

The “Muslim” Aristotle: The Treatment of Aristotle in Islamic Thought

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Aristotle is at the end of early Greek thought. The kind of thinking that began under the title of philosophy in Greece, did not stop there, but entered into thoughts of the believers of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, establishing a relation with them in such a way that we can now speak of Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophies. The reasons why philosophy did not become established among the followers of the far Eastern religions is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I would only mention that the reasons for this go beyond geography and history. In what follows, I would like to discuss the treatment of Greek philosophy— especially that of Aristotle – by Muslim thinkers.

After the direct and indirect translations of the works of the Greek philosophers into Arabic, the Muslim thinkers took three basic positions toward them. The diversity in these positions is due to the differences they felt existed between the Greek and Islamic worlds. For the Muslim thinkers to be Greek meant to be a philosopher, and to be a philosopher was to be a man of demonstrative thinking, of which Aristotle was the prototype. According to the first interpretation, Greek wisdom is philosophical, and was considered to be against the wisdom of faith. As the famous Iranian mystic, Shaykh Baha’² says: *«How much you talk of the wisdom of the Greeks Know something of the wisdom of the faithful!»*

The contrast between these two wisdoms is like what some of the Christian apologists saw between Greek and Christian wisdom. For example, we find the same sort of understanding of being Greek in Tertullian’s saying, “What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? Between the Academy and the Church?” and in Tatian’s book *Address to the Greeks*.

In this interpretation, Aristotle is the culmination of what it means to be Greek, as the Persian poet Khàqàn says: "Do not fasten the door of the best religion with lock of Aristotle's myth." Those who oppose the Greek philosophers, including Aristotle, look at the issue from completely different two points of view. One group, the jurists and theologians, rejects Aristotle with arguments that draw on revelation on the basis of a literal minded interpretation of the Qur'ân. Here one can mention Abu' Hamid al-Ghazalî in his famous book, *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, and Ibn Taymiyyah. The second group, the Muslim mystics, or Sufis, reject Aristotle on the basis of heartfelt or intuitive knowledge. Mawlav (Rumi), the great Muslim mystic, had this view of the philosopher when he says: "The philosopher killed himself of thinking. Tell him the treasure is behind his back."

The second type of interpretation of Aristotle is a religious one in which the views of Aristotle are considered to be in harmony with Islamic teachings. This very interpretation is based on the idea of the harmony of religion and philosophy. Therefore, Aristotle was so respected for his religiosity that a famous saying from the Prophet is narrated according to which "Aristotle was a prophet but his nation ignored and rejected him". Although there is no trace of such a saying in the early Islamic sources, we find it in many famous Islamic philosophical works and in the traditional histories of Islamic philosophy. As a result Aristotle becomes a prophet with Islamic philosophical ideas.

Historically speaking, whether Aristotle was a prophet or not is something unverifiable, but phenomenologically speaking, the historical report was not important for the Muslim philosophers. Their view of philosophy was a religious one, so they couldn't understand a philosophy without its being religious. Based on this attitude, Islamic philosophy was founded by the famous so-called Aristotelian philosophers, Farabi and Avicenna, who became known as *Mashshà' iyun*, that is, Peripatetic philosophers.

In spite of the high respect paid to Aristotle in Islamic philosophy, the Muslim Aristotle was not a purely Aristotelian one. There were some neo-Platonist ideas and texts that were commonly supposed to be of Aristotle, including the book *Liber de Causis* (Khayr al-Mahz) that for a long time was attributed to

Aristotle, while it is in fact a summary of the *Elements of Theology of Proclus*. We find the same sort of neo-Platonized understanding of Aristotle in the history of Christian philosophy in the Middle Ages.

In Islamic philosophical literature Plato was mostly called *ilāhī* meaning divine. Therefore, Aristotle needed to undergo a Platonic treatment to become more suitable for being combined with Islamic teachings. This is why in his book, *The Combination of the Ideas of Two Philosophers*, Farabi didn't hesitate to combine the ideas of Plato with Aristotle.

However, this treatment of Aristotle in Islamic philosophy was not confined to the Muslim Peripatetics. There exists a second type of Aristotelian interpretation in the school of Islamic philosophy called *Ishraq* (Illuminationist). The word *Ishraq* literally means radiance. It has the same root as the word *sharq* (orient).

The founder of this school Suhraward, being himself an Aristotelian in an Islamic sense – at least in the beginning of his work – and using terms and texts of Avicenna, seriously criticized philosophy based only on demonstrative reasoning. I will proceed to deal with Suhraward's ideas about Aristotle.

Suhraward considers himself as an heir to a perennial and profound wisdom, that is, Illuminationist wisdom (*hikmat al-ishraq*). He begins to comment on this philosophy favourably because, as Qutb al-Din Shraz, a commentator on *Ishraq* philosophy, says, the meaning of real wisdom had been forgotten in his time. By real wisdom, Suhraward means the one that God has granted to His people and from which He has deprived others; a wisdom which is completely different from the common one that causes people to deviate from the way of the Truth.

The wisdom of the Peripatetics or the followers of the first teacher, Aristotle, shares the same feature for it employs incorrect principles. Suhraward's main claim for posing the Illuminationist philosophy is the revival of the real meaning of wisdom or *Sophia*, which, in his view, is an intuitive wisdom based on spiritual wayfaring, but which had come to be replaced by Peripatetic philosophy. Suhraward considers this period as the worst and the most difficult period, as there is no search for mystical unveiling; and all the paths of contemplation are blocked. At this time, some people who are ambitious call themselves philosophers and mislead the seekers of wisdom.

Accordingly, in response to the question of who a real philosopher is, Suhraward divides philosophers into eight groups. This classification is made in terms of the degree of the philosopher's involvement in gnosis, and mystical wisdom on the one hand and his involvement with philosophical thought and reasoning on the other. Suhraward considers a philosopher as perfect and a vicegerent of God if he gets involved in both mystical knowledge and rational thinking. In this way, Suhraward sought to trace the fountain of wisdom which he believes is a profound and God-given one that existed at all times, i.e. a *philosophia perennis*; and since it is an illuminative wisdom, it must be attained in the East, i.e., where the sun rises. However, Suhraward is not referring to the geographical East; rather, he means the spiritual East which is the place of the illumination and radiation of the light of the Truth. Thus the wisdom rising from there is an Illuminationist one (*Ishràq*). Nevertheless, the question is: "Where is this East?"

This is Suhraward's main problem. In his search for the East, he goes to ancient Greece, and from there, to ancient Iran. In his eyes, these places comprise the Eastern source of the Truth, i.e., the place of the rise of the light of Truth. Concerning ancient Iran, he says that in that period, there existed a branch of real and perennial *sophia*. From among the Iranian philosophers living in the time of Zoroaster onwards, he points to the sages such as *Jàmàsif* and *Buzarjumih*r as the carriers of this wisdom. With regard to Greece, unlike the Peripatetics, he pays more attention to the pre-Aristotelian philosophers. In his view, the philosophy of ancient Greece is intuitive (*dhawq*) and oriental which has come to its end with Plato, and which has degenerated in Aristotle. Therefore, in contrast to *Fàràb* and Avicenna, Suhraward believes that Aristotle represents the decline of Greek philosophy rather than its perfection.

Suhraward considers himself the heir of Plato and his predecessors (the ancient Greek philosophers). He maintains that his way is the way of real wisdom, with Plato as its master. It is also the way of the sages living before Plato, including the father of philosophers, *Hermes*, as well as the prominent figures and pillars of philosophy, *Empedocles* and *Pythagoras*. Like most histories of philosophy in Islam «such as *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (*Religions and Schools of Philosophy*) by *Shahrestani* and *Tarkh al-Hukamà* (*the History of Philosophers*) by *Shahrzur*

- Suhraward» considers some ancient Greek philosophers as prophets or as people benefiting from the prophets' niche. He does not place Aristotle at their high level, and while respecting him, he does not believe it right to regard Aristotle so highly that the early Greek philosophers are downgraded in comparison with him.

Suhraward believes that the reason for ancient Greek philosophers' being ignored is that their words are symbolic; therefore, "what others claim to have rejected in relation to their ideas only pertains to the outward aspect of their words rather than to their deep and hidden meanings; and no one can reject symbols". It was this very attention to language that persuaded Suhraward? to enter a dialogue with the ancient Greek thinkers, and discover their hidden messages amidst their words.

The language of the ancient Greek philosophers which was symbolic, and represented their state of wisdom (sophia), taste and illumination, Suhraward says, turned into Aristotle's language of discourse and reasoning. Thus, logos changed into logic. From then on the decline of early Greek philosophy began and its dawn turned into dusk. Hence, Aristotelian philosophy was, as Suhraward would say, occidental. However, if the oriental philosophy of ancient Greece did not continue in the occidental philosophy of the Peripatetics such as Fārāb and Avicenna in the Islamic world, it was revived and renewed in Islamic Mysticism (Sufism).

Suhraward argues that the elders of Sufism have traversed "the path of the people of wisdom and reached the fountain of light". This is a fact about which Aristotle reminds him, as well. In a famous dream, he says that he saw Aristotle and asked him: "Has any of the Muslim philosophers reached the high position of Plato" Aristotle denies this. Suhraward mentions some of the Muslim mystics. Aristotle becomes happy and says: "Truly, they are real sages and philosophers. They haven't stopped at the current formal knowledge but reached to the intuitive direct knowledge."

As it appears according to this interpretation of Aristotle, he is the way of entering into the west in Suhraward's sense. In the light of this interpretation,

Aristotle was not completely a Westerner. He turned out to be a Western philosopher par excellence in the third type of interpretation made by Averroes. Because of their rationalistic view, Western historians of Islamic philosophy usually think that Averroes was the last Muslim philosopher and Islamic philosophy ended with his philosophy. Contrary to this common view, the fact is that Islamic philosophy not only did not end, but also Averroes was not taken into very serious consideration at least in the eastern part of the Islamic world at all. If we take a look at the basic works of the later philosophers such as Mulla Sadra, we will find no reference to any of his works or ideas. The main cause of this unacceptability was that Aristotle, according to Averroes, is a pure Greek and non-religious philosopher who was completely alien to the religious world of the Muslim thinkers. Muslim philosophers were very fond of an Aristotle who should be either himself a philosopher or issue from the niche of the prophets. This was not the Aristotle of Averroes.

Averroes believed that philosophy is Aristotle's philosophy and Aristotle himself the philosopher. Due to his idea about the disagreement of philosophy and religion, in his famous book *The Decisive Judgment about the Relation between Philosophy and Religion*, Averroes made a sharp distinction between philosophy and religion. This is why he defends Aristotle's philosophy one way through the refusal of the ideas of the theologians such as Ghazali in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* and the other way by accusing Muslim peripatetic philosophers of an Islamic theological interpretation of Aristotle, and thereby deviating from the authentic teachings of the philosopher. According to Averroes this religious interpretation paved the way for refuting philosophy by theologians such as Ghazali. He even disagreed with the new concepts that first appeared in Islamic philosophy with Fârâbî and Avicenna through their interpretation. In his commentaries on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, he was also critical of the misrendering of some Greek Aristotelian terms such as *ousia* into Arabic.

Averroes remained known as "the commentator," and his philosophy did not originate a philosophical school in the Islamic philosophical world but the philosophy established by Fârâbî and Avicenna and later on developed by Suhraward continued till now. This philosophy is called Islamic philosophy and later

philosophers such as Mr Dàmàd and Mulla Sadra are great stations on its way. The same western historians of philosophy regard this philosophy as simply an extension of Greek philosophy, and for the most part neglect the unprecedented philosophical concepts and ideas that were added to Greek philosophy by Muslim philosophers through their Islamic insight and the philosophical hermeneutics of the Qur`àn.

Aristotle's world is a world that cannot be conceived to be non-existent, but the Qur`anic and Biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) led the Muslim philosophers to interpret the Prime Mover (*prote kinoumenon*) of Aristotle as the creating God and Necessary Being, in relation to which the world was interpreted as contingent being.

In such a view of the world and God, new philosophical ideas, including the distinction between essence and existence and the division of being into the necessary, contingent and impossible appeared.

Whether Muslim philosophers could penetrate into the Greek world, especially Aristotle's, is an important issue. However, the more important one is that the second interpretation of Aristotle, that of Fàràb, Avicenna and Suhraward, and not the third one, that of Averroes, was influential in the later development of philosophy in Islam. In the West, Suhraward was ignored; and while the philosophy of Averroes was able to initiate a school of thought, Latin Averroism, the ideas and interpretation of Aristotle that had the most influence, even until and including the modern period, was that of Fàràb and Avicenna. Thus, the Muslim Aristotle became a bridge built to connect East and West.