

Lesson 1: A Glance at the Course of Philosophical Thought

Lesson 1: A Glance at the Course of Philosophical Thought (From Its Origins to the Islamic Epoch)

The Beginning of Philosophical Thought

The history of human thought as well as the creation of man goes back beyond history. Wherever he has lived, thought has been an inseparable characteristic of man. Wherever he has placed his feet, he has taken thinking and intellection with him.

There is no certain and precise information about the unwritten thoughts of man except that which has been surmised by archaeologists on the basis of uncovered remains. However, written thought has remained behind as caravan of history has passed, since the time of written language.

Among the kinds of human thought, that which is related to the knowledge of existence and to its beginning and end, at first were mixed with religious beliefs. Therefore it may be said that one must look for the oldest philosophical thoughts among oriental religious thoughts.

Historians of philosophy believe that the most ancient collections that are purely philosophical or that are predominantly philosophical are related to the Greek sages, who lived approximately six centuries before Christ (peace be with him).

Scholars of that time are mentioned who have tried to come to know existence, and the beginning and end of the cosmos. In order to interpret the appearance and changes that occur in existents, they expressed different and occasionally contradictory opinions, and at the same time, they do not hide the fact that their thoughts were influenced more or less by oriental religious beliefs and culture.

In any case, the free atmosphere for discussion and criticism in the Greece of those days prepared the

ground for developing and taking pride in philosophical thought. That area was turned into a nursery for philosophy.

Naturally, the beginning thoughts were not properly organized and arranged, and the problems for research were not precisely categorized, let alone that each category should have a specific name and title and characteristic method. In sum, all ideas were called science ('ilm), wisdom (hikmat) and knowledge (ma'rifat), and the like.

The Appearance of Sophism and Skepticism

In the fifth century B.C., scholars are mentioned who in the Greek language were called "sophists", that is, sage and learned. But in spite of their vast information they had about the knowledge then current, they did not believe in fixed truths, and they did not consider any thing to be definitely known or certain.

As reported by historians of philosophy, they were professional teachers who taught rhetoric and debate, and they trained defense lawyers for the courts, for which there was much demand at that time. This profession required the defense lawyer to be able to establish any claim and to be able to reject all sorts of opposing claims. Dealing with this sort of teaching which was often subject to fallacy, gradually brought about a kind of thinking according to which basically there is no truth beyond human thought!

You have heard the story of a man who jokingly said that in such and such a house sweets are being given away. In their simplicity, the people hurried to crowd around the door of the mentioned house. Little by little, the speaker himself began to harbor suspicions about the matter, and so as not to lose out on the chance for free sweets, he joined the line.

It seems as if the Sophists also were victims of this same fate. By teaching fallacious methods to establish and deny claims, little by little such tendencies came to appear in their own thinking, that basically truth and falsehood depend on human thought, and in conclusion that there is no truth beyond human thought!

The expression "sophism," which meant sage and learned, due to being ascribed to such mentioned people, lost its fundamental meaning, and it came to be used as a symbol and sign for a way of thinking according to fallacious reasoning. It is this same expression that in Arabic has taken the form "sufisti" and the term "safsatah" is derived from it.

The Period of the Flourishing of Philosophy

The most famous thinker who stood up against the Sophists and who criticized their ideas and views was Socrates. It was he who called himself philosophus, that is, a lover of wisdom. It is this same expression that in Arabic took the form filsuf from which the term falsafah is derived.

Historians of philosophy consider there to be two causes for the choice of this name: one is the humility

of Socrates, who always was confessing his own ignorance, and the other is his objection to the Sophists who called themselves sages, that is, with the choice of this title, he wanted to make them understand: You, who for the sake of material and political aims engage in discussion and debate, teaching and learning, are not worthy of the name 'sage', and even I, who reject your ideas with the firmest of reasons, do not consider myself worthy of this title, and I merely call myself a lover of wisdom.

After Socrates, his student, Plato, who for years profited from his lessons, endeavored to establish the principles of philosophy, and then, his student, Aristotle, brought philosophy to the pinnacle of its flourishing, and formalized the principles of thought and reasoning in the form of the science of logic, as he formulated the pitfalls of thought in the form of a section on the fallacies.

Ever since Socrates called himself a philosopher, the expression philosophy has been used as opposed to sophistry, and it embraces all the real sciences, such as physics, chemistry, medicine, astronomy, mathematics and theology. Even today in many of the world's most renowned libraries, the books of physics and chemistry are classified under philosophy, and only conventional disciplines, such as vocabulary, syntax and grammar, are outside the realm of philosophy.

In this way, philosophy came to be considered as a common noun for all the real sciences, and it was divided into two general groups: theoretical sciences and practical sciences. The theoretical sciences include the natural sciences, mathematics and theology, and the natural sciences in their turn include the fields of cosmogony, mineralogy, botany and zoology, and mathematics is divided into arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

Theology is divided into two parts: metaphysics or general discussions of existence, and theology proper. The practical sciences are divided into three branches: morality, domestic economy and politics.

1. Theoretical

a) natural sciences:

- the general principles of bodies,

b) cosmogony, mineralogy, botany, zoology

c) mathematics:

- arithmetic
- geometry
- astronomy
- music

d) theology:

- the general principles of existence
- divinity

2. Philosophy

a) Theoretical

- ethics (regarding the individual)
- domestic economy (regarding the family)
- politics (regarding the community)

The End of Greek Philosophy

After Plato and Aristotle, for some time their students occupied themselves with the compilation, arrangement and elaboration on the works of their masters, and more or less kept the market for philosophy brisk. It did not take long, however, for this briskness to be replaced by stagnation, and that prosperity and thriving began to fail, and in Greece there came to be few customers for the commodities of science and knowledge.

The masters of the arts and sciences came to dwell in Alexandria, where they engaged in research and education. This city remained the center of science and philosophy until the fourth century.

But when the Roman emperors converted to Christianity, and propagated the beliefs of the Church as official beliefs and ideas, they began to oppose the free realm of thought and science, until finally Justinian, the Eastern Roman Emperor, in the year A.D. 529, issued the edict to close the universities and schools of Athens and Alexandria, and the scholars fled for their lives, and they sought refuge in other cities and lands. In this reason the gleaming torch of science and philosophy was extinguished in the Roman Empire.

The Dawn of the Sun of Islam

Simultaneous with the above mentioned process (in the sixth century of the Christian era), in another corner of the world, the greatest event of history occurred, and the Arabian Peninsula was witness to the birth, mission and migration of the eminent Prophet of Islam, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be with him and with his progeny.

He read the message of Divine guidance in the ear of the consciousness of the world. As a first step, he called upon people to acquire knowledge,¹ and he held reading, writing and learning in the highest

regard. He founded the greatest civilization and most thriving culture in the world. He encouraged his followers to acquire knowledge and wisdom from the cradle to the grave (min al-mahd ila al-lahd), from the nearest to the furthest points on the globe (even if to China, wa law bil-sin), and at whatever cost (wa law bi-safk al-muhaj wa khawdh al-lujaj).[2](#)

The prolific sapling of Islam planted by the powerful hand of the Messenger of God (S) in the life giving radiance of Divine revelation and nourished by other cultures grew and yielded fruit. Islam absorbed the raw material of human thought according to proper Divine standards and changed them into useful elements in the forge of constructive criticism, and in a short period it spread its shade over all the cultures of the world.

In the shade of the encouragement of the Noble Messenger (S) and his impeccable successors, Muslims began to acquire various sciences, and the scientific heritages of Greece, Rome and Iran were translated into Arabic. They absorbed the useful elements and supplemented them with their own inquiries, and in most fields they were able to make important discoveries, as in algebra, trigonometry, astronomy, perspective, physics and chemistry.

Another important factor of the growth of Islamic culture was politics. The oppressive Ummayyids and Abbasids who illegitimately occupied the seat of Islamic government felt a severe need for popular approval among the Muslims, while the Household of the Prophet, the Ahl al-Bayt, may the blessings of Allah be with all of them, that is, those who were the legitimate guardians (awliyah) of the peoples, were the source of knowledge and the treasury of the Divine revelation.

The governing regime had no means to attract people except threats and bribes. Hence, they tried to make their regime prosper by encouraging scholars and gathering authorities, and by using the Greek, Roman and Iranian sciences, they tried to open a shop in opposition to the Ahl al-Bayt.

In this way, various philosophical ideas and types of knowledge and crafts with diverse motivations by means of friends and foes, entered the Islamic environment, and the Muslims began to inquire about, adopt and criticize them, and brilliant figures began to appear in the world of science and philosophy in the Islamic environment, each of whom developed a branch of the sciences by his own constant endeavors, and Islamic culture bore fruit.

Among them, the scholars of Islamic theology and doctrine reviewed and criticized the problems of divine philosophy from different viewpoints, and however much some of them went to extremes in their criticisms, this sort of criticism and nit-picking, questioning and raising doubts caused most of the Islamic thinkers and philosophers to try harder, leading to the enrichment of intellectual and philosophical thought.

The Development of Philosophy in the Islamic Epoch

With the widening of the realm of Islamic government and the inclination of different peoples to this life giving religion, many centers of learning of the world came to be included within the realm of Islam.

There was a great exchange of ideas among scholars, exchange of books among libraries and translation of these books from various languages: Hindi, Farsi, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Hebrew, etc., into Arabic, which had become the de facto international language of the Muslims, and this accelerated the pace of the development of philosophy, the sciences and the crafts. Many books of the philosophers of Greece and Alexandria, and other reputable centers of learning were rendered into Arabic.

In the beginning, the lack of a common language and technical terms agreed upon by the translators, and the discrepancies regarding the principles of Eastern and Western philosophy made the teaching of philosophy difficult and made research and selection among these principles even more difficult. But it was not very long before geniuses such as Abu Nasr Farabi and Ibn Sina were able to learn the entire sum of philosophical thought of that time by their constant efforts.

With God given talents that flourished under the radiance of the light of revelation and the explanations of the Imams, they were then able to review and select from among the appropriate philosophical principles and to present a mature philosophical system, which in addition to including Platonic and Aristotelian ideas and Neo-Platonic thought from Alexandria, and the ideas of oriental mystics ('urafa) also included new thoughts and was thus able to excel over all the systems of philosophy of the East and West, although the largest portion of the new system was Aristotelian, and for this reason their philosophy had an Aristotelian and peripatetic color.

Later, this philosophical system came under the critical magnifying glass of thinkers such as Ghazali, Abu al-Barakat Baghdadi and Fakhr Razi. On the other hand, taking advantage of the works of the sages of ancient Iran, and comparing them with the works of Plato, the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, Suhrawardi founded a new school of philosophy, called Illuminationist philosophy, which had a more Platonic color.

In this way, new ground was prepared for the encounter among philosophical ideas and their development and ripening. Centuries later, great philosophers such as Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, Muhaqqiq Dawani, Sayyid Sadr al-Din Dashtaki, Shaykh Baha'i and Mir Damad were able to supplement the enrichment of Islamic philosophy with their own brilliant ideas.

Then came the turn of Sadr al-Din Shirazi who introduced a new system of philosophy with his own genius and innovation which was composed of the harmonious elements of peripatetic and Illuminationist philosophies and mystical disclosures, to which he added profound thoughts and valuable ideas, and he called it transcendent theosophy (hikmat muta'aliyyah).

- [1.](#) Consider the first verses revealed to the Prophet (S), “Read! In the Name of your Lord Who created... Who taught by the Pen....” (96: 1, 4).
- [2.](#) Allusion is made here to several well-known hadiths attributed to the Prophet (S).

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