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REVIEW ARTICLE

SOCRATES ARABUS: MUSINGS IN GRECO-ARABIAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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In 1995 The Hebrew University of Jerusalem published in The Max Schloessinger Memorial Series, devoted to text and monographs in Arabic and Islamic Studies, a book entitled *Socrates Arabus. Life and Teachings*. Sources, Translations, Notes, Apparatus, and Indices, by Ilai Alon. This monograph brings interesting material concerning the reception and survival of Socrates in the medieval Arabic world. It complements another book, written by the same author, and entitled *Socrates in Medieval Arabic Literature*, Leiden & Jerusalem, Brill and the Magnes Press 1991.

On the occasion of 70th birthday of my colleague and dear friend, I dedicate this short piece to Ladislav Drozdík, as a small proof of my appreciation of his life-time work in the field of linguistics and literature. I apologize myself to the *Jubilar,* and to my readers, too, for the courage to review this book as non being an Arabist or a scholar of classical antiquity, but I dare to do it with the methodological equipment of a student of comparative literature and East-West intellectual history.

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Socrates (469-399) as we know, was the member of the great Greek trinity of philosophers, who did not have as deep and broad an impact on the Arab philosophers or men of letters as his two successors: Plato (427?-347?) and Aristotle (384-322). On the other hand, not a little was translated or taken over from him beginning with al-Kindi (d. 879) and Hunain (d. 870), and al-Mubashshir (d.1053). Whereas the knowledge of Plato and Aristotle, and especially of the last, was very reliable and even helped Europeans to understand and appreciate the solid basis of the greatest age of Greek philosophy, Socrates was received in the guise of a *mirage*, mostly as a kind of *fata morgana* within the process of sometimes creative work but even more treacherous misunderstanding.

Medieval Arabic writers were not always critical, although they were extremely important for the wholesale development of European intellectual, scientific and cultural climate. When Socrates' life and his teaching reached the Arabic philosophical and religious milieu, distortions concerning both these domains abound.

Where the first is concerned, Socrates was often misunderstood and presented as another Diogenes the Cynic (ca. 412-323), living in a jar and travelling through the Greek world, meeting people of different strata, who enjoyed his knowledge, but mocked his ugliness and poverty. He often met a king, who did not exist in his time in democratic Athens, and although not mentioned by name, it was the historical Alexander the Great, who allegedly met Diogenes who was obliged to ask the most powerful and most ingenious commander of armies of his time, to give him a favour: to step out of his light.

Arabic authors looked at Socrates as a great ascetic, even saint, worshipper of one God, even of Allah (which was really the same), but sometimes he was regarded as a heretic, or atheist (pp. 26-27 and 99-100). The data on his life are more reliable, when the sources used are Plato's works, such as *Phaedo,* or *Crito*, although everything should be used with caution. The differences between medieval Arabic and modern European translations are not big and decisive for their adequate apprehensions. Let us mention one from *Phaedo*, 16C:

"The servant of the eleven judges then came close to Socrates and said to him: 'Socrates, judging by your conducts I have watched, you are not liable to be angry with me for ordering you to take the potion, which is an inevitable obligation. You know that it is not I who is the cause of your death, but the eleven judges are, and I am compelled to carry out the orders. You are by far the best of those who have come to this place. Drink, then, the potion in good spirit, and bear patiently with the inevitable.' Having said this, his eyes filled with tears and he left the place near Socrates where he had stood'.

Socrates said then: 'We shall do that.' And addressing us he said: 'What a nice man! He would come to me frequently, and I think that he is virtuous in his conduct"(p. 33 and 114).

According to one modern translation:

"... the servant of Eleven came in, and standing by him said, 'O Socrates, I have not to complain of you as I do of others, that they are angry with me, and curse me, because I bring them word to drink their potion, which my officers make me do! But I have always found you in this time most generous and gentle, and the best man who ever came here. And now too, I know well you are not angry for you know who are responsible, and you keep it for them. Now you know what I came to tell you, so farewell, and try to bear as well as you can what can't be helped.'

Then he turned and was going out, with tears running down his cheeks. And Socrates looked up at him and said, 'farewell to you also, I will do so.' Then at the same time turning to us: 'What a nice fellow!' he said. 'All the time he has been coming and talking to me, a real good sort, and now how generously he

shed tears for me'" (Rouse, W.H.D. trans.: *Great Dialogues of Plato*. A Mentor Book. New York, The New American Library 1956, pp. 519-520).

The data are often unreliable, if the Arabic authors ascribed some works to Socrates, when it is well-known and generally acknowledged, that he never wrote one book or treatise, and all was done later by Plato.

The book contains exactly 130 items concerned with Socrates' life and 805 with his teaching, both in Arabic text and in English translation. If the first part constitutes one whole, the second is divided into 13 sections: God, Time and Fate, This World, Death, Possessions, Food, Asceticism, Women, The Soul, Human Relations (with subdivisions: Secret, Advice, Law and Politics, Talk and Silence), Vice and Virtue (subdivided into: Different Qualities, Justice, *Adab* (Civility), Contentment, Middle Way, Anger, and Intellectual Qualities where only Wisdom is mentioned and highlighted.

Due to the space allowed for a short essay, and a review of the book at the same time, I am obliged to be more selective in the case of partly alleged teachings of Socrates according to Arabic sources. Not all could be analysed here, but three of them which seem to be important for me: God, This World, and Women.

As to God, One and Absolute, He was certainly a problem for Socrates. If we begin with the Item No. 1 of the first section, we see that it was and should be investigated, although it is *ineffabile*: "A man said to him (i.e. Socrates): 'Teacher of goodness, what is the essence of the Lord?' He answered: "To say anything about that which cannot be known is foolishness.'" (p. 37). In the note to this assertion, we may see that this is to be found in the works by Ibn Juljul (d. 277), Gabirol (d. 1058) and Qifti (1248), and the same idea appears in al-Mubashshir and in other places. It is to be found in *Qur'ān, 20*, where among others, Moses, before taking upon his shoulders the decision to liberate Israel from the hands of Egyptians, humbly asked Allah, to dilate his narrow heart that it might comprise the whole universe. The Qur'ānic expression sounds as follows: "They themselves cannot comprehend it" (Ali, M. trans.: *The Holy Qur'ān*, Lahore 1951). The idea of the impossibility of investigating the essence of God was common in Greek literature, see for example Plato: *Laws*, 821a. This assertion by the translator and author of this book can be compared with another one pointed out by two outstanding specialists, Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese in their impressive book: *Philosophers Speak of God*, where another reason for this ineffability is given: In the *Laws, the* deity is "described with admirable fullness in many respects, yet one cannot gain from the description as exact an understanding of God's categorial relations as is available in the *Timaeus*." (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press 1953, p. 56).

Item No. 18 in the book under review is as follows: "A man asked him (Socrates, M.G.): 'Master, what is the cause for the creation of the world?' He said: 'God's generosity.'" (p.39). Here once again Ibn Juljul and Qifti are quoted, and *Timaeus,* 29d, is mentioned for expressing a similar idea. It is a pity (or it was in reality thus?), that *Timaeus*, one of Plato's early dialogues, where allegedly Socrates' and Timaeus' disputes were summarized, is only once mentioned in the

notes concerning Socrates and God. If certainly not more proofs could be found from this richest source of Socrates' views on God and their reception in medieval Arabic literature, then we may doubt the depth of the Arabic reception of Socrates and highlight more other foreign impacts and domestic responses. From the Arabic sources we know, that, for example Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) believed in the connection between the generosity of Allah and the creation of this world: "The First has emanated the existence on all existing things... and He is the true generous one, whereas this adjective is only attributable to others metaphorically" (p.106).

From the item No. 34, also the wording used in the characterization of Socrates' alleged understanding of God, we may see its typical Arabic or Islamic colouring: "Socrates, the Athenian, the son of Sophroniscus and Plato, the son of Ariston, shared the same view. They claimed that there are three principles: God, may He be exalted, the element, and the Form. God is [identical with] intellect, the element is primary substratum for coming to be and for annihilation, and the Form is an incorporeal substance (*jauhar*) [found] in the images and the thoughts that are attributed to God, may He be exalted. As for God, He is the intellect of this world (p. 41). Here the book by J. Ferguson (comp.): *Socrates. A Source-Book*. London 1970: "Mind was to Socrates a God" (p. 307) is cited as a proof.

As to the next section, to be analysed here, Ilai Alon did not illustrate No. 82, the first item of This World. Here we read: "This world consists of momentary pleasure followed by lengthy grief, whereas the world-to-come consists of a brief [time of] forbearance, followed by a long [period of] joy." (p. 44). Here in the note there is no reference whatsoever pointing to Socrates, but some to Arabic sources, and even to Jesus Christ (p. 111).

It is a little better with another "saying" of Socrates, where bodily pleasures are enumerated in a slightly similar manner as in *Phaedo*, 64B. Item No. 93 reads as follows: "A jester who was in the company of the king said to him: 'You have deprived yourself of this world's pleasures and comfort.' Socrates asked him; 'And what is this world's comfort?'

He said: 'Eating delicious meat, drinking pure wine, [enjoying] sexual intercourse, and [wearing fine] clothes." Socrates said to him then: 'These are not reprehensible for people who are willing to become similar to monkeys and to turn their stomachs into a cemetery for animals, and to prefer the construction of things that pass away to that of things everlasting'" (p. 44).

According to Plato, similar kind of dialogue was not led between Socrates and some king's jester, but between the philosopher Simmias the Theban, who together with a few others, were present at Socrates' cell in prison, immediately before his death, when he asked some Crito's people, one of his life-long friends, to take home his crying wife Xanthippe and small son. The dialogue between the two philosophers began with death which would be Socrates' lot in the next hours. "The Eleven", mentioned above, were knocking off his fetters and informed him that he must die today. And Socrates asked Simmias and his companions:

"'Do we think there is such a thing as death? (philosopher's death, he meant, M.G.)'

'Certainly," Simmias put in.

'Is it anything more than the separation of the soul from the body?' said Socrates. 'Death is, that the body separates from the soul, and remains by itself apart from the soul, and the soul, separated from the body, exists by itself apart from the body. Is death anything but that?'

'No,' he said, 'that is what death is.'

'Then consider, my good friend, if you agree with me here, for I think this is the best way to understand the question we are examining. Do you think it the part of the philosopher to be earnestly concerned with what are called pleasures, such as these - eating and drinking, for example?'

'Not at all,' said Simmias.

'The pleasures of love, then?'

'Oh no.'

'Well, do you suppose a man like that regards the other bodily indulgences as precious? getting fine clothes and shoes and other bodily adornments – ought he to price them high or low, beyond whatever share of them it is absolutely necessary to have?

'Low, I think,' he said, 'if he is a true philosopher'" (Rouse, W.H.D. trans.: op. cit., p. 467.)

Here we see the change of overall literary genre: philosophical prose develops into a sort of fiction, and partly the *personae* of the narrative are also different. It was probably caused, among others, by different genological development in ancient Greek and medieval Arabic literature. The philosophical, or ethical message, remained more or less the same. It is interesting that al-Kindi, who was otherwise the first to write on philosophical questions in Arabic, was also the first who made known this story among his contemporaries. Probably he could not resist the temptations of his indigenous milieu and the philosophical needs of his nation. It is known, that while being the translator and publisher of *The Theology of Aristotle,* he "introduced great confusion into Arabic ideas of Aristotle, from which it took centuries to recover" (Russell, B.: *History of Western Philosophy*. London, George Allen and Unwin LTD 1946, p. 443).

From the story of Socrates' death and not quite mournful parting with his wife, we may pass to the last section: his teaching concerned with women.

Ancient Greeks were certainly not gynosophic, but also not gynophobic or misogynic people. Women were regarded as human beings of the second category, higher than male slaves, but the attitude to them, from the point of view of men, was not deprecatory, if they were able to fulfil their functions in marriage and in the family. Among 32 items belonging to the section Women in the book under review, not one could be ascribed to Socrates, at least Ilai Alon does not try to prove that. They seem to be more product of "orientalischen Denken" (Nietzsche, Fr.: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Leipzig, Alfred Kröner 1930, p. 161) than of Socrates' thought. He was certainly critical of some women, mostly of his own wife. In Plato's *The Republic,* where Soc-

rates speaks on behalf of women, we observe that "woman is the weaker sex; but there are no occupations for which a woman is unfitted merely because she is a woman" (see the *Summary* in Rouse, W.H.D. trans.: op. cit., p. 121). According to the proper text, the women could be the guardians of the ideal Platonian City, they can even share in war, but under one condition: "in the same things, lighter parts will be given to women than men because of the weakness of their sex" (ibid., p. 255).

Already the first item No. 258 misunderstands Socrates' view of women: "Socrates was asked: 'Why do you flee women?' He replied: 'Because I see they flee the good and walk [the road of] evil'" (p. 60).

Al-Mubashshir is mentioned as the first "mediator" of this "maxim" (p. 120) and he is one of those who asserted in the name of Socrates: "There is no greater calamity than ignorance and no greater evil than women" (see pp. 90 and 152).

Completely unnoticed among the medieval Arabic students of Socrates, remained his sublime love to Diotima of Mantineia, and her exposition of the meaning of Love: "All men (human beings are meant, M.G.) are pregnant, Socrates, both in the body and soul; and when they are of the right age, our nature desires to beget. But it cannot beget in an ugly thing, only in a beautiful thing. And this business is divine (i.e. connection of sexes, M.G.), and this is something immortal in a mortal creature, breeding and birth" (Rouse, W.H.D. trans.: op. cit., p. 101). By Love and its everlasting processes, Diotima said to Socrates, "mortality partakes of immortality, both in body and in all other respects...; immortality is what all this earnestness and love pursues" (ibid., pp. 102-103). How could male chauvinistic authors admit that something like that was said to Socrates, the wisest among the Greeks, by a member of the *feminini generis*, a paragon of evil, and partly of stupidity, too. The item No. 265 reads: "Whoever wants to be able to look for wisdom should renounce women's domination over himself" (p. 60).

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It is a pity that the author of *Socrates Arabus* did not devote enough attention to the Greek part of the story. His primary concern was "Socrates's figure as an Islamic culture-hero, not as a branch of Greek tradition" (p. 15). On the other hand this book with her whole apparatus: translations, notes, Arabic texts, reliable names, sources and subject indices, and a rich bibliography of Arabic, non-Arabic and secondary materials, provides a solid basis for further research and may be recommended to interested readers.