

The influences of Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism on early Islamic thinking.

Introduction

Unlike other religions, the commencement of the Muslim era is not due to the birth of a Prophet, the beginning of a revelation, or the death of a Saviour-God; instead, it is marked by the creation of a community. The 200-mile migration (*Hijra*) to Medina, not only initiated the Muslim Calendar but also formed a new community, which was led by Muhammad himself.¹ Within one-hundred years of his death, this small community had flourished into an empire, which 'extended from the Pyrenees to the Punjab and from the Sahara to Samarkand.'²

Those early Muslims conquered cities, which contained schools of learning that maintained a traditional Greek philosophical curriculum; for example, the schools of Athens, Constantinople and Antioch. However, I would argue that the most influential school concerning Neo-Platonist and Aristotelian thought was the *Alexandrian philosophical school*, whose city was conquered in 642 CE.³ During the course of this paper I will discuss how Alexandria facilitated the translation of Greek texts, and how a literary forgery of the *Theologia*, led to the creation of a 'Neo-Platonised Aristotelianism.'⁴ Moreover, we will also discuss how these texts influenced Islamic thinkers like the Ikhwān Al-Safā' and al-Fārābi.

When considering the Ikhwān al-Safā', I will pay particular attention to Plotinus's triad and the notions of emanation and hierarchy. We will also explore Plotinus's definition of 'the One' and discuss how this is fundamentally different from Islam's conception of God. In order to synthesise these notions, I will argue that the Ikhwān adapted Plotinus's triadic structure by incorporating Prime Matter, which redefined Plotinus's original definition. Moreover, I will explain how this modification produced a unique version of Neo-Platonic thought, as its basic strand was Aristotelianism.⁵

I also propose to discuss al-Fārābi's, *Enumeration of the Sciences*. Al-Fārābi is a notable Islamic philosopher who is often referred to as the 'second master' second, that is, to Aristotle. This was because of his 'high standard of analyticity and clarity.'⁶ Al-Fārābi's classification of the sciences is fundamentally Aristotelian and I propose to convey the depth to which al-Fārābi's system is influenced by him. However, al-Fārābi also incorporates Neo-Platonic 'negativism' into his Metaphysics. As such, I will argue that Neo-Platonised Aristotelianism is not just unique to the Ikhwān but runs throughout Islamic thought.

¹ Leaman. O, 2001, p.2

² Ibid.

³ Leaman. O, 2001, p.6
Netton. I.R, 2002, p.33

⁴ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.33
Netton. I.R, 1989, pp.7-12

⁵ Netton I.R, 2002, p.33

⁶ Leaman. O, 2001, p.7

Alexandria and the translation of Greek texts

The conquering of Alexandria by the Arabs in 642 CE exposed them to an intellectually eclectic society. Historically, Alexandria had a tradition of acting as a ‘friend, refuge and, sometimes, catalyst’ to a plethora of religious, theological and philosophical systems.⁷ For example by 642 CE, ‘Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Gnosticism, Judaism and Christianity had already found their niches.’⁸ As such, I would argue that this cosmopolitan, tolerant and open-minded environment would have inspired thinkers like the Ikhwān and al-Fārābī. This is not because they were physically present in the city; but because the intellectual culture of Alexandria promoted tolerance and free thought. This in turn facilitated the creation and sharing of philosophical texts, such as the *Enneads* and *Theologia*.⁹ Moreover, I would argue that it was because Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city that it had the human resources to translate Greek texts to Arabic, which made them accessible to early Islamic thinkers.

As such, the translation of Greek texts resulted in certain aspects of Western philosophy being assimilated into Islamic thought. Many of the Greek texts were translated during the period 750-1000 CE. Some of these were translated directly from Greek to Arabic, whilst others were translated from Syriac. However, due to the significant differences between the Greek and Semitic languages, and the complexity of the texts themselves, the standard of translation was variable.¹⁰

Problems in translation led to several works being credited to Aristotle, which were not his. For example, the *Theology of Aristotle* was in fact books IV-VI of Plotinus’s *Enneads*.¹¹ However, the most notorious, which is also recognised as a Neo-Platonic forgery, is the *Theologia Aristotelis*. Netton notes that ‘right from the start, it appears self evident that...a Neo-Platonic stage... is being built rather than an Aristotelian one.’¹² This is because the Neo-Platonist notion of emanation is at the core of the doctrine set out within the *Theologia*, which is incompatible with the Aristotelian notion of the First Cause. The former implies that creation is involuntary, hence ‘the One’ ‘neither willed nor planned’ that which ‘emanated from it;’ whereas the latter assumes that God is something from which motion originates, thus implying a purpose for change and creation.¹³ As such, this significant doctrinal difference, alongside an emphasis on Plotinus’s emanation throughout the text, should have alerted the Arab scholars to the true nature of the document.

However, the fact that it didn’t resulted in the amalgamation of Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian concepts thus leading to a Neo-Platonised Aristotelianism. This is significant because the *Theologia Aristotelis* was studied by influential Islamic philosophers, including Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb Ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, the great father of Arab philosophy.¹⁴ As such, those Greek concepts which were received by

⁷ Netton. I.R, 1989, p.7

⁸ Ibid

⁹ For example, Plotinus, who is regarded as the father of Neo-Platonism, studied in Alexandria under Ammonius Saccas.

¹⁰ Leaman. O, 2001, p.7

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Netton. I.R, 1989, p.13

¹³ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.35

Russell. B, 2004, p.164

Russell. B, 1957, p.3

¹⁴ Ibid

medieval Islamic philosophers were considerably different from those received by their European contemporaries. I would therefore argue that this affected the way in which Islamic thinkers understood and incorporated Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian concepts into their own systems of thought.

Ikhwān al-Safā' : Emanation and Hierarchy.

This is evident within the Ikhwān's own philosophy, which is underpinned by Plotinus's concept of Emanation and hierarchy. In his *Enneads*, Plotinus outlines a triadic hierarchical structure consisting of 'the One', 'the Intellect' and 'the Soul.' It is because these three notions are not considered equal that a hierarchical structure occurs. However, although the Ikhwān adopt this basic framework, they also add to it and make it more complex.

Plotinus's triad is immersed in Plato's *Theory of Ideas.* Plato visualises reality as being split into two worlds; that of the material (or sensible world) and that of the immaterial (or intelligible world). Plato considers the sensible world as forever changing. Consequently, material objects cannot maintain a stable identity, which is why it is difficult for us to understand their true nature.¹⁵

Conversely, the immaterial world is one of 'forms' or 'ideas,' which are stable, permanent and eternal. Form transcends time and space, and can be likened to Pythagoras's notion of mathematics. Russell illustrates this concept through the example of a cat. For instance, when one says 'this is a cat,' although we identify it as a cat, we also recognise that it is different from other cats because it may be different in size, weight, colour etc. However, the word cat implies a universal cattiness; a set of commonalities describing a general nature which is common to all cats. As such 'form' can be defined as this common nature, which is permanent and transcends time and space. Consequently, the cat we perceive in the sensible world is just an 'opinion' of that 'form' and is therefore illusory.¹⁶

I would argue that this notion can be found within Plotinus's concept of *The One,* as Plotinus describes *the One* as, 'being beyond being.' This not only implies that it transcends time and space, but also contains the connotation of perfection and permanence. Moreover, in his *Enneads*, Plotinus explicitly refers to the One as a 'form;' 'the One is a form, as if Intellect was shaped by the numbers which came to exist in it.'¹⁷ First, this suggests that 'the One' is the source from which everything else emanates, which Plotinus compares to the emanation of light from the sun; 'It must be a radiation from it whilst it remains unchanged, like the bright light of the sun, which so to speak, runs around it.'¹⁸ Secondly, it also connects the notion of 'the One' to Pythagoras's notion of mathematics.

Furthermore, although the simile of the sun echoes Plato's *Theory of Forms,* it also creates a fundamental problem for the Ikhwān. Plotinus implies that, like light radiating from the sun, emanation occurs out of necessity. Genesis on the other hand, suggests that God created the universe out of choice and deliberate action.¹⁹ Although the Ikhwān use the phrase 'necessity of

¹⁵ O'Meara. D.J, 1995, p.11

¹⁶ Russell. B, 2004,p.123

O'Meara. D.J, 1995, p.11

¹⁷ Enneads (V,1,5)

¹⁸ Enneads (V,1,6)

¹⁹ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.35

wisdom' within their Rasā'il, which implies involuntary action, they also note elsewhere that emanation occurs due to deliberate action.²⁰

Furthermore, the Ikhwān also uphold the notion that Allāh created the world out of nothing, as stated in Genesis. However, this idea was alien to Greek Philosophers; for instance, Neo-Platonists, as did Aristotelians, assumed primitive matter existed before God. Accordingly, God is considered an architect, who orders and arranges matter, rather than a creator.²¹ In order to resolve this, the Ikhwān added Prime Matter to Plotinus's traditional triad and noted '[the One] created Prime Matter from the movement of the Soul just as He created four by adding one to three.'²² As such, this aligns the notion of 'the One' with the Islamic concept of the Creator, whilst implying omnipotence and separation between 'the One' and His creation, as He created matter.

Further modifications were also made to Plotinus's original triad. The final Ikhwān hierarchical structure of the universe consisted of nine levels of being: 'the Creator, the Intellect, the Soul, the Absolute Body, the Sphere, the Four Elements, and the Beings which live in this world.'²³ The final level was then divided into plant, mineral and animal kingdoms.²⁴ Moreover each level was also composed of a number of things, equal to the number of the rank which the level held in the hierarchy.²⁵ For example, 'the sphere, which had seventh place in the hierarchy, had seven planets.'²⁶ This resulted in a complex hierarchical structure, the foundation of which was based upon Plotinus's simplistic triad. Interestingly, later Neo-Platonists, such as Iamblichus, also added to and developed Plotinus's triad. One can argue that the Ikhwān may have been influenced by later Neo-Platonists in this respect.²⁷ However, I would argue that the more likely influence is Aristotle, as he also employed a similar method of categorisation. For example, substance was divided into the corporeal and Spiritual. Corporeal substance was then divided into that associated with the celestial sphere and the natural sphere, and so on.²⁸

It becomes apparent that at the heart of the Ikhwān's philosophy were Greek modes of thought. One can argue that although the basic hierarchical structure was borrowed from Plotinus, it was then adapted so that it reconciled with Islamic concepts. Furthermore, the systematic categorisation of the hierarchical structure incorporated Aristotelian principles. As such, I would argue that the Ikhwān were influenced by Neo-Platonism and Aristotelianism but were not confined to it. This is evident because they also incorporated their own arguments, which sometimes disagreed with the Greek philosophers. For example, the Ikhwān believed that Prime matter was a positive spiritual principle, whereas Plotinus considered it as inherently evil.²⁹

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Russell. B, 2004, p.330

²² Netton. I.R, 2002, p.34

²³ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.35

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Netton. I.R, 2002, pp.36-37

²⁸ ibid

²⁹ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.34

Al-Fārābī: The Enumeration of the Sciences

This influence is not only confined to the Ikhwān, but also infiltrates the systems of other notable Islamic thinkers like al-Fārābī.

Al-Fārābī's, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, is concerned with epistemology. This is a theory, which attempts to explain the nature, scope and sources of knowledge. During the course of his text, al-Fārābī outlines what he believes can be known, the scope of that knowledge and how one can acquire it. He attempts to achieve this by classifying the sciences with the intent to 'apprise [the reader] of everything that each of [the sciences] contains, their constituent parts and the composition of each of these parts.'³⁰ Through his classification of the sciences, al-Fārābī places emphasis on logic and devotes the whole of the second chapter to this subject.³¹ One can argue that this is because logic was considered a scientific framework, which could 'provide the justification and a system of classification for scholarly and scientific disciplines.'³² As such, al-Fārābī used logic as a tool to understand, justify and categorise his own epistemological system.

Al-Fārābī's classification appears to be Aristotelian in nature. Furthermore, the process of subdividing categories is broadly similar to that adopted by the Ikhwān, which I have already argued was influenced by Aristotelian thought.

First, al-Fārābī separates the sciences into five strands: Language, Logic, Mathematics, Physics (including Metaphysics) and civil sciences. Language and logic, which are also fundamental to Aristotle's work, are the first two sciences which must be studied under al-Fārābī's system. I would argue that this indicates the degree to which Aristotelianism influences al-Fārābī. However, I also consider it to illustrate the notion that logic underpins all language and texts. As such, if we are to understand an argument or concept then we must first master the sciences of language and logic.³³ This not only mirrors Aristotle's ideas on logic, but also explains why al-Fārābī positions these sciences at the start of his work.

Secondly, these principle sciences are subdivided; Physics, for example, is divided into eight further subdivisions, which are as follows: the basic physical principles, corporeal elements, physical generation and corruption, the examination of the principles of accidents; the examination of compound bodies formed from basic elements; mineralogy, botany and zoology.³⁴ Included within this sub-classification are many of the subjects which Aristotle himself explored. Furthermore, not only does the Aristotelian doctrine of the four causes run throughout al-Fārābī's physics, in his examination of zoology, for example, he refers to Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* and *De Animal*.³⁵ As such, it is apparent that Aristotelianism lies at the very heart of al-Fārābī's epistemological system.

³⁰ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.37
Netton. I.R, 2002, pp.34-37

³¹ Netton. I.R, 1992, p.37

³² Ibid.

³³ Netton. I.R, 1992, p.39
Leaman. O, 2001, p.17

³⁴ Netton. I.R, 1992, p.40

³⁵ Ibid.

However, al-Fārābī also adopts Neo-Platonic ‘negativism’ when discussing the nature of God in his *Metaphysics*. This is a dimension of knowledge which cannot be known or articulated unless it is described in a negative vocabulary.³⁶ For example, one may know what God is by acknowledging that He is not human, rather than by the traits He does possess. Neo-Platonists developed this approach because they considered ‘The One’ to be indescribable. Therefore it is only possible to describe God in negative or partial terms. As such, it appears that al-Fārābī epistemology is founded on two principles, “Aristotelian ‘positivism’ and Neo-Platonic ‘negativism’.”³⁷ Consequently, like the Ikhwān, a Neo-Platonised Aristotelianism is amalgamated into his system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism have a significant influence on early Islamic thought, which informs their philosophical and epistemological systems. However, one must question if a true and fair account of these Greek texts were received, as the standard of translation was variable and literary forgeries, like the *Theologia*, were in circulation. Despite this, one must also acknowledge that every religion is influenced by various philosophies and also reject certain concepts. For example, although Christianity accepts the majority of Platonism, it also rejects the notion that various deities exist ‘through whom God works in the world and communicates with his creatures.’³⁸

This same process can be seen within the *Rasā’il* and al-Fārābī’s, *Enumeration of the Sciences*. Both the Ikhwān and al-Fārābī incorporate and are influenced by aspects of Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic thought. However, they also either reject certain aspects of a doctrine, or integrate paradoxical concepts. In the case of the Ikhwān, this is illustrated by their rejection of Plotinus’s definition of ‘the One;’ whereas al-Fārābī adopts both Aristotelian ‘positivism’ and Neo-Platonic ‘negativism.’ Although, as I have already noted, this is inevitable when one tries to ‘[reconcile] a pagan philosophy with the dogmatic theology of any revealed religion;’ it also suggests that early Islamic thinkers were not limited to either Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic thought.³⁹ The Ikhwān, for instance, not only incorporated their own definition of God into their philosophy, but they also adapted Plotinus’s hierarchical structure in order to accommodate their own world view.

As such, one must recognise that Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism only had an influencing affect upon early Islamic thinkers. One may argue that the degree to which Greek doctrines were applied did vary. However, I would argue that unique and relevant bodies of work were produced, which directly addressed the philosophical problems within Islam itself and are therefore fundamentally different from those proposed by Neo-Platonists and Aristotelians.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Leaman. O, 2001, p.7

³⁹ Netton. I.R, 2002, p.33

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