

Ahmed Alwishah & Josh Hayes (eds.). *Aristotle and the Arabic Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 278 pages. ISBN: 9781107101739.

*Peter Adamson**

Some sense of Aristotle's standing in Islamic culture is conveyed by a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet proclaimed, "I am the Aristotle of this community." As in Latin, one could simply say in Arabic "the Philosopher" and expect readers to know who was meant. And when al-Fārābī was honored with the title of "the second master," it was superfluous to identify the first. Admittedly Avicenna, the Islamic world's greatest early thinker, displaced Aristotle as the central philosophical figure in the eyes of subsequent generations. But in what I would call the "formative period" of philosophy in the Islamic world – that is, up to the time of Avicenna – the study of philosophy was, much as in Latin Christendom, nearly synonymous with the study of Aristotle. Even thereafter, attempts were made to fight the tide of Avicennism by reinstating Aristotle's authority, as both Averroes and 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādi sought to do. There was also a resurgence of interest in Aristotle's works, along with other Hellenic sources, during the Safavid period.

All of this means that there is plenty of material to be tackled in a book entitled *Aristotle and the Arabic Tradition*. Indeed, the volume's editors have had to define their remit more narrowly than the title could suggest, for a full examination of this topic would be tantamount to a undertaking a general survey of philosophy in the formative period and of Aristotle's continued relevance even today. Eschewing this unfeasibly broad conception, the editors have gathered papers looking at the transmission of Aristotle's works and at some of the leading Muslim thinkers' direct engagements with his thought during the formative period.

The volume is organized in keeping with curriculum of Aristotelian studies in Late Antiquity. After a general discussion of the Arabs' reception of Aristotle by Cristina (not "Christina," as this book persistently calls her) D'Ancona, it begins with the contributions of two papers by Paul Thom and Riccardo Strobino, respectively, on Avicenna's use of Aristotle as regards logic. These are followed by papers on *Poetics* and

* Prof., Fakultät für Philosophie, Wissenschaftstheorie und Religionswissenschaft, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Rhetoric – which belong here, given the “extended *Organon*” of the Arabic tradition – by Uwe Vagelpohl and Frédérique Woerther. Paul Lettinck and Andreas Lammer contribute papers on natural philosophy, and the psychology or philosophy of the mind (for Avicenna and many others, an aspect of natural philosophy) is dealt with by Ahmed Alwishah and Yehuda Halper. After Calvin Normore’s general look at the nature of metaphysics in the Islamic world, the volume ends with Josh Hayes’ summation of what is known about the Arabs’ reception of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Claudia Baracchi’s rather bewildering piece on political philosophy.

Before picking out some of the more interesting themes, I would like to dwell upon what is not, or only barely, included here. This is not necessarily meant as a criticism, for, as already noted, the editors had to limit their project’s scope. But given that their chosen focus is rather traditional, it may be worth pointing out other directions that could have been explored. First, it is worth emphasizing the philological importance of the medieval Arabic-language translations of Aristotle. Given that these translations are based on very early and now lost manuscripts, they represent witnesses that should be taken seriously in textual criticism regarding Aristotle himself. Second, the reception of Aristotle in Arabic does continue beyond the formative period; however, the papers presented here do not (to his credit, Normore highlights this limitation of his piece: pp. 178, 199).

Third, “the Arabic tradition” would include Jewish and Christian thinkers, who, however, receive little coverage here. For example, the Christian Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī, recognized by his contemporaries as the leading Aristotelian of his time, is mentioned only once (by Lammer, p. 128). Fourth, and along the same lines, the Muslim thinkers focused upon are mostly the usual suspects; al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes feature prominently. *A fortiori* almost nothing is said about the impact of Aristotle beyond the narrow bounds of *falsafa*, even though such things as the *ḥadīth* mentioned above and his frequent appearance as a wise sage in “wisdom literature” show that his cultural resonance reached well past such specialist philosophers as Averroes or the members of the Baghdad School. Here, it might also be interesting to reflect upon areas of his thought that had surprisingly *little* echo outside the specialist circles, as Vagelpohl does when he notes the surprising fact that Arabic culture largely ignored Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, despite the centrality of poetry and eloquence in that culture (p. 83).

Fifth and finally, even though D’Ancona notes the importance of the Pseudo-Aristotelian texts on which she is such an expert, the remainder of the volume focuses squarely on the transmission and use of the authentic Aristotelian corpus. Again, this is fair enough and probably would even be expected by most readers. But one should bear in mind that to some extent it may distort the picture of what “Aristotle” meant in this culture.

Of course listing the things that a volume has *not* done is one of the easiest (and for the editors, most annoying) ways for a reviewer to respond to a book. So let's shift our focus to the wealth of interesting contributions that it does make. I will not survey the content of each article, as such an overview is well presented by the two editors in their introduction. Rather, I want to dwell on how this volume shows the distance between the original Aristotle and the Aristotelianism we find in the Arabic tradition. Even leaving aside the Pseudo-Aristotelian material, readers were almost always using Arabic translations and had no recourse to the original Greek texts. As Vagelpohl puts it, commentators undertook their task within a "closed circle" (p. 91) and could not know, for instance, that their version of *Meteorology* was very different from the one transmitted in the Greek tradition (on this example, see Lettinck, p. 107). Even translations that adhered closely to the Greek necessarily introduced a whole new layer of technical terminology that became determinative of Arabic Aristotelianism.

Another kind of distance was introduced by the influence of Late Antiquity's philosophical literature. As Lammer shows, even so fundamental a notion as "nature" was understood by Arabic philosophers not simply in light of Aristotle's definition in *Physics*, but through such ancient commentators as Philoponus. The latter's Neoplatonic understanding of nature as a "power that has descended into bodies" (p. 124) became a standard part of the "Aristotelian" definition of nature in Arabic, only to be rejected by Avicenna. This illustrates yet another factor that distanced Arabic Aristotelianism from the teachings of the authentic corpus: the originality with which that corpus was read, interpreted, and criticized. Reading Strobino's detailed discussion of scientific inquiry in Avicenna, for example, one sees that he is working within an Aristotelian paradigm and yet bringing to that paradigm his own concerns and conceptual apparatus (for instance, by aligning conception and assent with definition and syllogism, p. 73). His ambitious and sophisticated theory of self-knowledge and self-awareness, fully studied here by Alwishah and in a recent book by Jari Kaukua¹, is another good example.

Of course Avicenna was unusual in being determinedly original with respect to his sources, as shown in Dimitri Gutas' classic and similarly titled *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*.² But the same goes for more self-consciously Aristotelian thinkers. This is clear from Halper's look at "intentionality" in Averroes that,

1 Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy: Avicenna and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

2 Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Second, Revised and Enlarged Edition, Including an Inventory of Avicenna's Authentic Works) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014).



incidentally, exemplifies the point just made about Arabic terminology, with the notorious case of the untranslatable word *ma'nā*, as well as from al-Fārābī's prologue to a commentary on *Rhetoric*. As Woerther shows, this prologue makes numerous subtle changes to Aristotle, not least by making space for the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* within a legal framework (pp. 103-4). Here we see the importance of another distancing factor, namely, religious context. All three Abrahamic faiths provided a context for philosophy in the Islamic world, which helps explain why God is more central in Arabic metaphysics (a discipline that was even called *ilāhiyyāt*) than in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

As these examples will hopefully show, the volume as a whole provides a rich portrait of Aristotle's reception in the formative period. It offers both original research and more general pieces that bring together the state of the art on a given topic in chapters that could have been at home in a "companion" or "handbook" to the Arabic-language Aristotle. I take it that this mixture is intentional, in light of the editors' own contributions: Alwishah's piece on self-awareness criticizes and goes beyond previous secondary literature, whereas Hayes' chapter on *Ethics* is largely a summary of what has already been established by previous scholarship. Thus any reader with an interest in the Arabic reception of Aristotle will want to read this book, even if specialists may find some of the material familiar and those who are new to the subject may find that some of the contributions require a degree of background knowledge that they do not possess.