

Address of the Rector of Panteion University

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Aristotle influenced human thought more than any other philosopher. His work has shaped or crystallized to a great extent the concepts, definitions and problems of philosophy and has influenced many scientific fields.

The philosophical systematization of ethics and law and the scientific study of politics are attributed to Aristotle, while his contribution to the establishment of logic was decisive.

Aristotle is unquestionably the philosopher whose theories and works became the bridge on which the Eastern intellect met the Western thought making the Stagirite philosopher a “measure for all problems” and “master of them that know” according to Dante. We consider the organization of the international scientific conference titled “Aristotle, a bridge between the East and the West” in cooperation with the Education Department of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Goethe Institute of Athens a great honour for our University.

With the expansion of the Arab dominance during the 7th and 8th century, their language and religion were imposed on very big areas which had been influenced by the Greek culture, such as Syria, Egypt and Persia. In these countries, there had already been philosophers, since the 6th century, systematically studying Aristotle and Plato – known to them mainly via Aristotle – and who had translated their works into Persian and Aramaic.

The Arabs, of course, contributed to a great extent to making Aristotle known in Christian Europe. However, what they really did was to communicate what they, themselves, had conceived from Christian sources. It should be noted, nevertheless, that Aristotle, who was, in the end, appreciated in Christian Europe, was not the Arabic version of the great philosopher, but the Greek one which reached Western Europe through Constantinople.

Al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Avicenna or Ibn Sina, who in reality was Persian, and Averroes or Ibn Rushd were among the most famous philosophers of the Arabic School.

Al-Kindi was the first known Arab peripatetic philosopher who made a general introduction to Aristotle's philosophy. He faced the same difficulties with Aristotle with regard to the way we conceive entity, that is the essence of things. His theory on "acquired intellect" is based on the fundamental theorem of Aristotle's metaphysics according to which a "being" (einai) can change from potentiality to actuality only with the influence of a "being" (einai) already in actuality. From this starting point, Aristotle ends up admitting that above our intellect, which does not always "grasp", there is a Being / intellect who is eternally in actuality, constant and unchanging, producing all other beings, God.

Al-Kindi does not depart from Aristotle's theory that recognized a special position for the intellect inside the human soul, which conceives things without mater, as it is not a material object; this means that it does not need any body organ. The soul, according to Aristotle, is in a way all existing things, because they are either perceptive or intellectual (have perception or intellect), and so this synthetic view reveals its two poles, perception (aesthesis) and intellect (noesis). According to his exact words: «the soul is the first actuality of a natural body that is potentially alive».

The second one chronologically in the group of Arab philosophers is al-Farabi, who presented a more scientific, in the modern meaning of the word, study of Aristotle's logic restituting, thus, the bonds between philosophy and Islam. He took astral theology simplified by Arab astronomy from Aristotle; that is, a supreme God above the worlds and heaven consisting of eight concentric and articulated spheres.

This point directly leads to Aristotle, who was the first to support that in reality every movement in the world is not but the self-motion of a thing moved by something other and that the series "mover-moved" presupposes a "not moved mover", that is the logical principle of movement which is itself independent of movement. But who makes this possibility, which must be eternally carried out, an actuality? What is the mover? At this point, the celestial physics of

Aristotle is closely linked to theology, since the undivided mover of heaven which is eternal and in full actuality cannot be anything else but God. The Stagirite stresses characteristically: «We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God» (Metaphysics, Chapter. Λ, para. 7).

The Persian philosopher Avicenna starts from a God who is pure intellect and knows everything in their true entities. Avicenna described fully the mechanism of “second intellect”, according to which and by following a continuous progress we end up acquiring abstract knowledge from the perceived thing. The Stagirite considerably influenced him as well, since the Greek philosopher supports that there is no other way to understand the essence of things but intellectual supervision which he calls “noesis” and which is for essence what sight is for colour. According to Aristotle, noesis is not found at the end of a long dialectic movement through which we overcome perceived things, as Plato supported. The Stagirite believed that perception is the starting point for noesis and knowledge is impossible “outside perceiving”. In this way he is close to the theory of perception of Democritus. He supports, that is, that noesis is in the perceived understanding, exists in perception as essence exists in the thing.

Finally, the purpose of the foremost Arab philosopher of Spain, Averroes or Ibn Rushd is to define the true meaning of Aristotle, which has been twisted by its interpreters, emphasizing particularly the attempt to reveal his theory with regard to the production of the essence forms and his theory about the acquired intellect. Averroes analysed and recomposed Aristotle’s work in a fine and sensitive way. He was called “Commentator” because of his commentaries on Aristotle’s work. What is peculiar in Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle is the meaning he gives to the Aristotelian doctrine of the “Active” and “Passive” intellect. It was him, who put forward the progressive – for his time – idea that theology and philosophy spring from the same source, the “active intellect of God”.

One can conclude, therefore, that Arabic philosophy is to a great extent an interpretation of Greek philosophy and, mainly, of Aristotle’s philosophical theories. It is, of course, Arabic as it is written in the Arabic language, although its foremost representatives, Averroes and Avicenna, were not native born of

the Arabian Peninsula. What we should clearly recognize, though, is the fact that the Arabs developed Greek philosophy in relation to medicine and in this way greatly influenced Europe.

I would like to thank the officials of the Education Department of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Goethe Institute of Athens and the Department of Public Relations of Panteion University for the successful organization of the conference. We should also particularly thank Pr. Christos Giannaras, who was responsible for the scientific coordination of the conference and who will undertake the redaction of the publication of the minutes.

I would also like to thank the speakers of the international conference. To the ones coming from abroad, I wish them a pleasant stay in our country. I would also like to thank all of you who honour our conference with your presence.