Aristotelianism in Islamic philosophy

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In Arabic, Aristotle was referred to by name as Aristutalis or, more frequently, Aristu, although when quoted he was often referred to by a sobriquet such as 'the wise man'. Aristotle was also generally known as the First Teacher. Following the initial reception of Hellenistic texts into Islamic thought in al-Kindi's time, al-Farabi rediscovered a 'purer' version in the tenth century. In an allusion to his dependence on Aristotle, al-Farabi was called the Second Teacher. Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes, was the last great Arabophone commentator on Aristotle, writing numerous treatises on his works. A careful examination of the Aristotelian works received by the Arabs indicates they were generally aware of the true Aristotle. Later, transmission of these works to Christian Europe allowed Aristotelianism to flourish in the scholastic period.

We should not take at face value the Islamic philosophers' claims that they were simply following Aristotle. The convention in Islamic philosophy is to state that one is repeating the wisdom of the past, thus covering over such originality as may exist. There was a tendency among Islamic philosophers to cite Aristotle as an authority in order to validate their own claims and ideas.

1- Early influence

2- Middle stage: Ibn Sina and al-Farabi

3- Late period: the legacy of Aristotelianism

Early influence .1

Among the major differences between the Islamic philosophers and Aristotle are the questions of the eternity or creation of the world, the nature of Being and a real-world distinction between essence and existence. The ninth-century philosopher al-Kindi used Aristotle, in Arabic translations, as a base for his own philosophical works. Among other works, al-Kindi wrote one treatise specifically dealing with Aristotle, Fi kammiya kutub Aristutalis wa ma yahtaj ilahi fı tahsil al-falsafa (The Quantity of the Books of Aristotle and What is Required for the Acquisition of Philosophy). The early part of this treatise gives an accurate summary of various logical works by Aristotle, such as Categories and De Interpretatione, before diverging into a decidedly non-Aristotelian précis on questions found in the physical treatises. Though he owed a large debt to Aristotelian thought, al-Kindi parted company with Aristotle in espousing the

idea of creation from nothing by a Creator. Furthermore, in writing about creation al-Kindi does not ascribe the idea to Aristotle in the text of his treatises. Debate still continues over whether al-Kindi should be considered more 'Platonic' or 'Aristotelian'.

An inventory of those works attributed to Aristotle which were available to early Islamic philosophers appears in the Fihrist of the tenth-century bibliographer Ibn al-Nadim. The work known as the Theology of Aristotle appears in the Fihrist, although it is mentioned only in passing. Greater attention is paid to other correctly attributed works of philosophy and logic by Aristotle, including such detailed information as the translator, the number of sections and the work's Arabic commentators, suggesting the relative importance of these works to Ibn al-Nadim and his audience. Judging from the list available in the Fihrist, the Islamic philosophers would have been able to appreciate Aristotle's logic, physics and metaphysics. However, since the Theology of Aristotle was really a Neoplatonic work (see Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy §1), based on the Enneads of Plotinus, accepting this attribution would have obscured understanding of Aristotle. Whatever the influence of Aristotle on Islamic philosophy, the Muslims were nonetheless obliged to work out for themselves certain underlying issues, such as conceptualizing ideas in their own language. In particular, they had to implement a philosophical terminology, as there was a lack of abstract nouns in Arabic.

Middle stage: Ibn Sina and al-Farabi .2

The Islamic philosophers picked and chose from Aristotle's texts, using him as an authority when it suited their purposes, and knowing that philosophy was a 'foreign science' in need of an external authority as it lacked an indigenous authority. While aspects of Avicennan philosophy continue the Aristotelian tradition in broad terms, Ibn Sina's ideas about the Necessary Existent and the Possible Existent do not have their antecedents in Aristotle's philosophy (see Ibn Sina). However, as Ibn Sina himself hailed from Khurasan, one cannot dismiss the possible influences of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism on his philosophy. The differences with Aristotle go back to the fact that the philosophers are writing in an Islamic milieu, and certain changes had to take place to correlate with the religious ideology. Seen in some lights, these changes may be considered peripheral; the philosophers continued to hold a solidly Aristotelian view of such basic ideas as the relationship of form and matter.

Among the scholars of the Middle Period - the fourth and fifth centuries ah (tenth and eleventh centuries ad) - al-Farabi is considered the foremost Aristotelian, and was indeed known as the Second Teacher (Aristotle himself being the First Teacher). Some scholars have divided his

works into those which admit Aristotelian influence, such as Kitab al-huruf (The Book of Letters), and more popular works, such as Kitab fı mabadi' ara' ahl al-madina al-fadila (The Book of the Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City), usually known simply as al-Madina al-fadila (The Virtuous City), a utopian treatise which espouses Neoplatonic theories such as emanation, in which everything is said to flow from the One. His internalization of Aristotle is apparent in his treatment of the four causes in Tahsil al-sa'ada (The Attainment of Happiness), echoing those found in al-Tabi'a (The Physics). Here he shows a complete familiarity with the Aristotelian idea of the four causes, but is equally willing to propound his own interpretation, preferring the word mabadi' (literally, principles) rather than asbab (causes), which was the translator Ibn Ishaq's choice.

On another important point, however, al-Farabi is not conceptually Aristotelian. In al-Madina al-fadila, we do not find the long discourses on the inherent weakness of women, children and slaves, which are found in Aristotle; rather, he distinguishes the inhabitants of the virtuous city from those of the ignorant cities by their moral character.

Al-Farabi considered his Kitab al-huruf, which takes its title from the Greek letters which entitle Aristotle's chapters, to be a commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics. While al-Huruf is inspired by Aristotle's concerns, and deals with many of the same subjects, it does not slavishly imitate or even follow the order of the Metaphysics. Al-Farabi also believed in the ultimate harmony of the opinions of Plato and Aristotle, a difficult notion for many philosophers today to accept.

One might ask why Ibn Sina (Avicenna) would be taken in by a false treatise, the Theology of Aristotle, when he had such a good command of Aristotelian concepts that he could quote accurately from memory. In his 'Letter to Kiya', Ibn Sina expresses doubt about the authorship of the Theology of Aristotle, remarking that the text is 'somewhat suspect' (Gutas 1988). The tone of his discussion indicates that while he included this work with other Aristotelian treatises, he has by no means concluded it is genuinely an Aristotelian text. On the other hand, in the Danashnama-i 'ala'i (The Book of Knowledge for 'Ala'), his account of metaphysics, Ibn Sina derives a quotation from Aristotle where he claims that Aristotle describes the First Being as having complete happiness in itself. It is uncertain to which part of the Metaphysics Ibn Sina is referring, as such a passage does not appear to exist.

Elsewhere, Ibn Sina claims to quote Aristotle from memory when discussing the theory of definition for his treatise on Definitions, when he suggests that in the Topics, Aristotle defines definition as 'a statement indicating the quiddity of a thing'. This is an exact quotation. It is remarkable that Ibn Sina appears to remember Aristotle's important ideas word for word after having, he says, read the books only once and thereafter being unable to refer to them. Given

.his life as a wanderer, this statement is credible

Late period: the legacy of Aristotelianism .3

Unlike the Islamic east, where a Hellenistic tradition of philosophy flourished from the ninth century, philosophy reached al-Andalus later. Ibn Bajja, known as Avempace in Latin, was one of its first practitioners, active in the early part of the twelfth century. His heavily Aristotelian commentaries on the logical works of al-Farabi still survive. The socio-historian Ibn Khaldun ranked him with Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Bajja no doubt influenced this, the most famous, philosopher of Muslim Spain.

Ibn Rushd, better known in the West as Averroes, is considered not nearly as influential in the Islamic world as he was in medieval Europe. Here, either because he lived on the Western periphery of the Islamic world or because he wrote such extensive commentaries on Aristotle, he became renowned (see Averroism §1). Latin translations of Ibn Rushd's texts were available in Europe within a century of his death. Coming from a family of eminent jurists, Ibn Rushd had legal as well as philosophical training. He wrote commentaries on a wide range of Aristotle's works, including his Physics, Metaphysics, Book of the Soul, On the Heavens and Posterior Analytics, the last dating from 1170. In both long and intermediate commentaries as well as short paraphrases, Ibn Rushd tried to analyse the extent of his Islamic predecessors' deviation from Aristotle. He also exerted himself in reconciling religion and philosophy in his Fasl al-maqal (Decisive Treatise On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy). He discovers a duty to reflect with the intellect on existing beings and to seek knowledge in the Qur'anic injunction found at Surah 49: 2: 'Consider, you who have vision.'

There is good reason to consider another of Ibn Rushd's works, the Tahafut al-tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence) to be an attack on Neoplatonism and a defence of true Aristotelianism. On the question of the origin of the world, Ibn Rushd promulgated eternal creation but did not accept emanation. While he wrote the Tahafut primarily as a rebuttal of al-

Ghazali's attack on the philosophers, he also disagreed with Ibn Sina's ideas about necessity. Ibn Rushd was also to be the last in the line of Islamic Aristotelians. Throughout the classical period of Islamic thought, there were always some thinkers who distrusted rationalism and logic, certain that the study of philosophy results in a loss of faith. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya are the two best known examples. Al-Ghazali studied philosophy to be able to rebut it; he suggested that knowledge is inferior to faith, as knowledge could not overcome doubts. His Tahafut al-falasifa (The Incoherence of the Philosophers) had a lasting influence. Here al-

Ghazali attacked Aristotle and his followers, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, particularly objecting to the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world, which he found irreconcilable with the Qur'anic description of God's creation of the world from nothing. Al-Ghazali also saw this as an idea which limited God in a totally unacceptable manner. Two centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya wrote al-Radd 'ala al-mantiqiyyin (Against the Logicians) as an attack on the method of definition and demonstration used by the philosophers who were influenced by Aristotle. He argued that logic is based on the faculty of human reason, which is necessarily inferior to divine revelation. Despite the efforts of Ibn Rushd to rehabilitate philosophy, many scholars believe that Islamic philosophy never completely recovered from al-Ghazali's massive and brutal assault on it. In the Latin West, Islamic Aristotelianism was reincarnated as Averroism, that is, Aristotle's works as taught by Ibn Rushd and translated into Latin (see Aristotelianism, medieval §4; Averroism §1). His works also came to have great influence in Jewish philosophy, and for many years led to a strong strain of Aristotelianism among Jewish philosophers (see Averroism, Jewish). Aristotelianism continued to have an effect on Islamic philosophy through opposition to it from Illuminationist philosophy (see Illuminationist philosophy), and in particular thinkers such as al-Suhrawardi, al-Shahrazuri, Ibn Kammuna and others, often based in Persia. The latter sought to attack what they took to be the principles of Aristotelianism, especially its logical and ontological axioms, and produced critiques of Aristotelian essentialism which are sometimes quite similar to that of William of Ockham. It is accurate to say, however, that Aristotelianism as a school of philosophy in the Islamic world found no Muslim successors after the death of Ibn Rushd.

See also: Aristotelianism, medieval; Aristotle; Aristotle Commentators; al-Farabi; Greek philosophy: impact on Islamic philosophy; Ibn Rushd; Ibn Sina; Islam, concept of philosophy in; Logic in Islamic philosophy; Platonism in Islamic philosophy

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