

مراجعات کتب

Book Reviews

HISTORY OF LOGIC

Al-Farabi's commentary and short treatise on Aristotle's De interpretatione. Introduction and translation from Arabic by F. Zimmerman. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 1987. (Classical and Medieval Logical Texts, Part III.) ciii + 287 pp. of English. £22.50 (paperback edition).

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I

This edition (the first hardback edition appeared in 1981) finally makes available an eminently scholarly work to scholars of modest means, especially to scholars of Arabic logic and the history of logic. This is not simply a translation of the two (long and short) commentaries of Al-Farabi (d. 950) on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* (complete with indices of Arabic and Greek words, a general index, and appendices on manuscript readings); it is also a very thorough reading and study of the historical and philological evolution of Aristotelian (and especially Christian) commentators leading up to the Arabic tradition, with a systematic critique of such 'classical' theories on the transmission tradition as that provided, e.g. by M. Meyerhof (Von Alexandria Nach Baghdad; p. ciii). The author's linguistic facility with the relevant languages (including Syriac, Arabic, Greek and Latin), as well as his knowledge of pre-Islamic philosophical traditions, makes this an invaluable reading of the commentaries. Drawing on some manuscripts not previously consulted for the existing Arabic edition, as well as on earlier commentators, the author/translator is enabled to make highly reasonable educated guesses or readings where the text may seem corrupt or incomplete. The result is a smooth reading and translation, with constant cross-references to the Aristotelian original.

However, the introduction to the texts goes far beyond the strictly etymological domain; it is a very incisive treatment of some of the basic elements of the transmission tradition, with an attempt at a fairly precise delineation of Al-Farabi's place in the wider context of the Christian Aristotelian tradition in Baghdad. The introduction also addresses the indigenous intellectual context in which al-Farabi lived, and his interaction particularly with the grammarians and dialecticians (*mutakallimūn*) of his time. (The author's conclusion on p. cxxxviii that al-Farabi suffered from 'an alienation from Muslim Arab scholarship' is one that can probably be made of many a philosopher *vis-à-vis* the intellectual climate in which he lives.) Given the prominently linguistic basis of *De interpretatione*, this interaction sometimes found expression in disputations on logical and natural languages, or the extent to which a logical language can be independent of, and superior to a natural language. In part, the disputations in question almost provide a historical

antecedent to the problem of 'translatibility', which has preoccupied such contemporary philosophers of language and logic as W.V.O. Quine.¹ Presumably because of the very wide range of topics broached in the introduction, the reader is merely provided with a taste, rather than with a full analysis of the problems involved in this context.

II

Some readers might feel that the excellence of the textual and etymological treatment tends on occasion to turn into an obsession that can aberrate, perhaps even undermine a fair or objective assessment of al-Farabi's individuality as a logician and a philosopher. Zimmerman's pronouncement that al-Farabi 'no doubt produced some new ideas' (p. xxxv) has a slighting ring about it. This, together with various other remarks about him 'tendentiously distorting facts' (p. cvii), or 'falling victim to multiple confusion' (p. xxx), etc., exudes an air of condescension, making the reader feel that the treatment is somewhat unsympathetic. Indeed, between the pronouncement that 'al-Farabi's technical language is not self-explanatory' (p. li) and the conclusion that 'students will find most of the clues to the understanding of his concepts, not in Arabic usage and etymology, but in the language of the Greek tradition' (p. lii), there must be a very wide gulf which the author seems to cross all too easily. Even if the first pronouncement were true (which is highly questionable), in order to justify the second statement a far more rigorous analysis of al-Farabi's logical works would need to be undertaken.

An example of what was called above an excessive etymological obsession (Greek-Arabic) is the author's reference to al-Farabi's use of the word '*muḥassal*'. The author here claims (p. cxx) that 'to put it bluntly, we only know that *muḥassal* is supposed to mean "definite" because it translates "ὀρισμενος"'. However, one would have thought that anybody with a basic understanding of logic and no understanding of Greek, could not fail to understand the meaning of this term as it is used by al-Farabi, in just the same way that a modern student finds it possible to understand what 'instantiation' means in an English logical textbook. More generally, while it is certainly necessary and useful to trace the Greek 'equivalents' of the Arabic words (e.g. l.), this exercise should be regarded merely as a first step in the attempt at understanding the meanings of those terms in the context of the logical works themselves, rather than as sufficient means of determining those meanings. After all, if one hardly takes it as sufficient when two philosophers use the same word in one language to conclude they mean the same thing, how much more careful must one be when translation and two (or more) languages are involved?

A related (Arabic-Arabic) critique can be applied to the author's 'dissatisfaction' with al-Farabi's use of unconventional terms (e.g. *gawl* as opposed to *jumlah* for 'proposition' or 'statement' (p. cxxx)—a practice for which he says 'no excuse exists'. Actually, it is arguable that it is precisely because of the grammarians' well-established definition of 'jumlah' ('sentence'), that another word would have seemed better for introducing the logical concept of 'statement'. This certainly

1 Unfortunately, the author's treatment of the topic here surprisingly leaves out one of the better-known systematic epistles by Yahya b. Adi in defence of the independence of the rules of logic from those of grammar, published in Aleppo well before the first edition of this work appeared. A related topic is the interesting discussion in the context of predication arising from the absence in Arabic of the copula (pp. xxxvi ff).

seems to be the case in present-day Arabic classes of introductory logic, when one tries to set apart the logical usage from the well-established grammatical usage of 'sentence'. Once again, one would have thought that a full reading and understanding of medieval Arabic logical texts is sufficient for understanding the 'logical jargon' which was used—where 'jumlah', incidentally, also has its distinct role (e.g. sometimes used in referring to person, or any assemblage of parts). One feels that a full understanding of such 'jargon' might have saved the author some tortuous explanation (p. xcvi) of why the word '*ba'd*' is on occasion better translated as 'one'—the word is extensively used to mean 'at least one' in medieval Arabic logical texts, in the same way that 'some' is used in English logical texts.

The occasional tendency to misconstrue the nature and limitation of the etymological exercise, and sometimes to cross all too readily from the realm of strict scholarship to the domain of sweeping generalisations, can sometimes seem almost offensive—as when the author announces that, in his view, 'there is little in the logic of Avicenna that is not foreshadowed in that of al-Farabi' (p. lxxxiv, n. 2). Many experts on Arabic logic would find this statement highly dubious, to say the least. Incidentally, given the author's general assessment of al-Farabi as being little more than a mouth-piece for the Christian Aristotelian tradition of Baghdad, the reader cannot but come out with the impression by extension that, in the author's view, there is hardly an indigenous or original substance in medieval Arabic logic—a view which requires substantiation.

III

Finally, a brief comment on Islam. Although the author commends the freedom of interaction between philosophers of different religions in Baghdad (preferring to ascribe it, rather oddly one feels, to what he calls 'Nestorian humanism': p. cxii), he nonetheless claims that al-Farabi's philosophical project was to create an *Islamic* philosophy (p. cx, his italics). But this would seem inconsistent with the reference he makes to another of al-Farabi's works (p. xliii, n.2; p. cxii) where al-Farabi quite clearly makes the point that all religions are reflections of the universal truth of philosophy, implying that it is the latter which is the measure of the degree of truth of different religions. If anything, this would seem to indicate that al-Farabi took an almost condescending view of religions (including Islam)—thus his derogatory remarks on dialectics (*kalām*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (pp. cxiii ff)—preferring to consider himself a student of a 'higher' universal science (the reader may be referred to the works of Muhsin Mahdi on the subject). Indeed, as the author himself states (p. cxiii), the closest thing to an Islamic philosophy in that period is probably the discipline of *kalām*. There is no reason why one cannot take the simple view here that al-Farabi was, first and foremost in this context, a student of philosophy itself, believing it to contain the ultimate truths, and studying it with the only tools available to him at that time. Such an attitude would certainly have distinguished al-Farabi from some other philosophers of the period, and primarily from Avicenna, who took religious truth rather more seriously.

On the whole, however, criticisms such as those above, pale next to the scholarship exhibited in this work. It remains an indispensable enrichment to the field of study of Arabic logic particularly, and of the history of logic more generally.