


On the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim philosophers

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There are two dominant approaches towards understanding medieval Muslim philosophy: (1) Greek ancestry approach and (2) religiopolitical context approach. In the Greek ancestry approach, medieval Muslim philosophy is interpreted in terms of its relation to classical Greek philosophy, particularly to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. The religiopolitical context approach, however, views a thorough understanding of the religious and political situation of that time as the key to the proper understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy. Notwithstanding the immense significance of the two approaches for understanding medieval Muslim philosophy, the question on the reason behind medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in political philosophy is not accurately answered. This preference is usually attributed either to the availability or unavailability of the text or to the suitability or unsuitability of the text for Islamic theological views. However, this article shows that neither the availability or unavailability of text nor its suitability or unsuitability for Islamic religious and theological views can appropriately explain medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political thought. This article proposes that the key to understand this preference lies in understanding the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim philosophers.

Contribution: This study highlights the significance of the thorough understanding of the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim world as one of the important approaches towards proper understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy, particularly medieval Muslim political philosophy.

Keywords: transmission; medieval Muslim philosophy; Greek philosophy; political philosophy; Islamic theology; Plato; Aristotle.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, there are two major prevalent approaches towards understanding medieval Muslim philosophy: (1) Greek ancestry approach and (2) religiopolitical context approach. The Greek ancestry approach interprets medieval Muslim philosophy in terms of its relation with classical Greek philosophy, particularly to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. This approach is based on the claim that medieval Muslim philosophy is greatly influenced by Greek philosophy and, therefore, in order to arrive at a proper understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy, one must focus on its relation with Greek philosophy. Walzer is one of the greatest proponents of the Greek ancestry approach towards medieval Muslim philosophy. He (Walzer 2007:108–133) views medieval Muslim philosophy as a continuation of Greek philosophy. He argues that etymologically, almost all medieval Muslim philosophical concepts are derived from Greek philosophy. Similarly, Walker (2005:85–101) suggests that Greek thought has a profound influence on medieval Muslim philosophy. Leaman (1980:525–538), another important proponent of the Greek ancestry approach, is of the opinion that Greeks influenced medieval Muslim philosophers in all fields of knowledge. He adds that Muslims learned novel ways of thinking from Greeks. Likewise, Rosenthal (1958:78) believes that the dependence of medieval Muslim philosophy on Greek philosophy is so immense that it is inappropriate to call the Muslim philosophers 'philosophers' in the actual sense of the word.

The religiopolitical context approach, on the contrary, views the influence of the religiopolitical situation of the time as the dominant factor that shaped the medieval Muslim philosophy. Consequently, this approach views a thorough understanding of the religious and political situation of the time as the key to the proper understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy. The prominent scholars who analyse medieval Muslim philosophy in terms of its relation to the prevalent religious and political situation of that time include Strauss (1945:357–393, 1989:207–226), Fairahi (2003),

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Ali and Qin (2019:907–915), Al-Jabri (2000), Nasr (1996:27–38) and Tabatabai (1994). It is important to point out that the two approaches, broadly speaking, are not mutually exclusive. The Greek ancestry approach does not utterly deny the influence of the religiopolitical context on the medieval Muslim philosophers but tries to tone it down in favour of the influence of ancient Greek philosophy. Similarly, the religiopolitical context approach tends to tone down the Greek influence on medieval Muslim philosophy in favour of the religiopolitical influence by highlighting the differences between medieval Muslim philosophy and Greek philosophy.

There is a consensus of opinion among scholars that medieval Muslim political philosophy is largely based on Plato's *Republic*. However, there is a clear disagreement among them on providing an explanation for medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political discussions. While Strauss and his followers, who adhere to the religiopolitical context approach, provide religious and theological explanation for medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic*, others attribute this preference to the availability or unavailability of texts. The significance of both, Greek ancestry approach and religiopolitical context approach, for understanding medieval Muslim philosophy cannot be denied. There are obvious Greek and religiopolitical elements in medieval Muslim philosophy, which can be explained through the two approaches. However, notwithstanding the significance of the two approaches, the question about the reason behind medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in political philosophy is not accurately answered. This article shows that neither the availability or unavailability of the text nor its suitability or unsuitability for Islamic religious and theological views can appropriately explain medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political thought. Rather, this article proposes that the key to understand this preference lies in understanding the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim philosophers. This article, therefore, is an attempt to highlight the significance of the thorough understanding of transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim world as another important approach towards proper understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy, in general, and medieval Muslim political philosophy, in particular.

The transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim world

It is important to understand the events and circumstances that resulted in the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim world. There are three major historical events due to which Greek philosophy reached medieval Muslim world: (1) Christianisation of the Roman empire, (2) Persia becoming the new breeding ground for Greek philosophy, and (3) Muslim conquest and Arabic translation movement.

The eastward journey of Greek philosophy: Christianisation of the Roman empire and the closure of Athenian academy

The most important factor that played a role in the initiation of the eastward journey of Greek philosophy is the Christianisation of the Roman empire. The Christianisation of the Roman empire led to a clash between the pagans who had the Hellenistic world view and the Christians who had the Christian world view. This clash ultimately culminated in the Christian take-over, the closure of Athenian academy which was the cradle of Greek philosophy, and the flight of the philosophers towards Persia in the east along with the Greek philosophical legacy.

In 313 AD, Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, proclaimed the 'Edict of Milan' in which he granted religious tolerance for Christianity in the Roman empire. In the year 325 AD, he summoned the first 'General Council of Nicaea' in the city of Nicaea. The Council aimed to discipline the disputed Christian doctrines and canonise Christianity. In its first meeting, the Council produced what is commonly known as the 'Nicene Creed', a statement of the officially accepted Christian beliefs. Although Constantine officially recognised the Christian religion, it was the Roman emperor Gratian who declared Christianity to be the state religion in the last quarter of the fourth century.

In order to fill the gap created by the absence of any legal authority of Christianity, the state imposed the Roman law. In the pagan Greek culture, rhetoric was an important part of the law as the people who wished to pursue legal profession were trained through rhetoric. Roman law not only filled the gap created by the lack of the legal authority of Christianity but also replaced the Greek rhetoric. It was the first blow that the Greek rhetoric received as a legal discipline which initiated its gradual decline. Because law is the glue that holds a society together and any change in its foundation always has a grave impact on the whole structure of society, the gradual deterioration of the Greek rhetoric shook the legitimacy of the Greek world.

The immediate outcome of the Christianisation of the Roman empire and the transition from pagan Hellenistic to the Christian world view was that it was proscribed to make apocryphal interpretation of the texts. However, the application of the proscription was not restricted only to the interpretation of the sacred texts. Rather, it was expanded to the gnostic texts as well as the Platonic dialogues. The Neoplatonists were forbidden to make interpretations of Plato's dialogues. There was a compulsion to accept the official dogma, which was supposed to replace the forbidden myths and symbols. Shayegan (1996:183) rightly puts it as a 'divorce between creative imagination and rational thought'.

The philosophers and their works faced the same fate as that of the Greek rhetoric. The pagan scholars were persecuted by the state, as well as by the Christian monks and their followers. An association, named Philoponi, was formed,

which organised clashes with the pagan teachers and their students and attacks on the pagan temples (Maspero 1914:165–171). Many pagan temples were destroyed in Alexandria. The pagan teachers were deprived of their salaries, and most of them were not allowed to teach. A tragic incident took place in the year 415 AD, in which Hypatia, a famous pagan philosopher, was lynched to death (Cameron 1966:667–669). Because of the hostility of the situation, a number of famous pagan scholars and philosophers decided to leave Alexandria. Among the scholars who left Alexandria, the most prominent were Ammonius, Olympius and Helladius.

Ammonius headed the Alexandrian school of Neoplatonism during the last quarter of the fifth century. He was under severe pressure from the Christian authorities because of his pagan philosophical views. His concept of the eternity of the world made him a victim of an assault from two Christian scholars, Aeneas and Zacharias Scholasticus. In the last decade of the fifth century, he was forced into an agreement with Athanasius II according to which he was obliged to make concessions by turning away from those Platonic dialogues, which were deemed controversial by the authorities and turn towards Aristotle. In return, he and his school were granted financial support by the authorities. After Ammonius, however, the gradual Christianisation of the Alexandrian school took place. Although the school somehow survived, it lost its pagan characteristics and philosophical vitality.

Unlike the Alexandrian school, the Athenian Academy was a private institute and its closure was abrupt. In the year 529 AD, it was closed by the Roman emperor Justinian through a royal decree and its properties were confiscated. Because of the tense environment, the prominent philosophers of the academy left Athens and fled to the Persian Sassanian empire in the east.

Persia: The new breeding ground for Greek philosophy

After the closure of the Athenian Academy, there were seven prominent pagan philosophers who fled to the court of Khosrow I, the Sassanian king in Persia. These philosophers were Simplicius of Cilicia, Isidore of Gaza, Damascius the Syrian, Diogenes of Phoenicia, Eulamius the Phrygian, Hermeias of Phoenicia and Priscianus the Lydian (Hadot 1990:278). They remained in Persia for around 2 years and probably settled in Harran (Shayegan 1996:193).

It is widely acknowledged that the kings of the Sassanian empire in Persia were tolerant and open to foreign ideas. They showed tolerance towards both Greek paganism and Christianity. It is this tolerance that facilitated the growth of the Greek thought in Persia. The basic reason behind their tolerance for the Greek paganism was that the interaction between the Greek and the Persian culture was centuries old and dated back to the sixth century BC, the time of Cyrus the

Great. Cyrus founded the Achaemenian empire, the ancient Iranian empire also known as the first Persian empire. The Greco-Persian cultural interaction further strengthened during the Seleucid period (312–363 BC) and 'after Alexander the mutual influence spread to all levels' (Shayegan 1996:195).

The Sassanians' tolerance for foreign religions also has roots in the sixth-century BC. Tolerance for different religions had been the *modus operandi* of Persian *politics* since the time of Cyrus. In the sixth-century BC, Cyrus used the assimilation and transformation of the symbols and myths of the foreign religions and cultures as a political tool in order to ensure the integrity and coherence of the Achaemenian empire. The kings of the Sassanian Persian empire emulated Cyrus and showed tolerance towards Christianity (Shayegan 1996:199).

One of the most decisive incidents in the history of the Church is the Christological controversy that involved a dispute over the definition and interpretation of the basic tenets mainly between Nestorius, the archbishop of Constantinople, and Cyril who was an Alexandrian patriarch. The dispute was settled by the first Council of Ephesus in the year 431 AD and the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The doctrine of Nestorius was condemned as heresy. The state officially chose the Orthodox Church against Nestorius' doctrine and the followers of Nestorius, who came to be known as Nestorians, were persecuted. The school of Edessa, in which the Nestorian doctrine was centred, was eventually closed by the Roman emperor Zeno in 489 AD and the Nestorian teachers and students were expelled. As a result of the persecution, the Nestorians also migrated to the Persian empire where they found refuge and established their own Nestorian Church. Thus, the Christological controversy of the fifth century resulted in a split in Christianity and the formation of two Christologically as well as geographically distinct centres of Christianity took place. The Orthodox Church was based in the Byzantine empire, whereas Nestorianism was officially acknowledged by the Sassanian empire, and the Nestorian Church was set up in Persia.

The school of Edessa was famous not only for the theological studies but also for the Greek studies. In fact, it was the first Syriac and Hellenistic centre of the east (Georr 1948:6). Initially, the interest of the school in the logic of Aristotle was mainly for theological purposes as it had to defend and explain Nestorianism using it. The school played a role in the split between the two churches, and it is only after the separation from the Orthodox Church that the Nestorians were able to freely carry out commentaries and translations of the Greek philosophy. The migration of the Nestorian scholars to the Sassanian empire provided a new impetus to the study of Greek science and philosophy in Persia. Renan (1852:311) rightly comments that the philosophers banished from Greece by the royal decree of Justinian and the Nestorians victimised by the Orthodox Church found sanctuary in Persia and brought about an impressive movement of the Greek ideas in the sixth century.

Muslim conquest and Arabic translation movement

At the beginning of the second half of the seventh-century AD, Muslims conquered Persia and brought an end to the Sassanian reign. In less than 100 years after the conquest of Persia, Muslims conquered most of the area, which was previously part of the Byzantine and the Persian empires. The Muslim empire included the cities where the philosophers who were banished from Greece and the Syriac Nestorians, who were the torchbearers of the Greek philosophy, had managed to survive. The Muslim empire provided protection to philosophers and facilitated intellectual activities, especially the preservation, growth and development of the Greek legacy. The Muslim rulers became the patrons of the sciences, the arts and the translation of works from different cultures. They organised translation classes to ensure the expansion and continuity of the translation of works from other civilisations (Mehawesh 2014:687). In the eighth century, the city of Baghdad was founded and made the capital of the Muslim empire which became the world's centre of knowledge within a few decades. The prominent scholars from all over the world gravitated to Baghdad. In Baghdad, the Muslim ruler Harun established the House of Wisdom, a library that was later transformed into an institution for translation by his son, the emperor Mamun. The House of Wisdom became the centre of what is known as the Arabic translation movement (Al-Khalili 2012).

It is the Arabic translation movement that ensured the availability, in Arabic, of the Greek scientific and philosophical writings to the medieval Muslim philosophers. The translation movement was carried out through the collaboration between Syriac and Muslim scholars between the 8th and the 10th centuries largely in Baghdad. During this movement, the Greek texts were translated into Arabic either directly or through the Persian or Syriac versions. As a result of this translation movement, 'the curriculum typical of the later Greek Neoplatonic schools such as that of Alexandria was known in Baghdad' (O'Meara 2005:186).

Significance of the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim world for understanding medieval Muslim philosophy

The significance of understanding the transmission of Greek philosophy to the medieval Muslim philosophers for a better understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy can be best seen by focusing on the medieval Muslim political thought. Medieval Muslim political philosophy is largely based on Plato's *Republic*. It is obvious that like Plato in the *Republic*, all medieval Muslim philosophers, except Ibn Bajja, argue for social and political obligation of the philosopher. While there is no doubt that medieval Muslim political thought is Platonic in nature, the question that is of paramount importance here is related to the reason behind medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics*. Despite

the fact that medieval Muslim philosophers were not only largely conversant with the philosophy of Aristotle but also greatly influenced by it, why did they follow Plato's *Republic* in their political discussion and not Aristotle's *Politics*?

The question we posed is usually answered in terms of availability or unavailability of texts to the medieval Muslim philosophers. It is argued that medieval Muslim philosophers followed Plato's *Republic* in their political discussion and not Aristotle's *Politics* because Plato's *Republic*, in Arabic translation, was available to the medieval Muslim philosophers but Aristotle's *Politics*, perhaps, was not. However, there is no concrete evidence to prove that Aristotle's *Politics* was not available to medieval Muslim philosophers. On the contrary, in his *Aristotle's Politics in Arabic Philosophy*, Pines (1975:150–160) builds an arguably convincing case for the availability of the Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Politics* or at least its part(s) to medieval Muslim philosophers. Strauss (1989:207–226) and other Straussian philosophers argue that there was no problem of availability of Aristotle's *Politics* for medieval Muslim philosophers. The book was available but they ignored it. Medieval Muslim philosophers, they argue, based their political thought on Plato's *Republic* and not on Aristotle's *Politics* not because *Politics* was not available to them but because the *Republic*, rather than the *Politics*, suited their theological view better. In Aristotle's *Politics*, unlike the Islamic tradition, there is a clear separation between the temporal and spiritual authority. As explained by Melamed (2003:3), Aristotle's *Politics* views 'the political sphere as separate and independent' sphere, which is 'concerned with human laws and temporal rule'. This political sphere, Melamed adds, is clearly separated 'from divine law and affairs of spiritual authority', which are considered 'nonpolitical or supra-political'. In Islam, however, contrary to Aristotle's *Politics*, there is no separation between the spiritual sphere and the political sphere. Rather, it unified the spiritual and political authority in one person, Muhammad, the founding prophet. The founding prophet of Islam was not only a spiritual or religious leader but also a political leader. In addition to his spiritual role, he was the first ruler of the city-state of Medina. Furthermore, Islam emphasised the political character of the divine law, the revelation. In the Islamic tradition, revelation deals with both the spiritual and the political matters. Likewise, Plato, particularly in the *Republic*, also unifies the political and spiritual authority in one person by identifying the philosopher as the perfect political leader of his city. According to Strauss and his followers, because the medieval Muslim philosophers could identify their founding prophet-lawgiver with Plato's philosopher king, they were attracted towards Plato's *Republic* and followed it in their political discussions rather than Aristotle's *Politics*.

The roots of the Straussian opinion that medieval Muslim philosophers based their political thought on Plato's *Republic* because it suited their theological view better can be traced to Strauss' interpretation of Arabic philosophy. Strauss (1945: 357–393, 1989:207–226) suggests that Arabic philosophers

lived and worked in a hostile environment and, therefore, they were bound to present their views 'in conformity with Islamic religion'. Charles Butterworth also proposes the same view, particularly in relation to Muslim political philosophy. He (Butterworth 1972:187) argues that 'Islamic political philosophy has always been pursued in a setting where great care had to be taken to avoid violating the revelations and traditions accepted by the Islamic community'. The claim that the medieval Muslim philosophers worked in a hostile environment and that they were compelled to align their views with the prevalent Muslim religious views of the time provides the basis for the Straussian view that these philosophers preferred Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political discussions because it suited the Islamic religious and theological views better.

However, the Straussian claim that medieval Muslim philosophers worked in a hostile environment and that they were compelled to present their views in conformity with Islamic religion in order to avoid persecution can be criticised and refuted on at least two major grounds: one, the absence of any concrete evidence to prove the existence of hostile environment for the philosophers; two, the Muslim philosophers' explicit expression of the views which are not in conformity with Islamic religious and theological views. As Gutas (2002:20) argues, the claim about the existence of a hostile environment for the medieval Muslim philosophers 'is contradicted by historical facts' as 'there is not a single such philosopher who was ever persecuted, let alone executed, for his philosophical views'. Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi and al-Mayanaji are the two philosophers who are usually cited as examples to prove the existence of hostile environment for medieval Muslim philosophers. However, both these philosophers were not executed because of their philosophical beliefs. Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardi was executed 'because he had usurped, though an outsider to Aleppo, the position of the local "ulama" as confidant and manipulator of the prince, al-Malik al-Zahir, Saladin's son', whereas the reason behind al-Mayanaji's execution was, as even al-Bayhaqi reports, his enmity with 'the vizier Abu al-Qasim al-Anasabadhi' (Gutas 2002:20; Meyerhof 1948:175). Gutas (2002:21) calls Butterworth's statement a baseless assumption wrongly presented as hard fact without 'a single reference to any source, primary or secondary'. As it is claimed that the 'setting' has been 'always' so, it should have been so easy to provide examples to support the claim. However, there was not even a single example that was furnished from more than 10 centuries during which philosophy was practised in Islamic societies. On the contrary, there are medieval Muslim philosophers who freely and explicitly expressed the views which were not strictly in conformity with the prevalent Islamic theological views and never faced any persecution because of their philosophical views. The prime example of such philosophers is Abu Nasr Alfarabi. According to Alfarabi (1985:279–281), religion is the symbolic imitation of philosophy, and 'the knowledge of the philosophers is undoubtedly more excellent'. He subordinates religion to philosophy and the faculty of soul responsible for

revelation, the divine law, to the faculty of soul responsible for philosophical knowledge. As Gutas (2002) points out:

[F]irst, he is explicitly critical of theology as a science, relegating it to a status little more than the verbal counterpart of street fighting, and second, with religion in general, he is equally explicit in assigning to it a purely functional role in society, namely to maintain the social order among the unlettered masses. (p. 20)

Furthermore, while the Syriac logicians restricted themselves to the first four books of Aristotelian logic owing to the perceived threat of the study of the other parts, particularly of the *Analytica Posteriora*, to the Christian religious belief, Alfarabi was the first logician who broke with the Syriac tradition and paraphrased or commented on the whole Aristotelian logical corpus, the *Organon* (Fakhry 2002:8). Despite Alfarabi's non-conformity with the prevalent Islamic religious and theological views of the time, he was never persecuted. On the contrary, it is well known that he was made an honourable member of the court of Sayf al-Dawla, the prince of Aleppo, a year before his death. All of this indicates that contrary to the Straussian view, a favourable environment existed for the medieval Muslim philosophers where they could freely practise philosophy, and that they were not compelled to align their philosophical ideas to the Islamic religious or theological views. Thus, it appears to be very unlikely that the medieval Muslim philosophers preferred Plato's *Republic* just because it suited the prevalent Islamic theological view and, thereby, helped them to fulfil the claimed compulsory requirement of aligning their philosophical views to the Islamic views.

It is obvious that neither the availability or unavailability of the text nor its suitability or unsuitability for Islamic theological views can accurately explain medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political discussion. The key to understanding this preference, most plausibly, lies in the transmission of Greek philosophy to the medieval Muslim philosophers. There is a gap of more than 1000 years between classical Greek philosophers and medieval Muslim philosophers. During this 1000 years plus journey of classical Greek philosophy to reach medieval Muslim world, the nature, content and interpretation of classical Greek philosophy continuously changed because of various factors, such as complete or partial loss of some classical Greek texts, the complete or partial recovery of the classical Greek texts which were previously lost, and the inability or impossibility to translate the whole available classical Greek philosophical corpus to other language(s) in order to ensure its complete transmission to coming civilisation(s). Because of such factors, classical Greek philosophy was subjected to various interpretations at various stages of history by various schools of thought. Now, in this context, the question that is of paramount importance is that what was Greek philosophy for medieval Muslim philosophers? As discussed in the previous section, the philosophers banished from Greece by the royal decree of Justinian and the Nestorians victimised by

the Orthodox Church are the major sources by which classical Greek philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, reached medieval Muslim philosophers. These philosophers banished from Greece and the Nestorians, however, received the classical Greek philosophy from late Hellenists. Thus, the medieval Muslim philosophers inherited classical Greek philosophical corpus from late Hellenists through the pagan philosophers banished from Greece and the Nestorians. For medieval Muslim philosophers, classical Greek philosophy was what they inherited from late Hellenists. Here, it is important to point out that the transmission is not restricted to the transmission of philosophical texts only. Rather, it also includes the transmission of attitude and approach towards the classical Greek philosophers and their philosophical texts. Thus, in order to understand the attitude of medieval Muslim philosophers towards the classical Greek philosophers and their texts, we need to understand the attitude of late Hellenists to these philosophers and their texts.

Hellenistic period in philosophy, particularly the early and middle Hellenistic period, is usually characterised by a relative lack of explicit and direct engagement with the writings and ideas of Aristotle. However, the lack of explicit and direct engagement with Aristotle during this period was neither absolute nor an indication of complete lack of knowledge of Aristotle's writings and ideas. As Falcon (2015) points out, the first-generation Epicureans' acquaintance with the ideas and works of Aristotle is indicated by 'a fragment of a letter from a first-generation Epicurean, maybe Epicurus himself', 'preserved in a Herculaneum papyrus', in which 'Aristotle's *Analytics* and his writings on nature' are mentioned. Similarly, a summary of Aristotle's biology produced by Aristophanes, 'the head of the library of Alexandria at the end of the third century BC', is an exception to the lack of explicit and direct engagement with the works of Aristotle during this period. An explanation for the lack of explicit and direct engagement with the works of Aristotle in early and middle Hellenist period is provided by Strabo in his work *Geographica*. In book XIII, chapter 1, section 1 of *Geographica*, Strabo tells us that Aristotle handed over his library to Theophrastus. After the death of Theophrastus, Neleus succeeded to the possession of this library. Neleus transported these books to Scepsis in the Troad, where they were locked away. Later, Scepsians hid them in an excavation underground where they were damaged by dampness and worms. These books could not be recovered until the first century BC. This narration, which need not to be pure fiction, explains the limited fortune that the philosophy of Aristotle enjoyed in the Hellenistic period, especially in the early and middle Hellenistic period.

In the late Hellenistic period, however, only after the recovery of the philosophical writings of Aristotle, a thorough return to Aristotle took place. This return involved 'rise of Aristotle as a philosophical authority' and an active engagement with his works and ideas (Falcon). But there is no concrete evidence of engagement with Aristotle's political thought

even in the late Hellenistic period. There is not a single commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* dating from the late Hellenistic period (Melamed 2003:1). It appears that although late Hellenists acknowledged the significance of Aristotle's physics, metaphysics, psychology and logic, they viewed Plato as the ultimate authority on political thought.

It is unfortunate that not much of the late Hellenistic writings, which represent late Hellenists' engagement with Plato's political thought, have survived. The most important evidence of engagement with Plato's political philosophy during the late Hellenistic period comes from Cicero. Cicero was a great admirer of Plato. He wrote two dialogues, *De re publica* and *De legibus*, modelled on Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. *De re publica* is written in six books, but a large part of it could not survive. Only three books of *De legibus* are extant. The extant portion of these books is sufficient to indicate the interest of philosophers in the political thought of Plato in late Hellenistic period. There is evidence to indicate that interest in and engagement with the political philosophy of Plato continued during late antiquity. Around the time when Julian was about to become the emperor, Themistius, the prominent philosopher of Constantinople, wrote a letter to Julian. This letter is lost, but our knowledge of the contents of this letter comes from Julian's response to this letter which is extant.¹ It appears that Themistius had evoked, in his letter to Julian, one of Plato's most extraordinary claims in *the Republic* (473c-d) that there will be no 'cessation of evils for humanity' until philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. This is not the only instance that Themistius has employed Plato's idea of philosopher king. He has used the idea in *Orationes* (at 1, 46, 7-9 & 8, 162, 20-24) as well. In another letter, which Libanius has addressed to Julian, Libanius describes Julian as the king 'whom long ago Plato had sought and somehow found, late'.² Similarly, Synesius in his work, *De regno*, advocates the ideal of the philosopher king for the benefit of the young emperor Arcadius and his court. As far as commentaries on Plato's *Republic* are concerned, Proclus' commentary is the only ancient Greek commentary on Plato's *Republic* that has survived. These examples indicate that the political philosophy of Plato remained influential and relevant during late antiquity.

It is clear that for late Hellenists as well as later philosophers of antiquity, Plato was the ultimate authority on *politics* and Plato's *Republic* was the basic textbook on *politics*. This attitude appears to continue in medieval Muslim philosophy. Like the late Hellenists and later philosophers of antiquity, medieval Muslim philosophers admired and followed Aristotle's metaphysics, psychology and logic, but did not engage with his political thought. Similarly, like the late Hellenists and later philosophers of antiquity, medieval Muslim philosophers viewed and followed Plato as the ultimate authority on *politics*. The most typical example of this attitude in the medieval Muslim period is Abu Nasr Alfarabi, who is

1. Swain (2013:160-179) provides an English translation of Julian's letter in response to Themistius' letter.

2. Libanius' letter is printed as No. 97b in Bidez's edition of Julian's letters.

considered to be the founder of Islamic political philosophy. In logic, Alfarabi is greatly influenced by Aristotle. This influence is obvious in the extensive engagement of Alfarabi with Aristotelian logic. He has produced a series of commentaries and paraphrases on the great Aristotelian works in the field of logic. Alfarabi's important commentaries on Aristotle's works on logic include *Commentary on the Categories*, *Commentary on Analytica Priora*, *Commentary on Analytica Posteriora*, *Commentary on Interpretation* and *Commentary on Rhetorica*. Among these commentaries, only the *Commentary on Interpretation* (Sharh Kitab al-Ibarah) has survived, which is translated with notes and introduction by F. W. Zimmermann. Alfarabi's major paraphrases on Aristotelian logic, however, include *Paraphrase of Aristotle's Categories* and *Paraphrase of Aristotle's Prior Analytics*. Similarly, the influence of Aristotle's psychology on Alfarabi is also noteworthy. As Ali and Qin (2020:91-105) have discussed, Alfarabi has adopted Aristotle's monistic psychology. For Alfarabi, as for Aristotle, the body-soul relationship is a specific instance of the general doctrine of hylomorphism where the body is matter, the potentiality, and the soul is form, the actuality of the potentiality. As form cannot exist without matter, the soul cannot exist by itself and perishes with the body. Thus, for Alfarabi, as for Aristotle, the body and the soul represent a unity, and neither the soul nor the body but an ensouled body is the ultimate reality and actual being. Despite the immense influence of Aristotle on Alfarabi especially in logic and psychology, the political philosophy of Alfarabi is largely Platonic. In *Mabadi Ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadhila* and other political writings, Alfarabi has proposed a theory of virtuous city, which is modelled on Plato's theory of virtuous city of the *Republic*. It is evident from the similarities between Alfarabi's and Plato's theory of the virtuous city that Alfarabi has borrowed certain Platonic elements and incorporated them into his political philosophy. The common premise for Plato's and Alfarabi's theory of the virtuous city is their shared belief in the possibility of a rational socio-political arrangement that can ensure ultimate human happiness. Alfarabi follows Plato in making the possibility of such a rational socio-political arrangement dependent upon the rulership by a philosopher king.

It is, thus, obvious that the most plausible explanation for medieval Muslim philosophers' adoption of Plato's *Republic* rather than Aristotle's *Politics* in their political thought is that they inherited the same late Hellenistic attitude towards Plato and Aristotle via pagan philosophers of the Roman empire and Nestorians. Like the late Hellenists and later philosophers of antiquity, medieval Muslim philosophers acknowledged the importance of Aristotle's philosophy, but viewed Plato as the ultimate authority on political thought and followed Plato's *Republic* rather than Aristotle's *Politics* as the basic textbook on *politics*.

Conclusion

Medieval Muslim philosophy has been extensively investigated in relation to its Greek ancestry and the religiopolitical situation of the time. Greek philosophy and the religiopolitical context of the time have greatly influenced

medieval Muslim philosophy. Therefore, the Greek ancestry approach and religiopolitical context approach are important in order to provide explanation for those elements in medieval Muslim philosophy, which are dictated by Greek philosophy and the religiopolitical situation of the time. Despite the immense significance of the two approaches for understanding medieval Muslim philosophy, there are certain questions about medieval Muslim philosophy which are still unanswered. One of such questions is related to medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political discussions. This preference is usually attributed either to the availability or unavailability of the text or to the suitability or unsuitability of the text for Islamic theological views. However, this article showed that neither the availability or unavailability of the text nor the suitability or unsuitability of the text for Islamic theological views can accurately explain medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* in political philosophy.

This article revealed that the key to answer the question about medieval Muslim philosophers' preference for Plato's *Republic* in their political discussions lies in the transmission of Greek philosophy to medieval Muslim philosophers. It is highlighted that the philosophers banished from Greece through the royal decree of Justinian and the Nestorians victimised by the orthodox church are the sources through which classical Greek philosophy reached medieval Muslim philosophers. These philosophers who were banished from Greece and the Nestorians received classical Greek philosophy from late Hellenists. Thus, medieval Muslim philosophers inherited classical Greek philosophical corpus from late Hellenists through the philosophers who were banished from Greece and the Nestorians. However, in addition to the classical Greek philosophical corpus, medieval Muslim philosophers inherited late Hellenists' attitude towards the classical Greek philosophers and their texts as well. Therefore, as late Hellenists viewed Plato's *Republic* rather than Aristotle's *Politics* as the basic textbook on *politics*, medieval Muslim philosophers preferred Plato's *Republic* over Aristotle's *Politics* in their political discussions. In light of the discussion, it can be concluded that in addition to the two prevalent approaches towards analysing medieval Muslim philosophy, a thorough understanding of the transmission of Greek philosophy to the medieval Muslim philosophers is also significant for a better understanding of medieval Muslim philosophy.

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Author's contributions

I.A. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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