

The Reception of Aristoteles in the Christian and Islamic Thought

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The history of the reception of Aristotle is, beside the systematic analysis of his philosophy, a realm of interesting investigation, that bears in itself not only new insights for understanding his thought, but offers also significant characteristics for conceptual transformations as such. The process of this reception in the Christian and Islamic thought presents thereby, in regard of its manifold aspects and relative high traceability, a unique example that may have no parallel to each other ancient philosophical thought. It goes across historical, geographical and cultural boundaries and penetrates in quite different areas of theoretical and practical spheres of life.

Christian Faith and Pagan Philosophy

The Christian faith claimed, as any other religion, to be the way, the truth and the life in one, i.e. in philosophical terms, both the theoretical truth and the practical formation of the life. These were aims, that the ancient philosophy wanted to achieve too, with the difference that the new religion – instead of being merely the love of wisdom grounded by the finite man – claimed to be, because of being based on divine revelation, the absolute and eternal truth, the incarnation of the logos and the certain way of life. This partially identical, partially different, dispositions of Christianity and the philosophy in same aims, but in different ways, shaped the features of their relation during the next centuries.

The early Christian thought, as represented by the Apologists of the Patristic era, had an ambivalent position toward the Ancient and the Hellenistic philosophy, which can be traced back to St. Paul himself, in his letters to the early Christian

communities and his sermons, especially the sermon addressed to the Athenians at the Areopag. They aimed to defend the matters of Christian faith against the skeptical approach of the philosophers by calling in question the ability of philosophy to achieve the truth on one side, and to make them, on the other side, as far as going, reasonable for the intellectual milieu of the educated in the Imperium Romanum, which was deeply influenced by the Hellenistic, e.g. the neoplatonic, peripatetic and of course the stoic philosophy.

The spectrum of the positions of the Apologists toward the philosophy reaches from total denying all achievements of the ancient pagan philosophy as the result of the human hybris, to subordinating them, as incomplete acquisitions of the finite reason of man, under the very truth revealed by God in the person of Jesus Christ, so that the real owners of it were therefore the faithful Christians.

The Christian Theology and Aristotle

The reception of Aristotle was, because of historical circumstances, more or less limited to his logical writings and Aristotle was more known as a logician, or in the terms of that time, a dialectician. His logic offered, the method of reasonable, it means, acceptable thinking. Several Fathers of the Church, like Tertullian, attacked the Aristotelian logic for restricting the way of reasonable approach to the truth.

“Wretched Aristotle! He invented for these men dialectics, the art of building up and pulling down, an art so evasive in its propositions, so far-fetched in its conjectures, so harsh in its arguments, so productive of contentions, embarrassing even to itself, retracting everything, and really treating of nothing.”

But the critical position of the early Christian theology was not focused merely on his dialectic. For the Greek Fathers of the Church, who could yet read Aristotle in his original language, seemed several of his doctrines incommensurable with main matters of Christian faith. We try to point out in brief the main problems in three areas of philosophical disciplines.

I / In the philosophy of nature, was Aristotle’s doctrine of the eternity of the kosmos one of the main problems. It seemed to confront directly the dogma

of the creation of the universe by the divine creator. While Plato's Demiorgos in his *Timaios* could be in some way identified with the biblical God as the creator, or at least, as the designer of the world, didn't Aristotle need such an instance for its coming to being. The world was and will be for ever and its changes were the result of his four causes. His *proton kinoun akineton* was only the final, but not the efficient cause of the universe and, in the case of natural changes, was the *morphe* or *eidos* not only the *forma causalis*, but the *causa efficiens* and the *causa finalis* as well. Moreover, the belief of the eternity of the world in Aristotle's cosmology was in contradistinction with its creation in time out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), i.e. the usual interpretation of the Holy Script in the Christian theology. The concept of creation however, seemed to be incompatible with Aristotle's cosmology, because according to his concept of the *genesis ex nihilo nihil fit*.

2 / In the theology seemed the differences between Aristotle's unmoved Mover and the God of the Bible, to be no less. The unmoved Mover is the perfect being, the pure intellect, the pure *eidos* and the pure thinking, that thinks merely itself (*noesis noeseos*). It has, as the *actus purus*, nothing to do, than thinking itself. It intervenes neither in the "creation", nor in the course of the *kosmos*. It does not anything for any purpose, does not work miracles according to its free will, is not the ruler, lawgiver or governor of the world, does not take notice of the singular actions of the man, does not get influenced by his prayers, does not answer him, is not the judge of his works and does not enforce his commandments by punishment and reward in regard of the good or bad actions of the man in his life. Also, the Christian dogma of the Trinity seemed to be incompatible with Aristotle's doctrine of the substances, while the neoplatonic, especially Plotin's Theory of the hierarchal structure of the being and the relation between the hypostases and the One, offered a closer interpretation.

3 / In the ethics knew Aristotle only one world, i.e. the world we live in it and the *eudaimonia* of the man belongs to this world. The soul of the man was – except his *nous poietikos*, which is separable – the form of his body, but only one, and has to give, according to Aristotle's *hylomorphism*, place to another form after his death. This soul is not preexistent, has no fall and no original

sin, no salvation and no postexistence in an eschatological life. What remains, is only the form of the art "man", which is present in its individuals.

Moreover, his prudent, cool calculated doctrine of the *aretai*, the virtues as the *mesotes*, or the "middles between two vices which were neither too much nor too little", and "not one, nor the same for all", seemed to exclude every kind of charity and self-restraint, as a principle of Christian morality.

These characteristics of the Aristotelian philosophy made it unattractive for the Greek Fathers of the Church and for many of the theologians in the next centuries. The later Latin Fathers – even Augustine – and the early scholastic scholars had another problem else: they could not read Aristotle's texts, because they did not know Greek. The pagan Academy of Athens had been closed after nine hundred years in 529 on the order of the Christian Roman emperor Justinian, and the ambitious project of Boethius, as one of the last philosophers, who could enjoy the study of the whole Ancient Greek philosophy in its original language, to translate "all of Aristotle's works and Plato's dialogues", which came to his hands into Latin failed, because he was sentenced to death and executed in the age of 44 years, succeeding only to translate and comment some logic writings of Aristotle. These translations were the whole works of Aristotle, which were available in the Christian Middle Ages up to the 11th century, as the great translations from Arabic into Latin begun. The rational theology of Anselm of Canterbury and the controversies between the realists, conceptualists and nominalists concerning the nature of universals and its theological consequences however, were a direct result of the reception of Aristotelian logic and philosophy in the Middle Ages.

Aristotle in the Islamic World

The reception of Aristotle in the Islamic thought begun with the flood of translations of the main works of Greek philosophy and science from the third, up to the fifth century after the Hira (8th-10th centuries of the Christian calendar), first from Syriac and later directly from Greek. Among these translations were the available works of Aristotle at that time and his works had - compared to other Greek philosophers - no doubt the most influence on the formation of

the Islamic philosophical thought. Aristotle was titled by the later Islamic philosophers as the first master (al-muaʿllim al-awwal).

Aristotle's logic was even accepted by the more rationalist theologians, although a large number of them could not accept his philosophical doctrines. Some of these doctrines however, penetrated into the Islamic theology (kalam), jurisprudence (fiqh) and the methodology of the jurisprudence (ilm -al usul) indirectly.

Although many of the problems, which emerged in the Islamic kalam had their roots in the effort of Muslim thinkers to bring their understanding of the Qur'an and the tradition (sunna) in a harmonic system, used some of them indirectly ancient Greek ideas, which were received through the eastern schools of Alexandria, Antioch and Gondishapur. This indirect influence can be traced in a number of works of the Mutakallimin of both the Muʿtazilit and the Ashʿarit schools.

The main influence of the Aristotelian thought however, begun with the reception of his philosophy in al-Kindi's works about logic, metaphysics and physics. We must mention that this reception should not be understood as a mere transmission. Al-Kindi's inquiries about the intellect, especially the active intellect (nous poietikos or intellectus agens) and the act of abstraction (aphelein) to achieve the universal (katholon) should be regarded as the first attempt toward the later problem of the universals in the Middle Ages. Al-Kindi worked out a theory about the soul and human nature, based on Aristotle's distinction between the passive intellect (nous pathetikos) and that part of the intellect, which was later named by his peripatetic successors the active or agent intellect.

This motive was followed by the great Islamic Persian logician, philosopher and physician Abu-Nasr al-Farabi, who was called the second master (al-muaʿllim al-thani). He considered the agent intellect as a universal Intelligence and placed it in his hierarchical order of the world, inferior to the one supreme cause, who resides above all the created beings in his inaccessible solitude. As we remark shows this interpretation the influence of Neoplatonism on Farabi's philosophy, in which he tries – maybe inspired by the translation of a pseudo-Aristotelian work, called the Theology of Aristotle – to reconcile the Platonic and the

Aristotelian ways of thinking. Farabi wrote a separate treatise (*al-Gam' baynara'yay al- hakimayn*) to demonstrate, how this could be possible.

Another important doctrine of Farabi was the distinction between the essence and the existence in created beings, which is described as “epoch-making” and by Max Horten, the German translators of his works, “a turning point in philosophical evolution” . According to Farabi, must the natural beings as contingent essences, receive necessarily their existence, from a cause, which has its existence necessarily, i.e. from God. This distinction delivered a basis to solve the problems, which occurred in reconciling a modified Aristotelian philosophy with a theological concept of the creation.

Farabi was aware of the Greek concepts in politics, but took quite another way in his political writings. Another great Islamic Persian philosopher and physician, who was called the third Aristotle and gained an immense influence in the Islamic and Christian thought, was Ibn-Sina (Avicenna), whose works in metaphysics, logic, physics and medicine became the textbooks of Islamic and Christian schools in the Middle Ages. His *Šifa* (*Liber Sufficientiae*) was an encyclopaedia of logic, metaphysics, mathematics and physics, learned, interpreted, disputed and quoted by Islamic and Christian scholars until the 15th century and his *Qanun fi al-tib* (*Canon*) remained the most influent work in medicine, even till the 17th century. Ibn-Sina’s innovations, like the fourth form of the syllogism, or his subtle investigations in the modalities remained a constant part of the formal logic. His success to achieve a widely coherent system in the metaphysics, was appreciated by both Islamic and Christian scholars and expressed itself in the title *malik al-falasafa* (*princeps philosophorum*), by which he was referred to.

But it made him also, as the representative of philosophy as such, a target for criticism of theologians like al- Gazzali. This Persian theologian, born in the town Tus in Khorasan, made himself familiar with the arguments of the Islamic peripatetic philosophers, mainly Ibn-Sina and composed a devastating refutation of these, the *Tahafut al-falasafa* or “The Incoherence of the Philosophers”, which was translated into Latin as *Destructio philosophorum*. In this work accused Gazzali “the philosophers”, i.e. Ibn-Sina and the Islamic peripatetic

scholars, in twenty problems to be incoherent in their arguments, and in three of these problems, to confront with the beliefs of Islam, as understood by the theology. This work of Gazzali had a great resonance in all parts of the Islamic territories. But it was soon responded by Ibn Rušd (Averroes), another great Islamic philosopher, physician and jurist (faqih), born in Cordoba in the Islamic Andalusia, in his famous work *Tahafut al-tahafut*, translated as *Destructio destructionem* or "The Incoherence of the Incoherence".

Andalusia, in the western part of the Islamic world, was another center of philosophy, which had brought up before, famous Islamic philosophers like Ibn Bajja (Avempace) and Ibn Tufail. Ibn Rušd should be characterized as the Islamic Aristotelian philosopher par excellence. His commentaries on most of Aristotle's philosophical works became the main source of Aristotelianism in the Christian Middle Ages. In scholar texts Aristotle was simply called the philosopher, and Ibn Rušd the commentator. Ibn Rušd tried not only in his commentaries, but also in his genuine works to remain close to the Aristotelian thought. For him was Aristotle the culmination of philosophical thought. Ibn Rušd expressed his admiration for Aristotle in strong words: "Blessed be God, who has distinguished this man among others in perfection and given him the highest magnitude of human rank, that no human being in no time could get before".

In his earlier works convinced Ibn Rušd the philosophy of Aristotle and the rational truth as identical. "The doctrine of Aristotle is the supreme truth, because his intellect was the limit of the human intellect." In his later works however, like the *Fasl al-maqal fi ma bayn al-sari?ati wa al-hikmati min al-ittisal*, demonstrates Ibn Rušd a more critical position towards Aristotle. To the same Andalusian philosophical milieu belonged also the Arabic-writing Jewish thinker, Musa ibn Maymun or Maimonides, and Ibn Gabirul or Avicenna, who stood close to the Aristotelian doctrines.

The Eurocentric philosophical historiography neglects the development of the Islamic philosophy after the attacks of Gazzali on the Peripatetic philosophy and the answers of Ibn Rušd. The lack of a clerical organization analogous to the Church in the Islamic world, which could rule the intellectual life, prevented

a stagnation of the development of philosophy, as a consequence of such attacks. This development is concentrated in the eastern part of the Islamic world, mainly in Iran. The tradition of Islamic philosophy continued in representatives like Nasir al-din Tusi, Qutb al- din Širazi and the outstanding figure of Suhrawardi, who received a number of his principle ideas from the ancient pre-islamic philosophy of Iran and worked out his new Philosophy of Illumination (Hikmat al-İšraq) as a synthesis of Aristotelian, Neoplatonian and Ancient Iranian philosophical tradition. The philosophers of the school of Isfahan, like Šeykh Baha'i, Mirdamad and Mirfendereski stood nearer to the neoplatonic thought, using however several Aristotelian motives in their theological-philosophical systems.

But the most brilliant Persian philosopher, whose philosophical system has influenced the Islamic philosophy until the recent times is Sadr al- din Širazi, better known as Mulla Sadra. Sadra tries to bring all the efforts of his predecessors, including the platonic, aristotelian, islamic philosphers, but also the achievements of the kalam and the islamic mysticism (irfan), e.g. Ibn Arabi's mystical doctrines, in a harmonical philosophical system, which he called the Transcendent Philosophy (hikma al- mutaʔaliya). The tradition of the Islamic philosophy continues to our times on the basis of the philosophical system of Sadra.

Aristotle's philosophy and the Christian scholastics From the 11th up to the 13th century, a great number of works were translated from Arabic into Roman languages like Catalan and Castile Spanish and into Latin, sometimes mediated by Hebrew. Beside the large number of works in different sciences and philosophy, had the works of Aristotle and his Islamic commentators an outstanding position.

The reception of the philosophy of Aristotle during the scholastics has a strange history. The works of Aristotle were read, refuted, forbidden, condemned and at last ordered as obligatory by the church. The provincial council of Paris interdicted in 1210 for the first time their teaching. In 1215 forbade Robert of Courson, the lagate of the Pope in the university of Paris the scholars, especially the masters of the faculty of artes liberales in this university to teach the Metaphysics, all the Books on physics and natural sciences and their commentaries because of their incommensurability with the Christian dogma. In 1231 Pope

Gregory IX renewed this interdiction until it had been submitted to censorship and purged of errors. It was followed by two other interdictions in 1245 and 1263 and finally the condemnation of 219 theological and philosophical theses in 1277 by Etienne Tempier the cardinal of Paris, including doctrines of Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes and the so-called Latin Averroists. But all these preventions could not hinder the reception of the Aristotelian philosophy. During the 12th and 13th centuries, several Christian philosophers, especially Albertus Magnus and Thomas of Aquin tried to establish a Christian philosophy based on Aristotelian doctrines, without suffering from inconsistency and opposing the dogmas of Christian faith. Even the philosophical system of Thomas of Aquin, the most significant Christian philosopher, had to open its way with great efforts. But Aristotle's metaphysic and physics gained an increasing influence in the next centuries. In 1366 the study of the whole works of Aristotle was declared as obligatory for obtaining the license of the faculty of arts by the legates of the Pope.

The doctrines of Aristotle had thus become in their modified form the official philosophy of the Church. But it lost hereby its emancipating role it had in the centuries before. The philosophy of the New Ages had to open its way only through a hard confrontation with this kind of a stagnated Aristotelianism, which had become itself an obstacle of intellectual progress. It was the merit of philosophical researches at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century that made it possible to have a new encounter with Aristotle's philosophy after a long time of negligence.