

ARABIC HELLENISM. BETWEEN REASON AND VOLITION

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Prologue

Did 'the tragic experience (as a philosophical attitude) and tragedy (as a literary category) seriously influence the creation of a specific Western way of thinking, experiencing and feeling'? Did they found 'a fundamental attitude of being and acting which, during 2500 years, provided a specific Western face of art, religion and philosophy'? And was 'consequently, Western man... stimulated to act, to feel released from nature, to make choices and to take responsibilities, all aspects of human life relying upon the human "will" '? (quotes taken from the conference outline)

If so, and if the ancient Greeks did initiate the exploration of the tragic world view, bequeathing it to the West, how to explain that the 'Eastern' inheritors of Greek civilization and culture - i.e. the spokesmen of what I prefer to call 'Arabic Hellenism' - did *not* partake in that tragic spirit? In my short contribution, I would like to explore the thesis that it is not so much a question of fundamentally opposing world views, an Eastern 'Islamic' one versus a Western 'Christian' one, as of an ideological divide running across *both* Eastern and Western cultures.

1. Is it true, as seems to be implied by the conference outline, that the tragic experience 'relies upon the human 'will' ? There are reasons to doubt it. The ancient Greeks were unfamiliar with the notion of 'the will'. Neither in their poetry nor in their philosophy do we find a word that is completely equivalent to our familiar concept of 'will' (that word being derived, of course, from the Latin, *voluntas*). Actually, when surveying Greek literature, starting with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, one gets the impression that, in order to describe human behaviour, the poet is using a *dual*, basic psychology. In other words, human behaviour is explained by the interaction between *two* (not three) basic faculties or powers: the rational one of human understanding, on one side, and the irrational urge of our emotions and passions, on the other side. We find this psychology confirmed in Greek language: the act of volition, for which we use the one verb, '*to will*', is split up in ancient Greek between *two* word groups:

(a) the first one (*ethéloo*) is used in order to express a passive and spontaneous receptivity towards external influences or stimuli; its meaning is: 'to be ready, to be inclined; to be disposed to; to give in to, to desire'... As such, the verb is referring to our emotional and 'irrational' functioning.

(b) the other verb (*boulomai*) refers primarily to our planning and deliberating, preceding any conscientious action (etymologically, the verb is related, in Greek, to words denoting 'consultation, deliberation and counseling'). We could paraphrase the meaning of it with: 'I prefer or decide on the basis of rational deliberation'.

Greek language, you could say, actually *rationalizes* human volition. Inasmuch as 'willing' is considered to be an *active* faculty, resulting in conscientious and purposeful action, it is reduced to a function of human intelligence, of reason, and consequently it is subordinate to *knowledge*. Moral value judgements, thus, in the Greek view of man, refer primarily to what we would call the *intellectual* performances implied in a person's behaviour. Accordingly, the Greek word for 'to sin' (*hamartanein*) means literally: 'to miss one's target', just like the archer missing the bull's-eye. Take, for example, Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, with the parricide, the sphinx, the incest, Oedipus' blinding of himself: surely, this is not a drama of the human *will*, but one of human *knowledge and ignorance*. The same goes for Greek ethical and philosophical thinking. Greek ethical intellectualism, of course, is best epitomized in the famous dictum of Socrates: 'virtue is knowledge' - i.e. in order to choose the good, and thus automatically to do it, it suffices to *know* it. Or to put it otherwise, *immoral* behaviour is due to *ignorance*, i.e. ignorance that is of 'the good'.

What is implied in this world view, is the objective existence of 'the good', *not* in so far as it would be personified in a theistic (Christian or Islamic) God. One could call the Greek view rather a *naturalistic* one: the good for man coincides with the rational order in nature (nature as a whole being deified). The first philosopher to have formulated for us this intellectualist and at the same time naturalistic view of man, was Heraclitus of Ephesus (5th c. B.C), fragment 112:

'thinking well is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak and act things true, according to nature, paying attention'.

2. So, in Greek tradition, human intention is referring back to *knowledge*, and thus to an objective, eternal and rational order of being. However, in the Biblical and Koranic tradition, on the contrary, i.e. in the world view of the three "Abrahamic" religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, things are viewed quite differently. All three of them proclaim the belief in one, personal god: God. The point of departure of this religious view is the principle of 'absolute creation', i.e. the creation of the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), through God's almighty will alone. What is introduced, that way, is the principle of a radical distinction between the divinity, i.e. the Creator, on the one hand, and natural reality, as a created reality, on the other hand. More important, still: inasmuch as creation is dependent on the divine Will, this will transcends all order and regularity within the world. God being understood as the only reality truly worthy of that name, nature and its order are not truly real: it's all a question of divine... *voluntarism*. Yahwe's or God's promise to his chosen people, for that reason, is more trustworthy than any regularity or stability man is observing in nature. As it is said in the Bible, *Isaiah*, 54.10:

'For the mountains may recede and the hills may stagger, but my mercy will not recede from you and my covenant will not stagger, says the Merciful, your Lord'.

In the Qur'ân roughly the same idea is succinctly expressed in sura 28, verse 88:

'And do not invoke anyone besides God. For everything will perish, except His countenance, which is eternal. His alone is the command and to Him alone everyone shall return'.

In this monotheistic, religious world view, man is not so much confronted with the order of nature, but with the will and command of his creator. What is primarily expected of a human being, within the Covenant concluded by God with mankind, is not knowledge or understanding (i.e. of the universe), but obedience and allegiance to God's commands. 'Whoever obeys God and His Prophet, shall without a doubt attain salvation' (Qur'ân, s. 33:71). Just like the rest of the universe ('all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beast', Qur'ân, s. 22:18), man as well has to submit or surrender himself (in an act of "*islâm*", you could say) to God's will. In man's case, though, that submission has to be voluntary, since of all creatures, man alone freely agreed to "*carry the Trust*", cf. s. 33:72:

'We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it. And the human being carried it'.

The sharpest test of this Trust or Covenant, in the three religions, was of course God demanding Abraham (Îbrahîm), that he would kill and sacrifice his own son - an order which from the point of view of human intelligence is completely incomprehensible, even repellent. The more so since there is no "rational" *quid pro quo*, as is the case in Euripides' tragedy, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*: king Agamemnon is required to immolate his own daughter, in order that the winds might blow in the right direction, and he himself might uphold his leadership. According to the biblical story (in the Catholic Dutch translation it is called 'this beautiful story'), *Genesis*, ch 22, at the last minute - Abraham already raised his knife, 'in order to cut his son's throat' (22.10) - God's angel intervenes and says (22.12):

'Now I know that you fear God, for you did not want to withhold from me your only son'.

In the Qur'ân as well this sacrifice is presented as a true example of "*islâm*", i.e. of putting one's trust in almighty God, s. 37:102-107:

'Abraham said to his son: "My son, I have had a dream in which God has commanded me to sacrifice you. What do you say to this?" His son replied: "My dear father! Carry out the command of God. You will find me, if God so wills, compliant and forbearing". And so when they had both submitted their wills to God's command and Abraham had laid his son on his side, and brought the knife close to the boy's neck, We called out to him: "O Abraham! You did not doubt the veracity of your dream. Thus do We reward those who do right. This was clearly a great trial". And we gave a large sacrifice to be immolated in his place'.

Summing up: the principal human value, in the three religious traditions, is not rational understanding or intelligence (albeit that humans are called upon to learn God's *signs*, in order to know his will), but the basic value is *fidelity* or *faithfulness* (*amunâh*, in Hebrew; *amâna*, in Arabic; *pistis*, or "*faith*", in Greek), resulting in trustful and grateful submission (*islâm*). This is of course a matter of human volition. The actual construction of the *concept* of the will, as being one

of three faculties of the human psyche, was to be the work of the Latin Church Father, St Augustine. I said: "grateful (*submission*)". *Alhamdu lillâh!*, 'all praise belongs to God'! In daily life, a Muslim uses this phrase frequently, thus giving voice to the basic ethos of his or her religion. Indeed, as Emilio Platti (one of Belgium's most distinguished experts on Islam) puts it:

'Islam is one of the world's most positive religious philosophies: Thank God! This way a Muslim experiences the profound meaning of his life. Islam is the opposite of an attitude of revolt against the disappointments and the ordeals (of life); the opposite also of a sorrowful or tragic view of this world' ... (p. 18, my translation).

'The opposite of a tragic view of this world': this is confirmed by the British Muslim philosopher, Shabbir Akhtar (*A Faith for All Seasons*, 1990, p. 160):

'it is no exaggeration to say that for both modern and classical Islam, tragedy remains a foreign category of reflection', and 'the lack of a theory of tragedy within Islam is not accidental, being as it is a deliberate feature of a characteristically Islamic religious vision' (p. 236 n. 32).

Akhtar, however, is mistaken - at least in my view - when he characterizes the *Christian* religious outlook 'as being a supremely tragic one'. There may be *pathos* in the passion of Jesus Christ, but there is no tragedy. I am convinced that tragedy is not at home in *either* of the two religions, real differences between them notwithstanding. I would suggest that the tragic vision demands a naturalistic view of the world - be it that of ancient-Greek, so-called paganism or of modern secularism.

3. But what of Arabic Hellenism?

It goes without saying that, in order to broach this subject within a limited time-span, I have to be extremely selective. So let me draw your attention to a fascinating figure, supporter of an 'integral rationalism' (Badawi): the Muslim physician, alchemist and philosopher, Abû Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyâ' ar-Râzî (865-925). Râzî was an outspoken nonconformist; later on, in the Muslim heresiographic literature, he was classified as a notorious *zindiq* or freethinker. Being conspicuous amongst medieval Arabic philosophers for his knowledge of Greek, Râzî concocted a philosophical system of his own. With its *Five Eternals* (*al-qudamâ' al-khamsa*) - the Creator, the Soul, Matter, absolute Time and

absolute Space -, it was based on the ideas of different Greek philosophers, foremost Plato (his *Timaeus*), Democritus (his atomism) and Epicurus (his ethics). In opposition to the so-called ('atheistic') *Dahriyya*, supporting the eternity of the universe, Râzî argued for the creation of the world in time and its final destruction. However he confronted the Muslim *mutakallimân* or theologians as well, and denied the possibility of a creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). At the same time, though, Râzî integrated into his system a *gnostic* view of the world, i.e. he shared 'the gnostic conclusion that creation is a tragedy or mistake' (Lenn E. Goodman). This 'world of ours', as Râzî calls it, is mostly a place of sorrow, i.e. (and I quote from the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III.12, pp. 441-2 Pines, when writing about what he calls: Râzî's 'ravings'):

'(R. thought) that there is more evil than good in what exists; if you compare man's well-being and his pleasures in the time span of his well-being with the pains, the heavy sufferings, the infirmities, the paralytic afflictions, the wretchedness, the sorrows, and the calamities that befall him, you find that his existence - he means the existence of man - is a punishment and a great evil inflicted upon him'.

The creation of the world, i.e. the creation of this 'tragedy of horrors' (*hè tragoodia toon foberoon*, as the gnostic world view was earlier characterized by the ancient philosopher, Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.9.13), was primarily due to the ignorance of the Soul (I quote from Nâsir-i-Khosraw): 'out of ignorance, Soul fell in love with Matter and... tried to produce forms out of Matter, in order to get corporeal pleasures'. Or, according to another source (Abû Hâtîm): 'The Soul was overcome by lust and she was ignorant of the calamities that were awaiting her'. Matter resisting the imprint of form by the Soul, God in his compassion intervened and helped her. His creation of 'this world of ours' was motivated by his wish that Soul, 'having experienced the disastrous consequences of her act' (Abû Hâtîm), might learn (i.e. '*pathei mathos*', 'learning through suffering', as the Greek tragedian, Aeschylus, once wrote), learn, that is, 'that she made a mistake, out of which this world came into being' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw). As a matter of fact, it is the responsibility of *human* souls, all having been endowed by God with reason ('*aql*'), to emancipate themselves. I.e. 'learning philosophy, (they have) to recognize their own world, to cause no one, if possible, sorrow, and to acquire knowledge', in order to be able to return. Once *all* human souls 'have become aware of this secret, thanks to philosophy' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw), and once *all* of them will have returned to their proper world, then this material world will come

to an end, 'Matter' getting liberated once again from its bondage.

So far Râzî's cosmogonic myth and what we might call his tragic world view. The 'Gnostic-Platonic expedient of Soul' (Goodman) made it possible for him to argue in favour of the *conceivability* of creation in time, against the objections of the *Dahriyya*. Soul's ignorance and irrational desire, in particular, could explain why God at that particular time changed his (rational) will, i.e. 'from the will, not to create the world, to the will, to create it' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw). All this *could* suggest a basic psychology that is comparable to that of the ancient Greeks, but I wouldn't want to press this point.

Epilogue

Râzî's case, of course, is not a typical one - he is not even representative of medieval Arabic philosophy as a whole - but my purpose with this paper was a very modest one. What I said should suffice in order to be able to conclude that historically as well in the matter of tragic vision, it is not simply a question of the West *versus* the East.

THE GREEK CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY IN THE ARAB CULTURE. HOW TO DEAL WITH AN ISLAMIC OEDIPUS ?

Ahmed ETMAN

Fruitful Circulation and Different Receptions

Aristotle's treatise *Peri tes poietikes* (*Ars Poetica*) dates from about 335 BC, i.e. towards the end of the author's life (384-322). The finishing of this important treatise is obviously so rough that many critics believe that it contains simply lecture-notes taken by one of Aristotle's students in the Lykeion. The general form and style of the text confirm this point of view. However, there is nothing like the fate of this book in all the human literary tradition. Although it is the only extensive critical and theoretical survey of Greek drama from the whole antiquity, it goes from one misinterpretation into another through the different ages and till the present time. Noteworthy is that the Greek concept of tragedy and the Aristotelian concept are not precisely identical. In other words, the Aristotelian theory does not apply to every Greek tragedy. *Prometheus Bound*, *Aias*, *Oedipus in Colonus* and the majority of Euripides' plays are not Aristotelian, but they are highly rated tragedies throughout the successive ages. It is noteworthy, however, that Aristotle himself criticized Euripides bitterly for many reasons, but nevertheless described him as the most tragic (*tragikotatos*)¹ of all poets.

This Aristotelian paradox can be naturally justified, if one remembers that when Aristotle gave his lectures on the *Poetics*, Aeschylus had been dead for more than hundred years. Sophocles and Euripides were dead for seventy years. So one must consider this gap of time between the Aristotelian theoretical notes and Greek tragic performances, which are the subject matter of this theory as a whole. It is not acceptable to use the phrases *Aristotelian tragedy* and *Greek tragedy* as synonyms. The first link in the chain of misinterpretations is the application of Aristotelian rules as strict criteria to the Greek tragedies and to applaud this, or to banish that accordingly. This does not mean that dealing with Greek tragedies, one can do without Aristotle's theory, which has assured itself as the *sine qua non* of any well-balanced effort to understand Greek tragedy or the tragic as a whole. But it is not agreeable to distort or to squeeze Aristotle's theory in order to apply it to every Greek tragedy. Perhaps it is more reasonable to begin by studying the Greek tragedies and performances before moving on to Aristotle, not vice versa.