The Universality of the Aristotelian Thought, as a Bridge between East and West

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The caliph al-Ma'mun in the 9th century is said to have had a dream, in which he asked Aristotle about the best speech. Aristotle informed him that the best speech is what is correct to the individual insight and what the listener considers to be good, because he must not fear any bad consequences. This dream might be a fabrication; it is preserved in a version from the 10th century and attributed to the Christian philosopher Yahya Ibn 'Adi; it specifies the good (al-hasan) as something acceptable to reason ('aql), to religious law (shar') and to the opinion of the plurality, the "masses".

This statement can be interpreted in different ways. At first sight, Aristotle appears to be a proponent of rational reasoning; good is what corresponds to the individual rational insight and what is accepted by the other – either because it has no bad consequences or because it corresponds to religious law and to the common opinion.

The dream looks like a harmonization of the divergences of Islamic schools of law since Abu Hanifa, the founder of the oldest school of law in the 8th century. The involvement of Aristotle as a proponent of the concept of good according to critical reason will give rise to further observations.

The dream parallels Aristotle's rationalism with the rationalism of early Islamic jurists who could not reach an agreement about whether personal reasoning or religious tradition, respectively common sense should be preferred. According to Aristotle rationalism determines what is good. The utilitarian aspect prevails. ¨

This utilitarian aspect and its rationalistic background is not only shared by Islamic schools of jurisprudence, but also by the socalled Mu'tazilites, who

commonly are labelled as freethinkers in early Islam but who should be understood as intellectual circles who tried to develop an Islamic dogma on the basis of Koran and reason and as defence against dualists and Christians.

During the reign of the already mentioned caliph al-Ma'mun the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Koran became the official dogma; herewith the Mu'tazilites intended to save God's transcendence and almightiness, his infinity, the Koranic ghayb of God, from any involvement in the finite visible world; as a consequence the visible Koran could only be something created by God and should be distinguished from its eternal meaning.

In their doctrine of creation the Mu'tazilites distinguished between substance and accident: God is the creator of the substances, not of the accidents which inhere the substance.

This is based on Aristotle's distinction between the concrete-individual, the prote usia , the "primary substance" and the Platonic general, the essence, the deutera usia, the "secondary substance". Similar to Aristotle the Mu'tazilites considered the substance as a general essence, of which the form becomes visible in the accidental realization, in the accident. At the same time they made the description of God, the talking about his attributes a problem: language fails in grasping God's essence from his attributes as every definition would "define" and thus limit the infinity of God.

In their combination of the Aristotelian concept of substance with the Koranic doctrine of God's transcendence, his ghayb, the Mu'tazilites prepared the ground for future discussions on logic, language, epistemology and causality. The terms substance and accident are discussed in Aristotle's Categories and in Porphyry's "Introduction", his Isagoge to Aristotle's Organon. Both texts, together with Aristotle's De interpretatione and Analytica priora were already available to the Arabs in a summary, which is said to have been translated from Persian by Abdallah Ibn al-Muqaffa, who was executed in 756 A.D., or shortly afterwards and who was the advisor of the 'Abbaside caliph al-Mansur. Following the model of Syriac-Christian theologians and their christological discussions about the nature of God-father and God-son the Mu'tazilites and generally Muslim theologians

used the Aristotelian Organon as a tool for theological argumentations and definitions.

In doing so they integrated the Aristotelian heritage into a Koranic doctrine of creation, in which the hierarchy between God-creator and his creation is emphasized. God cannot be the creator of the visible things, as his transcendence has no direct relation to this world. God has only created the substances, the essences but not the accidents, the existent things.

Here, the phenomena appear to be degraded to something which cannot be measured from its cause. Aristotle's "horizontal" explanation of the effect as something similar to the cause - Aristotle's anthropos-anthropon-genna-argument - is replaced by a vertical cause-effect relationship, which includes the inferiority of the effect to its cause. The effect is no more similar or identical with its cause. Cause and effect are separated from each other because of their ontological difference.

A variant of this solution is the assumption that there exists an endless chain of intermediate causes between the first cause, the Aristotelian prime mover, and the final effect: this proposal enabled the Mu'tazilite Mu'ammar Ibn Abbad as-Sulami (died 830 A.D.) to combine the Aristotelian principle of the preservation of nature with the doctrine of intermediate causes.

This doctrine of intermediate causes can be compared with the Neoplatonic doctrine of the intermediate emanations from the divine One, which includes similarity and dissimilarity. It is echoed in Ibn Sina's concept of different modes of existence with regard to priority and posteriority, self-sufficiency and need, necessity and possibility. The cause, Ibn Sina's first cause, has more "truth" than the effect.

Ibn Sina's assumption of intermediary causes is criticized by Ghazzali in the 11th/12th century as denial of God as determining factor, because it means God's replacement by the causality of nature. According to Ghazzali God remains the all-determining cause either through nature, the conditioning causes, implanted by God in the substances, or through primary and unchangeable causes, namely earth, seven heavens, stars, celestial sphere and their perpetual

motions, which are created by God's decree. Consequently, God can even annihilate causality by effecting a miracle.

Here, Ghazzali follows the Ash'arite theology and lays more stress on the involvement of God in his creation; contrary to the Christian philosopher John Philoponus from the 6th century he did not separate God, the transcendent creator of substances, from nature inhering these substances and determining their causality.

The starting-point of these reflections is the Aristotelian notion of the prime mover which became modified under Neoplatonic influence and within the context of a koranic world-view. Already al-Kindi in the 9th century, the first Islamic philosopher, took over the Aristotelian (Met. 993b27) explanation that "most true is that which causes all subsequent things to be true" and defined philosophy in accordance with Aristotle (Met. 993b20) and Plato (Theaet. 176 A.B) as "knowledge of the true nature of things, as far as it is possible for man"; Kindi explains metaphysics, "the first philosophy", as "knowledge of the first truth, which is the first cause of every truth". He argues that "knowledge of the cause is better than knowledge of the effect" (Kindi, Rasa'il I 101,1).

Here, the search for causality appears to be connected with the search for truth. The Aristotelian notion that the effect, the derivative truth is inferior to the cause, the first truth is, under the influence of Neoplatonic emanationism, developed to Ibn Sina's concept of an hierarchy between divine essence and the existent beings of creation. The divine first cause cannot be recognized by human mind which requires the inspiration of the divine revelation. Here, Ibn Sina took up the doctrine of the philosopher Farabi who died in 950 A.D.

Farabi moreover developed in an original manner the doctrine that the essence of a thing can only be conceived in the shape of a picture, which imitates the thing. This resumes the Aristotelian notion that we can only think in the shape of pictures. Accordingly Farabi ascribes to the universals of philosophy a pictorial and symbolic pendant in the particulars, in religion.

He parallels this with the Aristotelian bipartition of philosophy into a theoretical and a practical part, into knowledge and ethical action. Under the influence of

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Farabi considers religion as a kind of practical philosophy which with its prescriptions and laws as realization of theoretical philosophy is a way to supreme happiness, to the "good which is strived after for the sake of its own". As in Aristotle this striving after the good requires "reflection and choosing". It is a kind of "reflecting and choosing" which we can compare with the Mu'tazilite concept of free will to choose and make decisions guided by reason.

Sofar Farabi presents in his main work, in the "Perfect State" (al-madina al-fadila) ruled by the prophet-philosopher, a complex picture of Aristotelian ideas, within a koranic world-view mixed with notions from Aristotle's commentators, like Alexander of Aphrodisias and mixed with Platonic-Neoplatonic concepts. Aristotle's Logic, Metaphysics and Ethics were assimilated in a manner which reveals universal structures related to language, logic, epistemology and ethics.

New in Farabi is the inclusion of ethics, of Aristotle's practical philosophy. Here I should remind you of the dream by the caliph Ma'mun, in which Aristotle appears to be a proponent of rational reasoning as a way to the good; Aristotle is said to have explained the good as something that corresponds to the individual rational insight and what is accepted by the other - either because it has no bad consequences or because it corresponds to religious law and the common opinion. As already said, the juristic background is quite evident and at the same time we are reminded of Farabi's religious concept of the good and his Aristotelian postulate of "reflection" and "choosing" as condition for the striving after the good.

"Reflection" and "choosing" reappear shortly after Farabi in Miskawayh's philosophical ethics Tahdhib al-akhlaq "The Refinement of Character", which in the foosteps of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (1107aff.) propagates the virtues as means (Gr. mesotes) between extremes; therefore the virtue of justice (adl) with regard to God, fellow-men and forefathers plays a key role in Miskawayh and induced him to include chapters on love and friendship which lead to harmony among the people. Miskawayh's Aristotelian concept of the mean - between two extremes reappears in Ibn Sina's encyclopaedia "Book of Healing" (Kitab ash-Shifa') and has some similarity to the popular saying khayr al-umur

awsatuha wa-sharr as-sayr al-haqhaqa "the best things are the middle and the most evil way is the most troublesome". This saying, however, misses the pedagogical aspect of Aristotle and tends to consider the middle as the easy way.

It is not superfluous to pay attention to this rationalism of ethics not only as part of Aristotelian thought, but also as a part of universal thinking. This was developed in Islam under the influence of Aristotle and his commentators and in the context of the shari'a, to a basically normative ethics. This normative ethics was in single cases aware of the relativism of values but contrary to Western ethics remains "theocentric". Modern discussions of human rights in Islam until now did not take into account the richness of argumentations and reflections about ethics among Islamic thinkers of the past. Here too the universality of Aristotelian thought could become a bridge between East and West, Orient and Occident, Muslims and "unbelievers".

In addition, the universality of Aristotelian thought in its impact on Islamic thinking can be a bridge between antiquity and Europe: As we have seen, Muslim scholars since the 8th century reflected upon God, his creation, causality, epistemology and the concept of truth, upon the limits of mind and language, here with regard to the description of God or the explanation of the divine word of the Koran. In doing this they recurred to Aristotle's logical work, his Organon, to Aristotle's "Physics", "The Heaven and the World", "Coming to Be and Passing away", "Meteorology", "The Soul", "Sense and Sense Perception", "Book of animals", "Metaphysics" and "Nicomachean Ethics". Aristotle's "Politics" seems to have been known to the Arabs merely in the shape of a paraphrase.

Most of these books, moreover some works attributed to Aristotle in the Greek or in the Arabic tradition, were from the 12th century onwards translated into Latin; in addition the Arabic commentaries which often reshaped the Aristotelian texts in the spirit of the Greek commentators and Neoplatonic philosophers; I refer you to Ibn Sina, Ghazzali and above all Ibn Rushd who contributed in an essential way to the philosophical disucssions by medieval philosophers like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. It was Ibn Rushd, the Commentator of

Aristotle par excellence, whose Aristotelian rationalism contributed in an essential manner to the integration of reason into faith and religion and prepared the way to tolerance.

Nowadays, scholars in their study of medieval scholastic philosophy take seriously the contribution of Muslim medieval thinkers. We have scientific projects being engaged in the edition of the Syriac, Arabic, Hebrew and Arabic-Latin versions of Aristotle and his commentators ("Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus"), of the Arabic and Latin versions of Ibn Sina's "Book of Healing" ("Avicenna Latinus") and Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle ("Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem"); there is a growing number of publications on Islamic philosophy, theology and science ("Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science. Texts and Studies"). This increasing interest of modern scholars in East and West once more exemplifies the universality of Aristotelianism in its search for reasonable and ethical norms.

Here, the historian becomes a participant of the human dialogue between those committed to this search for reasonable and ethical norms. This human dialogue on the basis of universal Aristotelianism can diminish the gap between faith and reason and can contribute to the creation of a global morality, far away from fundamentalism and terrorism.