

SOME TREATISES AND EPISTLES OF IBN SĪNĀ

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On Unesco's initiative, a millenary of the great Eastern medieval thinker, Ibn Sīnā, has been commemorated by many nations of the world. This millenary has been celebrated on a particularly large scale in the Soviet Union.

By decree of the Soviet government, the millenary celebrations were held in Moscow and the Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan. In Dushanbe, the Tadzhik SSR's capital city, and in Bukhara, the thinker's native land (now a regional centre of the Uzbek SSR), an International Scientific Conference was held in commemoration of Ibn Sīnā's contribution to humanitarian knowledge and scientific thought. Scientists and scholars of various countries of the world participated in the conference.

In the Soviet Union a great number of Ibn Sīnā's works—translated into modern languages—as well as many works dedicated to the great thinker's scientific heritage have been published, and extensive research work has been carried out to study his rich heritage.

Undoubtedly, all the measures taken to commemorate Ibn Sīnā's millenary have been useful for the development of world studies of Ibn Sīnā's creative works.

An outstanding thinker of encyclopaedic knowledge, and one among the most talented and gifted physicians of the world, Ibn Sīnā (970-1037 A.D.) lived a comparatively short life, but left a great number of works, hardly neglecting any medieval science : medicine and mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, mineralogy, philosophy, logic and philology. He has also a number of creative works—in poetry and prose—to his credit.

Being a synthesis and embodiment of total progress made in philosophy, medicine and science by the Muslim East during the medieval period, as well as of the whole culture embodied in the Arabic language, Ibn Sīnā's scientific heritage reflected not only the achievements, but also various problems and contradictions of human spiritual life of that epoch.

As is mentioned in a number of sources, some 450 works of different value emanated from Ibn Sīnā's pen, but only 250 of them have survived, of which MSS are found in the various libraries all over the world.

Ibn Sīnā's manuscripts are being studied in many research centres of the world, and they are translated into many languages. In the meantime the search for Ibn Sīnā's lost works continues.

Studies on Ibn Sīnā are being conducted also in the Soviet Union, and, in particular, at the Abu Raihan Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbek SSR Academy of Sciences, its manuscript section being one of the largest depositories of Eastern written sources in Arabic, Persian and Old Turkish languages. Among over 40 thousand manuscripts of the works of various medieval authors, there are 70 of Ibn Sīnā's 55 books, some of them being unique. One of these MSS belonging to the 14th century is on medical science in 6 volumes entitled "The Canon of Medicine" (*Al-Qānūn fī-Ṭibb*), its first full translation from Arabic into Russian having been accomplished by scientists of Uzbekistan. A number of small, but rare, treatises on medicine, the well-known philosophic works: "The Book of Instructions and Precepts" (*Kitāb al-Ishārāt wa-Tanbīhāt*), "The Book of Knowledge" (*Dānish-nāma*), a unique manuscript of his philosophical stories: *Solāmān wa Ibsāl*, *Ḥayy bin Yaḳḏān*, and similar small treatises on philosophy and logic.

In the study of Ibn Sīnā's world view and scientific outlook, his major multi-volume fundamental works, such as *Kitāb ash-Shifā*, *Al-Qānūn fī-Ṭibb*, as well as the *Ishārāt wa-Tanbīhāt* and *Dānish-nāma* are of primary importance. However, there is a lot of interesting and new material contained in Ibn Sīnā's small treatises shedding light not only on some little-known aspects of his rich heritage and scientific concepts, but also on early medieval Eastern ideology.

The collection of the Institute of the Oriental Studies of the Uzbek SSR Academy of Sciences contains an old compound manuscript which consists of three small treatises on philosophical subjects.

"A Treatise on Terms" (*Risālat al-ḥudūd*) is in its content an explanatory dictionary of 70 most commonly used philosophic and scientific terms of the medieval Arab Muslim East, such as matter, substance, form, reason, soul, accident, motion, and definition. Both the brief notes and various meanings of these terms are given insofar as they are found in works written by ancient Greek or medieval scientists and philosophers which is very important for properly understanding the terminological base used to express the conceptual structures of the whole medieval Arab Muslim philosophy. Ibn Sīnā's most precise and laconic definitions of complex scientific terms testify to his profound knowledge and rich practical experience of research in the field of medieval theoretical thought.

The work "A Treatise on Different Branches of Rational Sciences" (*Risāla fī Aqsām al-'Ulūm al-'Aqliyya*) enumerates and defines all the branches of philosophical sciences notable in the Middle Ages that were fundamentally divided into those that are theoretical (natural science, mathematics, metaphysics) and those that are practical (ethics, domestic science of economy, politics). In all these treatises Ibn Sīnā defines about 35 branches of science prevalent in the medieval East.

The problem of classifying sciences—determining general structure and order of branches of natural sciences and philosophy, their relationship, as well as defining the place and peculiarities of each one of them within the broader frame of scientific knowledge—was of no small significance for medieval science. Great attention was paid to this problem in works written by Ibn Sīnā's predecessors—al-Kindī, Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī and in epistles of "Brethren of Purity" (*Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'*). A special work by 'Abdullāh al-Khwārizmī a 10th century writer and Ibn Sīnā's contemporary entitled *Mafātīḥ al-'Ulūm* ("The Keys to Sciences")—also discusses these classifications.

In the medieval Muslim East all branches of science were primarily divided into two classes :

- (a) the *Shari'ah* related science of Arabic philology, and
- (b) the philosophical branches of science.

In his treatise Ibn Sīnā considers mainly the philosophical branches of science. His classification lays emphasis considerably on natural science that consists of 8 major branches for studying various forms and states of matter, motion, 4 elements of their quality, as well as various developments taking place in nature and pertaining to all the phenomena of the organic and inorganic world, and the state of human soul.

Ibn Sīnā also gives an interesting classification of mathematical sciences (such as science of numbers, geometry, astronomy, music) pertaining to studies of quantitative relations between natural objects. While explaining separate parts and components of mathematical sciences, in contrast with other authors who preceded him, in more detail Ibn Sīnā mentions such branches of science as topography, mechanics, optics, hydrogeology, science of weights, tools, etc. All this testifies to the fact that he was much concerned in his research with studying the properties of real objects and natural phenomena.

While stressing the importance of studying problems of logic, Ibn Sīnā puts it under separate, and more detailed scrutiny and names it both as a science and an instrument in the hands of man which prevents him from making mistakes in acquiring knowledge of theoretical and practical philosophy.

As the treatise in question shows, Ibn Sīnā based his classification of sciences on an objective principle resulting from order and divisibility of the very object of science.

Finally, this collection of manuscripts includes a unique, not available in other manuscript collections, a small philosophical work—*A Treatise on the Classification of All Existing Objects (Risāla fī Taqṣīm Aqsām Mawjūdāt)*. Its value lies in the fact that Ibn Sīnā focuses his concise and laconic examination on the hierarchy of those elements of the existence and those parts of the material world that have been thoroughly and circumstantially analyzed in his other philosophical works. This short but unique treatise, written in a laconic language, reproduces the whole system of elements and categories of the medieval philosophy of peripatetics, while giving us the possibility of imagining not only its merits compared, for instance, with the *Kalām*, but also its intrinsic controversies and demerits. It clarifies all the peculiarities and shortcomings of the medieval ideological system.

Manuscripts of Ibn Sīnā's philosophical correspondence with his contemporaries—great savants and public men of that time, such as Sheikh Abū Saī'd Abu'l Khair, Said ibn Jubairi, his pupils Bahmanyār and Abū 'Ubaid Juzjānī and the great scientist of encyclopaedic knowledge Abū Raiḥān al-Birūnī,—may be of great interest to students of medieval science and its controversial problems.

This correspondence is part of a unique collection of manuscript, entitled "A Collection of Treatises by Sages" (*Majmū'a Rasā'il al-Hukamā'*), which includes 107 rare works written by thinkers of ancient Greece and some countries of the Near and Middle East. While compiling a list (*Fihrist*) of works by his teacher, Ibn Sīnā's pupil, Abū 'Ubaid Juzjānī, included the titles of over 25 specimens of his correspondence and epistles.

This correspondence is not only a valuable source for those who study the great thinker's world view; it is not only an evidence of his intense activities to explain and establish the main principles of his philosophical system proving the wide range of his scientific interests, the depth of Ibn Sīnā's convictions and the strength of his logical arguments; it is also an authentic historic record of the epoch's complex and highly controversial spiritual life, of the coexistence of different philosophical systems, schools of natural science and religious and mystical teachings in the Middle Ages. Ibn Sīnā's epistolary heritage expresses a strong feeling of the spirit, and pulse of the epoch designated in literature as the epoch of the Renaissance in the early medieval "Muslim" East.

Ibn Sīnā's correspondence with al-Bīrūnī (*vide* Unesco's *Courier* for July 1974) on the subject of Aristotle's works *Books on Heaven* and *Physics* may be of considerable interest to us. This correspondence poses a number of fundamental problems of the natural philosophy of the time, notably some philosophical aspects of the main theses of mathematics, astronomy, physics, cosmology, problems of motion, forms of the firmament, and the character of the planet orbits.

In this correspondence, while raising objections against al-Bīrūnī's questioning a number of Aristotelian theses, Ibn Sīnā stands out as a supporter and an interpreter of the view expressed by the great Stagirit.

Ibn Sīnā's correspondence with al-Bīrūnī enables us to understand a number of common points and differences of opinions between the two outstanding exponents of the epoch's progressive thought in treating a number of concrete questions of medieval science and in using the Aristotelian heritage of natural science. The similarity of their views is evident in their both defending the interests of progressive science and philosophy, in their both proposing new scientific theses, criticizing weak points of natural philosophy, and in their broadly negative and critical attitude towards the dogmatic world view of the teachings of the *Kalām*.

Among Ibn Sīnā's letters and epistles, there are such in which he explains to his pupils the way to understand and interpret certain difficult parts of his works. He gives interesting answers to Bahmanyār's questions, as regards properly grasping the forms and methods of explaining the philosophical problems under the medieval circumstances and the thinker's firm, consistent attitude towards their treatment.

In an epistle of his, written in reply to questions of the famous Muslim mystic Abū S'aid ibn Abū'l Khair, Ibn Sīnā deals with cardinal theoretical problems of his day—the character of the divine predetermination, reward, retribution and proof of the immortality of human soul. The reward and retribution do not have anything supernatural in them, as the *mutakallims* think. Ibn Sīnā points out, and, while giving allegorical meaning to them, he reduces their content to human spiritual perfection and happiness that are achieved as a result of one's persistent auto-training. In the same epistle, Ibn Sīnā insists, likewise, on the necessity of one's logical, reason-dominated basis for any theses of good and evil. He assumes that "the purpose of the world can only be that which displays good, not evil".

These epistles and letters of Ibn Sīnā show that the fundamentals of scientific thought and rational views of those days that were positively and most clearly and systematically expressed in his works *The Canon of Medicine*, *The Book of Healing*, the *Dānīsh-nāma*, *The Book of Instructions and Precepts*, etc., gained a foothold in a basic ideological struggle against the dominant ideology of the *Kalām*.

Thus, Ibn Sīnā's correspondence and epistles are important historic documents testifying to the great thinker's energetic efforts to propagate the scientific achievements of his epoch and to strengthen the position of philosophical (peripatetic) ideas in their confrontation against dogmatism. This correspondence is an evidence of the fact that Ibn Sīnā was in the very midst of his epoch's ideological cross-currents and at times took active part in serious discussions with various contemporaries prominent in science and culture, while fiercely and consistently defending his own scientific views.

Ibn Sīnā's correspondence enriches our knowledge of his scientific heritage, shedding light on some little-known aspects of his world view and the character of the epoch's ideological struggle.

Among the 17th century manuscripts preserved in the collections of the Institute there are two MSS under the same title—*At-T'aliqāt* ("Comments—Notes"). Till the present time it has been commonly believed that the author of *At-T'aliqāt* was Ibn Sīnā's predecessor but a thorough examination of these two manuscripts has proved that the shorter one, including 101 theses-notes, is, indeed written by Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (the treatise was for the first time studied and published in Russian translation in 1975 in Tashkent). Now it has been proved that the author of the second manuscript, the larger one including over 950 theses, is Ibn Sīnā.

These books of the two outstanding thinkers of the middle ages deal with essential questions of metaphysics, physics, logic, natural philosophy, and mathematics, giving evidence of ideological similarity and coincidence of the two authors' philosophic systems.

In *At-T'aliqāt* much consideration is given to explaining the philosophic principles of Aristotle and other ancient Greek thinkers. Ibn Sīnā accepts the basic points of al Fārābī's theses, but at the same time he makes his own positive contributions and supplements them. The theses can be said to deal, in a concise form, with all the essential theoretical problems of medieval philosophy and science.

These *T'aliqāt*, or "Comments", once again reaffirms the deep continuity existing between the views of the two great medieval thinkers—al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā—give authentic proof that they had common ideological grounds, adhering to one and the same philosophical conception. Likewise, the theses show that, in elaborating the basic principles of their teachings, both giants of medieval thought drew from one and the same source—the heritage of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers and scientists. And, naturally, it is they who were destined to become the founders and most bright exponents of a philosophic school that came to be known as the "oriental peripatetic philosophy".

In his autobiography Ibn Sīnā states how his study of al-Fārābī's works helped him in understanding the main theses of the Aristotelian philosophy, (specially metaphysics.).

These two versions of the *T'aliqāt* emanating from the pen of the two great medieval thinkers give an additional evidence that Aristotle's philosophical ideas were elaborated and enriched in the course of its diffusion, by creative works of various thinkers of the "Arab Muslim East".

Thus, a brief assessment of several aforementioned manuscripts of Ibn Sīnā's work will prove the fact that even some of his small books contain rich material about the trends and character of spiritual life and philosophic and scientific ideas during the medieval period in the East.