveal himself to be the head of the school, support the principle according to which the intellect, with its only constitutive potentialities, cannot lead man to the higher truths because it is unable to lift the veils that cover reality.

This kind of *unveiled knowledge* must then remain closely anchored in the revelation of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, but it is a gift reserved for some of God's chosen servants. While theologians and philosophers therefore intend to interpret the world, the Sufis wish to strip it.

Another element that characterizes the position of the Sufis is that the real understanding of the canonical sources also takes place through the unveiling, otherwise their reading would remain limited to *opinions* as happens to theologians, who apply human explanations to a sacred text that has instead a divine origin. This is one of the main arguments that will place the Sufis in frequent and sharp contrast with the theologians and vice versa.

However, the whole doctrine of Qūnawī does not aim at rejecting or denigrating theology and philosophy, but at showing their limits, errors, trying to correct and complete them; the lack of agreement between the theological and philosophical schools is considered an inevitable consequence due to the deficiencies proper to rational reflection. Thus a contradiction arises, and an infinite debate, which contrasts with the harmony that underlies the doctrines expounded by the *realized*, by the saints and by the prophets. In fact, these doctrines all derive from the same transcendent source and all carry the same unity, but the problem arises when they differ in the terms with which they are expounded, and above all, according to whom they will be addressed.

The disagreement will then be inconceivable between the *akābir al-awliyā'* (the greatest close to God) because they, having contemplated the divine principles, have resolved any divergence that intellectual knowledge continues to propose.

The basic idea that Ibn 'Arabī professes about the notion of *higher knowledge* is that for the Sufis, wisdom is the contemplation of the Essence clothed in the lights of divine attributes and therefore it is nothing but the *reality of knowledge* (*haqīqat al-ma'rifa*). The perfect *connoisseur* (*al-'ārif al-kāmil*) is the one who attributes to everything its due in a just and equitable way; and this happens through unveiling and direct experience and not through science or blind imitation (*taqlīd*). Another key term of the title of the epistle, on which it is useful to dwell, is that of *al-ikhtilāf al-umam* (the disparity of religions or communities) of which Qūnawī intends to seek the cause.

Qūnawī, in one of his works in Persian summarizes with a certain linearity the question of the hierarchical nature of revelation, revelation and the intellect:

Man possesses stages, and in each stage there are specific perceptions, so that the perceptions of the subsequent stage are absent from the preceding stage. For example, the unborn child has specific perceptions, and in relation to its perception, the suckling infant's

perceptions are “unseen” [ghayb]. So the stage of the suckling infant is beyond that of the unborn child. In the same way, the stage of the child who can differentiate (between right and wrong) in relation to the suckling infant is the same as the stage of the infant in relation to the unborn. Likewise, the stage of the person who controls his intellect is beyond that of the child who can only differentiate, the stage of sanctity (where unveiling takes place) is beyond that of the intellect, the stage of prophecy is beyond that of sanctity, And over every man of knowledge is one who knows (Koran XII, 76).

It is impossible for the unborn child to perceive any of the objects of perception of the child, for it is imprisoned within the constricting limits of the womb and has not yet reached the open space of this world. And so it is in the other cases as well: whoever resides in a determined stage of man is incapable of grasping the objects of perception of the stage beyond his own ... The farthest limits of the man of intellect are the beginnings of the saints, and the farthest limits of the man of intellect are the beginnings of the prophets.⁶

It is therefore a question of different levels of perception, knowledge and revelation in which the degree reached, which appears maximum to those who belong to a certain category of men, represents the initial stage for others.

Qūnawī, in his epistle *al-Mufsiha* states that men are divided into three orders: upper, middle and lower. The first are the so-called masters of *sublime intentions* aimed at the acquisition of sublime dimensions.

They seek *the realities of things as they really are*, and above all aspire to knowledge of the Truth, they have also examined existing beings, intelligible and sensitive, and have understood that there are things that man is able to grasp thanks to his constitution natural, while there are others that have a nature that can be grasped thanks to its theoretical and cogitative activity.

⁶ Cfr. Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *Matālī'-i īmān*, ed. by C. Chittick, “Sophia Perennis” 4/1 (1978), pp. 71-72 (Persian section).

As for the knowledge of the essence of Truth and the realities of its Names and Attributes, we do not proceed through the intellect.

Qūnawī introduces a particular figure called *impartial mustabsir*, someone who we could define as *able to see*, or a *perceptive observer*. It is the one who tries as much as possible to see and penetrate *the reality of things* (*haqā'iq al-umūr*) with intellectual means.

The *mustabsir* recognizes the insufficiency of his means, but feels a need that does not satisfy him; in fact, he does not find theoretical activity capable of calming his anxiety, even if it is that same anxiety that drives him to search for *knowledge of the reality of things*.

This does not mean that the *mustabsir* has not confronted himself with the sciences that are available to men, but following his research he has understood that they are *imaginary opinions and representations* and that none of them is firmly founded⁷.

Rational knowledge is limited because the intellectual tool is inadequate to understand the object towards which it is aimed. The prophets and the *awliyā'* (the intimates of God) are the recipients who possess a predisposition to welcome those realities as they are determined in the science of truth. In fact, Allāh has confirmed prophets and saints through His spirit and to them He reveals the secrets of His being; their task is to call the attention of men and bring them to their Lord, to make known through wisdom, warning, miracles and indications the way that leads to him and to beatitude⁸.

The masters of the higher order, cited at the beginning of the epistle, participate, draw and drink from the same source as the prophets; they too had already reached the station of the People of Speculation, but they recognized its weakness by encountering precisely those obstacles which prevent you from reaching *realization*. This – Qūnawī confesses, opening up an autobiographical space – is his own case.

⁷ Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī, *Il calamo dell'esistenza. La corrispondenza epistolare tra Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī e Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī ...* cit., pp. 207-210.

⁸ Ivi, pp. 214-216.

This brings us to another focal point of the discussion: Qūnawī will explain what are the causes that determine the limits of the intellect and above all what the diversity of opinions between peoples entails.

A lucid criticism is launched at the science of logic which generates an inevitable disagreement between thinkers, a clear proof of its weakness. On the contrary, the minority constituted by the realized (*ahl al-tahqīq*) which certainly does not need the logical criterion, is qualified to receive directly from the Truth, to draw from the sea of His Generosity, to get to know the secrets of His being. The Sufi knows the very realities of things and not mental abstractions, this occurs because the organ of knowledge is different: the heart receives a light that reveals it to itself, transforming the being of those who know.

Qūnawī's intent is to try to highlight the concordance of opinions between Sufis and philosophers regarding the fallacy of the rational way and to implement this, he calls the prince of philosophers Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) as a witness by extracting a passage from his *Ta'īqāt* where the philosopher affirms that *the intellect only comes to know the properties, the concomitants, and the accidents of things, while pure realities escape it.*

Once again it is concluded that *the knowledge of the realities of things* according to their simplicity and their purity in the Presence of the unitary Divine Science is impossible, and this time it is demonstrated by affirming that one cannot perceive a thing starting from ours *unity*, since it is never without the characteristics of *multiplicity*⁹.

These principles manifest themselves in the form of very obscure secrets, such as the status of the *Theophany of Truth* which pervades the realities of possible beings, to which the master Ibn 'Arabī alluded in poetic verses inspired by God.

⁹ Ivi, pp. 252-254.

Those who are qualified to know through their inner sight have seen from the beginning that the shape of the world is *an imaginal representation* of essential realities; they know then that every single being is the form of a *place of manifestation* and *symbol* of an ideal reality that is not manifested.

Allāh has set three levels for science: one of these levels is called *the science of certainty* (*‘ilm al-yaqīn*), the second *the vision of certainty* (*‘ayn al-yaqīn*), the third *the real of certainty* (*haqq al-yaqīn*).

In the degree of the *Real of certainty*, there is the search to assemble what results from the demonstration and what is the fruit of direct vision. This is one of the reasons, concludes Qūnawī, that *led him to carry out this collection of questions, and to prefer to dare to venture into it having previously renounced it, in the hope of success in this intention*¹⁰.

Qūnawī thus provides us with concrete evidence of a line of thought in which *direct vision* represents the pinnacle of spiritual experience, but where intellectual speculation is, in turn, the summit of knowledge. *Revelation* and *knowledge* seem to be absolutely co-implicated in a whole, one recalling the other. The arduous attempt is then to achieve *real certainty* in order to grasp a *result* (demonstration) and a *fruit* (direct vision): two different aspects of the same Reality.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 244-245.