

## From Plato to al-Fârâbî

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*In this essay, I will sketch how from specializing in Greek philosophy, and Plato in particular, I came to learn Arabic and to know more about Islamic Studies. The focus will be on how philosophy can transcend linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, while still taking into account the linguistic, cultural, and religious particularities, as this leads to a richer philosophical approach.*

**Key words:** Plato; Islamic Philosophy; al-Fârâbî; Greek into Arabic; Arabic into Latin.

Born and raised in Belgium, a very small country with no fewer than three official languages, I soon became aware of cultural differences.

My first serious awareness of linguistic diversity came in elementary school. As a French speaker in second grade, I began to learn Dutch/Flemish and discovered that languages are complicated; it's not simply a question of using other words. On a blank page we had to put the title "toys" and then in two columns draw six toys with their name in both languages. Not only were the names of the toys different, but "toys," as a general term, is plural in French and masculine, while in Dutch/Flemish it is a mass term and therefore singular and neuter. The latter is a grammatical notion unknown in French.

The experience of linguistic diversity was complemented in high school by the experience of cultural and historical diversity. I was in the then-common Greek-Latin track, which alone would give access to some specific fields at the college level, such as philosophy, as it was a prerequisite. Six years of Latin and five of Greek opened my mind to not only linguistic cultural diversity but also historical differences. I very much enjoyed Greek literature and most of all Plato, despite the linguistic difficulties and cultural differences. I began to wonder, as philosophers do, how one could communicate and in some way dialogue despite such differences. I was beginning without knowing it to ponder on universality and particularity.

At the Université Catholique de Louvain, I chose to major in philosophy, which included further delving into classical Latin and Greek. For my BA thesis, which was more or less equivalent to a current MA thesis, I wrote on the notion of "stoicheion," or element, in Plato. Some of the first uses of this word occur in Plato, and it is said in many ways, as Aristotle would say. It may mean a letter of the alphabet, equated at the time with a phoneme, or a basic constitutive element of anything. Plato, for instance, makes much use of a comparison of letters, which can be combined into syllables and then into words, to explain the relation between parts and wholes. This led to my first publications.<sup>1</sup>

I was intending to become a high school teacher, particularly of Greek and Latin, but was offered a job as assistant to *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, the scholarly review of the Institute of Philosophy at the Université Catholique de Louvain. This assistantship included taking more advanced courses in some area of study. The Dean of the Institute of Philosophy, Reverend Professor Georges Van Riet, asked me for which courses I would register. I replied that, as I could

already read the Christian scriptures in Greek, I wished to learn Hebrew to read the rest of the Bible in the original language. His answer was unexpected. He told me with his dry sense of humor, “If you are foolish enough to be ready to learn an exotic language, don’t learn Hebrew, which isn’t very useful in philosophy, but rather Arabic, which is much more useful (most of medieval Jewish philosophy is in fact written in Judeo-Arabic, i.e., Arabic but with Hebrew characters).” He put me in touch with his sister, Dr. Simone Van Riet, the famous editor of the *Avicenna latinus* (the medieval Latin translation of Ibn Sînâ’s Arabic masterpiece, the *Shifâ’*, often known in English as *The Healing* or *The Cure*). I then began to learn Arabic and to focus on Islamic studies, a language and a culture that are non-European. Though originally I had no desire to learn Arabic or to work on Islamic culture, I got hooked. This was an excellent case study to meditate on how we can communicate and dialogue despite great differences in language and culture.

Once I had completed my PhD on Plato’s vocabulary for causation at Louvain, I went to Oxford to take a BPhil in Oriental Studies, section Medieval Islamic Philosophy and Theology, as I was well aware that I needed to delve more deeply into Arabic and Islamic Studies. How Greek philosophical texts are translated into Arabic and then what impact they had on philosophers in Islamic lands fascinated me. These philosophers make the Greek heritage their own and creatively modify, develop, and enrich it to fit their own historical and cultural situation, but they do so each in their own ways. Avicenna, though claiming to follow Aristotle closely, in fact initiates what later on will be called the transcendentals and continuous creation. Al-Ghazâlî, the great Sunnî Muslim thinker, combats what he thinks wrong in the influence of Greek philosophy in his famous *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, but a close look at other texts show how much of Greek philosophy he integrates in his theology and spirituality. Al-Fârâbî (870-950) in particular fascinated me as he is the one most fully aware of cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical differences. He often ponders on how to communicate true philosophy, which for him basically is grounded in Aristotle’s thought, though with some serious modifications and developments, to ordinary or fairly well-educated people from various religious, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Believing that few people can grasp the intricacies of technical philosophy, he ponders how to present the truth in more accessible language.

At Oxford, for the specialized courses in Islamic philosophy and in Kalâm (Islamic theology), we often were four people only: two teachers (Dr. Richard Walzer, the retired lecturer in the field, who was a German Jew, and Fr. Richard McCarthy, SJ, an American Jesuit who had lived in Baghdad, the current lecturer) and two students (Charles Genequand, a French-speaking Swiss, who became a famous scholar in the field at the University of Geneva, and myself). Not only was each of us from a different nationality, but we were also from three different religious backgrounds and spoke three different mother tongues. Yet, we were all fascinated by the field and admired the philosophical acumen of the texts we were reading together. For my BPhil I translated and annotated the first half of al-Fârâbî’s so-called *Political Regime*. This first part is essentially metaphysical. In philosophy, my main field of interest is metaphysics.

After Oxford I still thought I needed more training in classical Arabic and in particular on al-Fârâbî, who kept fascinating me, even if I was far from accepting some of his views. Professor Muhsin Mahdi of Harvard University, who was the leading Farabian, granted me a one-year postdoctoral fellowship to work with him on al-Fârâbî.

Finding a job was not easy, and for a couple of years I lived on grants and exchanges in England, Holland (at Leiden, which has a great library for my field, including manuscripts), and Italy (at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan). These exchanges helped me to develop new linguistic abilities and to observe various academic systems.

In 1978, I returned to the United States to teach at Georgetown University. I was in the philosophy department but also associated with the Center for Contemporary Arabic Studies. Most of my publications focused on al-Fârâbî, Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace, from Saragossa in Spain, d. 1138), metaphysics and also ethics, as the Philosophy Department emphasized ethics.

In 1986, Professor Michael Marmura (University of Toronto), a Palestinian born in Jerusalem, asked me to work with him on continuing the bibliographical work begun by Father Georges Anawati, O.P., who was very proud to be the only Egyptian Dominican. These bibliographies of medieval Islamic philosophy and theology were published every couple of years in the *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale*. After a few years Marmura asked to be relieved of this task, but I continued. An international bibliography, which lists the books and articles of scholars all over the world and in many languages, is truly an intercultural enterprise. In order to make the bibliography more widely available and without cost for the users, I began to publish it on my university website in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Since 2007 it is uploaded annually. Its greater availability led users to request broadening both its scope by including medieval Syriac philosophy and its historical span by adding the post-classical period. This enterprise gives rise to contacts with many scholars all over the world and is only possible through intercultural exchanges.

In 1987, the Catholic University of America gave me the opportunity to do more teaching at the graduate level, particularly in Arabic philosophy and in metaphysics. As its School of Philosophy gathers many scholars in medieval Latin philosophy, to my interest in the transmission and transformation of Greek philosophy into Arabic I added an interest in the passage of texts written in Islamic lands to the medieval Latin world. We are realizing more and more how much from the thirteenth century on, philosophers in the medieval Latin west used these texts. Al-Fârâbî's famous *Enumeration of the Sciences*, known through two different Latin translations, one by Gerard of Cremona and the other by Gundissalinus, led to a serious revamping of the philosophy curriculum in western universities from more or less 1230 on. From the traditional trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric) plus quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), the curriculum shifted to a somewhat revised version of the Alexandrian curriculum that required reading all the Aristotelian texts, including the introductory *Eisagoge* by Porphyry. One began with logic, then moved to natural philosophy, including *On the Soul* or *De anima*, followed by metaphysics, and ending with ethics and politics. This curriculum also integrated mathematics.

For many years, I helped Richard C. Taylor (Marquette University) prepare his translation of Averroes (Ibn Rushd) of Cordoba's *Long Commentary on the De anima of Aristotle* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009). This too was an intercultural enterprise, as it required comparing Aristotle's Greek text to its Arabic translation, edited by Abdurrahman Badawi (Cairo: 1954) and to the Latin translation of Averroes' lemmata, as the original Arabic of this second translation is lost. Besides, Averroes' Arabic text did not come down to us, and so the work was done on the Latin translation, even if use was made of recently found fragments of the Arabic text in Hebrew characters.<sup>3</sup>

Often my research stems from puzzles found in reading texts. I begin to wonder: Why does al-Fârâbî or Avicenna or Averroes say this? Why do they innovate? What arguments do they give to justify these innovations? Such texts remain very much alive, as I discovered in April-May 2002 when I was invited to teach during the summer at Institut Catholique of Madagascar. To my surprise, I was told to give to these African seminarians an intensive course on intellectual exchanges between medieval intellectuals. I wondered what benefit Malagasy seminarians could get from this foray in the Middle Ages. On the Christian side, I chose Abelard's (a French twelfth-century philosopher) *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew and a Christian*. In this text, a "pagan" philosopher, a

Jew, and a Christian argue to determine which of these persuasions is the best and in particular whether natural law is enough to build an ethics or whether we really need a revelation. The philosopher, whose paganism seems somewhat influenced by unacknowledged Islamic views, easily defeats the Jew. He then gets into complex philosophical discussions with the Christian, but the text ends abruptly without indicating who has the best arguments. In order to present the Jewish side, I selected Jehuda Halevy's *Kuzari*. Jehuda Halevi was a Spanish Jewish philosopher who wrote this text circa 1140. The story presents a mythical pagan, the King of the Khazars, who wonders where the truth is and so invites a philosopher, a Christian, and a Muslim to present their views. Suddenly a Jew appears and convinces the king that the Jewish position on disputed issues, such as creation, is the best. For the Muslim side, I presented some passages in al-Ghazâlî's autobiography in which, after some kind of pre-Cartesian doubt, he shows what he considers the intellectual weaknesses of Islamic theology, of the views of the philosophers, and of Isma'ilism. He then moves to extol Sufism. To this text of al-Ghazâlî I added Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 1326) *fatwa* or Islamic juridical decision about monks (celibacy is against Islamic views and Ibn Taymiyyah spells out on which conditions monks can be tolerated in Islamic lands) that was used by some to justify the 1996 killing of the Trappist monks in Tiberine, Algeria. To my surprise, the course was a huge success and discussions were lively. Medievals had discovered that religious dialogue badly needs philosophy: in many cases one cannot use scriptures, as they are not accepted by all the various partners. Arguments, therefore, must use philosophy. Madagascar's population is a bit less than half Christian and half of the ancestral religion, with some important Muslim minorities on the coast. One of the seminarians commented that Ibn Taymiyyah's *fatwa* about monks should convince all of them to lead really holy lives.

More recently, I have gone back to working more on al-Fârâbî, his views on language, on music (he wrote the most important treatise on music of the medieval Middle East and was certainly a non-professional music performer), and on his ethics.

I hope to keep learning more and more and so to refine my understanding of philosophical issues and their complexities in the Islamic world and their influence on the west.

**Thérèse-Anne Druart** obtained her PhD in Greek Philosophy at Université Catholique de Louvain in 1973 and a BPhil in Oriental Studies, Mediaeval Islamic Philosophy and Theology, at the University of Oxford in 1975. Druart was Assistant and Associate Professor at Georgetown University from 1978 to 1987 and has been Associate and Ordinary Professor at The Catholic University of America since then. She was also Director of the Center for Medieval and Byzantine Studies from 2001-2006. She was privileged to give intensive courses at the Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain, at Institut Catholique de Madagascar, and at Universidad de los Andes in Chile. Druart is the current President of SIHSPAI, Société Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences et de la Philosophie Arabe et Islamique, since 2010; was President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association for 2009-10; and President of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy from 2000 to 2002.

<sup>1</sup> Thérèse-Anne Druart, "La notion de 'stoicheion' (élément) dans le *Théétète* de Platon," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 66, (1968): 420-34, and "La stoicheïologie de Platon," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 73, (1975): 243-62.

<sup>2</sup> <http://philosophy.cua.edu/faculty/druart/bibliographical-guide.cfm>.

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<sup>3</sup> These were first edited by Abdelkader Ben Chehida (1985) and subsequently edited in part by Colette Sirat and Marc Geoffroy (Paris: 2005).