TWO KNIGHTS OF ARABIAN THOUGHT

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A FEW YEARS AGO the institution of baseball gloriously celebrated its centennial. Indeed there was a laudable purpose in this celebration in which American sportsmanship was presented to the world for emulation. Yet of the many millions who joined in this almost world-wide commemoration, it would not be an exaggeration to say that only a very small percentage were really filled with that spirit of appreciation for this institution which comes from a knowledge of its origin and subsequent evolution. This knowledge should include the history of the game's humble beginning, the formation, abrogation and re-formation of its rules, the divers alterations in paraphernalia, and the tales of those heroes who provided an impetus to its development. All these elements were factors of no small import in shaping the internationally popular game as we see it played today in stadia or on sandlots.

This same lack of an appreciative spirit is not less manifest in feats of an intellectual character. Concerning such intellectual masterpieces as philosophic systems and their evolution the number of people who know very much is very limited. Too many young students, in admiring the great works of the masters, overlook the tireless diligence of the artist. Young philosophers are often guilty of this charge. Not infrequently in history of philosophy courses men who really aided in the growth and formation of philosophy are given a slight nod then passed by as quickly as one would pass an inanimate statue in the corridor of a museum. Is it any wonder such a subject is a headache to the student and a heartache to a zealous teacher? Truly we are indebted to such profound thinkers, rich in erudition and culture, who have bequeathed us treasures of wisdom buried in hoary tomes. This is especially the situation as regards the Arabian philosophers who seem to be extremely underrated in most philosophic circles. Conceding the handicap of time, perhaps the cause of their being underrated might be traced to the fact that they are transitional philosophers to the golden medieval era, and likewise to the complexity of their doctrine. Indeed this complexity becomes evident almost immediately when one realizes that the entire system of Arabian philosophy was an Aristotelianism tempered with Neo-Platonism. It was a cold scientific system tinged with mysticism.

Before coming to our two knights of Arabism a brief glance at the history of this philosophic system will not be out of place. As early as 500 A.D. this system of thought, especially the Neo-Platonic element, the nucleus of which is Emanationism, had been cultivated by David the Armenian. He had commentated on the Porphyrian "Isagogue" and the Stagirian "Categories"; however, the effects of his philosophic endeavors were short-lived. This epoch may be aptly called the prenatal stage of Arabism. Having passed through the embryonic period, Arabian philosophy was born at the victory of the Arabian military forces over the countries of Parmi and Syria in the middle of the eighth century. At that time those vanquished peoples were the vigilant custodians of prized philosophic and scientific manuscripts. Victory and the subsequent seizure of voluminous libraries gave rise to a rapid development of Arabian thought which provided the incentive to a civilization founded on a religious basis. The proper elements of this move towards mysticism were adequately furnished by Emanationism, the heart of Neo-Platonic philosophy which has as its dominant note the perfection of beings with God as the most perfect.

From the half-way mark of the eighth century translations of Hellenic works in philosophy, medicine and mathematics were begun in earnest. Aristotle's works and other early masterpieces were popularized by translators and were even sparsely annotated. The seed of interest in philosophy had fallen on fertile ground and had taken comparatively firm root. In the following century Arabism, as we now know it, commenced to come forth in full bloom. This growth was principally nurtured by the efforts of the Syriac Christians and schismatical Nestorians in the work of translation. Most of these Syrian works, not now extant, were utilized mostly as guide-posts for the Arabian intellectuals. The Syriac Christians had pointed out the path of perennial wisdom to the Arabs who were their scholars, and as it often happens the students far excelled their masters in clarity of expression and depth of thought. The knights of Arabian thought had begun their intellectual quest for philosophic treasures. As in all human undertakings some made greater advances in their searchings than others. The two who seem to take the laurels in this golden era of Arabism are Avicenna in the east and Averrhoes in the west. Both of these intellectuals' doctrines, it is well to note in passing, were germinally contained in the teachings and writings of their predecessor, Alfarabi.

In this paper we have not attempted an exhaustive treatment of either of these renowned Arabic thinkers—volumes have been written

and still that task is far from completion—but we have endeavored to unify and manifest the salient features of their life, character, works, and doctrines, as well as their influence on Christian philosophy. Our aim is to make these philosophers break forth from their museum casements and walk again down the corridor of life. Necessarily, then, some things will have to be treated more in detail than others, and still other things will have to be omitted.

Ibn Sina, better known in our philosophical world as Avicenna, was born in the year 980 A.D. at Kharmeitan, in the province of Bokhara, near central Asia. Naturally endowed with superb mental powers, Avicenna was a precocious child who cultivated his young intellect with the study of theology, philosophy and medicine under Syriac tutelage. At the age of ten years the verbatim memorization of the Koran, a text little shorter in length than the Christian New Testament, presaged his future intellectual achievements. In Arabian intellectual circles he was probably tagged the "boy wonder" because of his genius. As a youth Ibn Sina confirmed the early signs indicative of his superb mental prowess and native genius by editing a scientific encyclopedia. While yet in his "teens" he had a flourishing medical practice, and at twenty-one published a work on medicine, "Canones," which overshadowed his philosophic fame and was for many centuries the basic medical text in European and Asiatic schools. As will be evident when we consider his other works Avicenna combined genius with hard, untiring labor. Unlike some geniuses he substituted industry for indolence. He also made the most of opportunities. This is shown in the way this Arabian knight came in contact with Aristotle's works. Though to a great extent ignorant of Greek he drank indirectly, nevertheless, from the Stagirian fonts. This feat was accomplished through his medical ability, for by curing his king of a fatal disease Avicenna was given, as a token of gratitude, access to some of the Peripatetic's works in Syriac.

However, even though he attained mastery over his mental faculties at an early age, he is said to have led an unbridled life of immorality.[1] Master of his intellectual powers, he was a slave driven by the despotic whip of his lower passions to sordid and sinful living. Despite his extremely carnal life Avicenna tirelessly persevered in his quest for greater knowledge in the various sciences. Not a little of his time was spent in Ispahau, where he taught natural science, medicine and philosophy. There he taught the students a philosophic doctrine of peripateticism mixed with Neo-Platonism. He was always

[1] Metaph. Comp. Avic.—Carame, p. viii. "Licet iste vitam effrenatam duxerit, passionibus iactatus . . ."

very active, teaching, writing and discoursing. Finally death silenced the teaching and arrested the prolific pen of this erudite doctor and celebrated knight of Arabian thought at Hamadan in his fifty-eighth year. But his works and doctrines were not interred with his body; his name has come down the centuries.

Avicenna's works have been conveyed to us chiefly through the medium of Latin translations. The focal point of this medieval project of translating was the College of Toledo. Through the zealous efforts of Dominic Gundisalvus at this institution most of the Avicennian works were done into Latin; however, much praise is due Gerhard of Cremona for his translation of the great medical work, *Canones.* In his outstanding metaphysical masterpiece, *Chifa* or *Book of Healing,* which is encyclopedic in style, Avicenna included physics, psychology, logic, mathematics and metaphysics. His commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima, De Caelo et Mundo,* as well as those on the *Physics* and *Metaphysics,* were an important factor in acquainting students with the Stagirite whose doctrine was often improperly interpreted by our Arabian knight. To enkindle interest in his own theories and tenets Avicenna's writing was not restricted to works of prose but extended also to the poetic. He wrote a didactic poem, *To the Soul,* wherein are contained his main principles of logic and as late as 1895 this opus was translated into the German language. Besides such masterly productions as *Nadjat* or *Book of Deliverance,* which is somewhat metaphysical, and *Sufficientia,* he wrote volumes more on mysticism and astronomy. Indeed he was a prolific author and made use of every means afforded him to disseminate his philosophical opinions. Since only his philosophical doctrine concerns us in this paper any consideration of it ought to be sufficiently extensive so that most of his fundamental teachings will be cursorily treated. The likeness of his doctrine with Aristotelianism is more apparent than real. All that is meant by such a declaration is that Aristotle's basic doctrines were usually thrown into the Avicennian mould. The Stagirite became a naturalized Arabian, for originality was to play a major role in Avicenna's system.

In natural philosophy his unique theory was that of the "preparer,"[2] which is the principle of motion and that which disposes matter for the fusing of a substantial union wrought by direct intervention of the Active Intellect, the nature of which will be explained presently in detail. According to his doctrine of Emanation, God is not the immediate Creator of all natural things but is only a starting

[2] cf. Avic.—"Sufficientia" *(Physics Bk. I)* I, 10.

point from which intermediaries carry on this sublime work of creation. This theory has its origin in Neo-Platonism and, according to the Angelic Doctor, is definitely untenable; first, because it attributes to creatures the power of creation, which is an act divinely unique, and secondly, because to chance alone is ascribed the beginning and perfect completion of this world which is the acme of harmony. This is likewise patently impossible, for order always demands intelligence.[3]

Though granting the human soul to be a spiritual, immaterial substance endowed with immortality, Avicenna seems in his psychological teachings to incline more to Platonism in describing the nature of the soul as a receptacle of intelligible forms. This inference is more strongly confirmed in his doctrine concerning the union of soul and body. For Plato this union was only accidental, analogous to a sailor in his ship; similarly Avicenna declares this union to be not substantial, but only a relation of amity and collaboration. This teaching leaves much unexplained. Besides, such a theory is not at all consonant with the substantial union productive of one essential nature which is the first principle of operation, as rigidly maintained by all Thomists.

In the third of the famous *quinque viae* by which the existence of God can be adequately demonstrated by a rational process, Saint Thomas of Aquino, according to the renowned Gilson,[4] employed an Avicennian argument. The "necesse-esse" of Avicenna was very similar to Aristotle's Pure Act. His explanation of the nature of this necessary being runs as follows: "the existence of a necessary being is proved from the possible effect"—a collection of an indefinite number of possibles would never produce a necessary being—therefore, "all possibles are ultimately brought back to a cause essentially necessary, which is everything that is, yet has no dependence on anything." He called such a being "necesse-esse per se"[5] and further identified it with God.

Before presenting a brief exposé of two doctrines which manifest his originality in metaphysics it might be well to note that Avicenna was one of the first philosophers to acquaint the western world with the real distinction in created things between essence and existence. This teaching the Angelic Doctor valiantly defended against

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[3] cf. *Summa Theologica* I, q. 47, a. 1.
[4] cf. Le Thomisme, Strasbourg—1920—Gilson pp. 44-46.
[5] Avic.—"Chifa," Metaph. I, 7, fol. 73a.
N.B. All translations in this article, unless otherwise noted, are those of the writer.

some bitter foes in his great works, the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The two doctrines we now wish to present are his division of beings and his theory of knowledge. Beings, Avicenna maintained, are of three grades: first, the possible strictly so-called—that is, the celestial spheres and human souls which are of such a nature that they need not exist but once given existence by God they must exist always; secondly, the absolutely possible—that is, all sublunary things subject to generation and corruption; thirdly, the absolutely necessary—that is, God, whose essence and existence are identical.[6] According to his theory of knowledge the human intellect abstracts the form from sensible objects and compares it with other individual objects possessing the same essential notes. This comparison furnishes the universal. There is more than one hiatus in this cognitive theory of Avicenna. St. Thomas refuted the doctrine with this terse reason, "forasmuch as no one can apply a thing to another unless he first knows that thing."[7]

Next we shall consider his teaching on the universal, the nature and scope of philosophy, and his doctrine on the Active and Passive intellect. In the *Chifa* Avicenna states his basic logical principle in this succinct expression, "Intellectus in formis agit universalitatem."[8] This solemn dictum, later to be used by Averrhoes, embraced by Saint Albert the Great and oft repeated by Saint Thomas Aquinas, has this significance, that mind alone gives to forms their universality or oneness. This is fundamentally the teaching of moderate realism. The universal, Avicenna said, has three modes of existence: *"ante rem,"* in *"re"* and *"post rem."* He explains his doctrine in this manner, "in some way the known form (in the wisdom of the Creator and angels) is the cause of forms existing in sensibles; and somehow the forms, which have existence in sensibles, are the cause in some way of the known forms existing; in short, the forms exist in the intellect after they have already been in sensibles."[9] This theory is more ornate in its Neo-Platonic trappings than that of the Aristotelians insofar as the idea causes the fact, whereas the Aristotelian analysis does not do this but looks directly to the idea contained in the fact, after which follows the universal in the mind. Nevertheless Avicenna has the spirit of the Stagirite and his followers on this much controverted point.

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[6] cf Avic.—"Chifa," Metaph. VIII, 4, fol. 99r.

[7] *S. T.* I, q. 14, a. 11—taken from the translation of the Dominican Fathers of the English Province.

[8] cf. Avic.—"Chifa," Metapm. Tract V, c. 1-2.

[9] Avic.—"Chifa," Metaph. Logica, Pars III, fol. 12v. Latin version, Edit. Venet.—1508.

The nature, purpose and scope of philosophy, according to our Arabian knight, would cause many alterations in the departmental set-up of most of our modern colleges and universities. A philosopher was truly a savant. To be a philosopher was a great task and an ambition to be realized only after years of intellectual industry. "The purpose of philosophy," declared Avicenna, "is to comprehend the truth of all things to the extent that this is possible to man. Things actually existing either have, or have not, being independent of our will or labor. Indeed knowledge of the former is termed speculative philosophy; knowledge of the latter practical. The sole aim of speculative philosophy is the perfecting of the intellect for knowledge; whereas the end of practical philosophy is not only that the soul may know, but that it also have knowledge of what it may and should do. Thus the purpose of the former is solely the apprehension of thought (Truth); the purpose of the latter is knowledge of thought extended to action—consequently, speculation adds a greater dignity to any science. Therefore, the goal of speculative philosophy is apprehension of Truth, and the aim of practical philosophy is knowledge of Good."[10] The scope of philosophy for Avicenna may be illustrated by diagram.

Philosophy

speculative	-	practical
Physics	-	Ethics
Mathematics	-	Economics
Metaphysics	-	Politics

The last unique doctrine of Avicenna in our treatment is that of the Passive and Active Intellects. According to this Arabian knight of philosophic thought the Passive Intellect is the individual mind in a potential state of cognitive operation. It springs into action upon coming in contact with the Active Intellect, which becomes particularized in each existent human soul, as light is diffused on different sensible objects. This Active Intellect, in which universal ideas are generated and which is the giver of forms, resides in the sphere of

[10] Avic.—*ibid.* Logica, fol. 2.

the moon and is participated in by each individual soul. Some thinkers, realizing that the Active Intellect is an impersonal mind in the state of actual, perennial thought, proceeded to identify it with God. But such a conclusion may reasonably be denied, for in the Avicennian sense this Intellect is the first of the intelligences created by God the supreme intellect, the Divine Intellect, Uncreated and Uncaused. The objections of the Angelic Doctor and most Scholastics against the unity and separability of the Active Intellect are two-fold; that it is an untenable psychological doctrine and an unfaithful interpolation of the Stagirite. That is sufficient for Avicenna, so let us proceed to a similar treatment of our second knight of Arabism, and then we shall conclude this study with a consideration of the influence each had on philosophic thought.

(To be continued.)