

Aphorisms of Avicenna*

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AVICENNA, son of the Orient, died in Hamadan 917 years ago (428 A.H.). It was to commemorate the millennium of the birth of this great genius that historians gathered in Iran in April, 1954. His philosophy and precepts of medicine, which so closely resemble our modern concepts, have formed the basis of teaching in Europe as well as in Asia over the centuries. The majority of civilized nations organized similar celebrations, and the admirers of Avicenna gathered in the four corners of the world to honor him and commune with his spirit.

All the known works of Avicenna, numbering some two hundred manuscripts, are to be found nearly complete in the various libraries of Istanbul and of other Turkish cities. It has happened that while working in these libraries we have often found in manuscripts signed by various authors and dealing with various topics, quotations and maxims attributed to the great genius whose memory has been so honored. We have translated these quotations and maxims, which are written in Persian and Arabic, and have gathered them under the title, "Aphorisms of Abu-Ali Sina," but unfortunately it was impossible to establish from Avicenna's works the various sources whence all these maxims originated. When unable to find the original texts, we compared them with the translations of Cherefeddin Yaltkaya and of Kilisli Rifat, which are to be found in the archives of our Institute of the History of Medicine.

In order that the commemoration of Avicenna's great genius not be limited to the days spent at Hamadan in April of 1954, some of the aphorisms of that unforgettable scholar, whose precepts have been the basis of teaching for centuries not only in the East but also in the West, are here presented. The aphorisms, some of which have been published already, can be a new source of inspiration for many. They express in timeless style the most

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profound and humanitarian sentiments. We can say that if humanity has a mouth, Avicenna is its tongue. With your permission here are presented some of his words.

On relations with fellowmen

You who ignore what fate prepares for you, may God stir you from your torpor and open your eyes. Learn that the wealth you amass is for others; only the blessings you give away belong truly to you.¹

Be discreet toward all and know how to guard jealously your secret. If you succeed in keeping it well, it will be your slave; if you let it escape, it will enslave you.²

If one who has done you a wrong solicits your pardon, do not hesitate to forgive him.³

If one knows oneself, the opinions of others can have no importance nor have any effect upon one.⁴

If I leave no trace upon the heart of men, they will not be concerned with me; they will be neither for nor against me.⁵

If they look at me askance, I know that it is they who sleep until morning whilst I spend pure nights in the pursuit of science. If they look upon me unsympathetically, they will see nothing but evil in me, but if they look upon me with sympathy, they will see that the evil they imagined in me is in fact good.⁶

They cannot abide my being a physician of merit; it is painful to them to see my merits beside their ignorance. They believe they can hurt me with slander and calumny but their slanders and calumnies remind me of a goat who strikes the mountainside with his horns.⁷

The most profitable good deed is charity; the best character is that which bears all vexations without complaint. The worst deed is hypocrisy. The man who does not rise above the crowd cannot purify himself and remain without blemish.⁸

¹ Bibliothèque Köprülü. V. 1353. Bibl. Süleymaniye. Section Esad Efendi. N. 3396 "Enisül vahde ve Celilül Halve" of Ismail Hakkı.

² Bibliothèque d'Ayasofya N.4829.

³ *Ibn Ebi Usaybia: Tabakatül Etibba*, the biography of Avicenna by his student, Ebu Ubeyd-Cüzeçani.

⁴ Bibliothèque Chehid Ali Paşa N. 2703. Köprülü N. 483 and 1580 and Ahmed III N. 3303.

⁵ Bibliothèque de Ragıp Pacha No: 847.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See note 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Just as one eschews giving vent to a bad humour, so a person in high places should shun anger toward a humble person.⁹

Anger which dissipates itself quickly does not engender hate.¹⁰

On destiny

Do not struggle excessively for your existence; no one can assure himself a grain more than is destined for him.¹¹

One dies and the only truth that matters is that one knows nothing.¹²

I have resolved all the problems that abound between the center of the earth and the stars. I have known how to untie every knot save the knot that binds us to death.¹³

One day I addressed myself in these terms to an experienced physician.

Why are my hair and my beard white?

Because of catarrh, he replied.

No, you are wrong, I said to him without embarrassment, it is because of grief.¹⁴

The white of my beard is a sign that announces old age and tells me that I do not have much time to devote to diversions and pleasures. I was advised to dye my beard; but although I do not like my white hair, I could not consent to this nor could I lie peacefully in my grave with such trickery.¹⁵

In the end, I have learned that we have neither learned nor understood anything.¹⁶

In aging, it is natural that one's hair and beard should grow white no matter what one may do—whether one removes the white hairs, covers one's head, shaves one's beard or dyes it—one can do nothing to stop old age.¹⁷

The world was made to be destroyed and strengthened to be shattered.¹⁸

⁹ Edviyei Kalbiye. Note on the manuscript of the Bibliothèque de l'Institut d'Histoire de la Médecine, Istanbul.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See note 3.

¹² Bibliothèque Chehid Ali Pasha. N. 2703 and N. 2853.

¹³ Mecma-ül Fusaha. Bibliothèque de l'Institut d'Histoire de la Médecine, Istanbul.

¹⁴ Bibliothèque Süleymaniyé sect. Esat Efendi N.3500.

¹⁵ Bibliothèque d'Ayasofya N.4829.

¹⁶ Bibliothèque d'Ahmed III au Vieux-Serail. N.3303.

¹⁷ See note 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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Man deceives himself with illusions but the days pass and time flies.¹⁹

Fortune is fickle; she knows neither law nor measure.²⁰

On self determination

It is natural for those who set about a task thoughtlessly and without reflecting upon it to repent in advance for the consequence.²¹

An intelligent and ingenious man will not suffer in time of want; he will find the means with which to occupy himself agreeably and forget his hunger.²²

In seeking success they have lost intelligence and understanding. Is what they have gained of the same value as that which they lost?²³

You who live for merry-making and for pleasures hasten to learn that your existence depends upon a mere breath.²⁴

Fate, that restive horse, is docile only with him who profits from experience.²⁵

Each of us has the capacity to be merry or to be sorrowful, but some have a disposition toward nothing but joy or nothing but sadness.²⁶

It is not those who have a sound spirit who rejoice the most, just as it is that those who rejoice do not have a sound spirit.²⁷

On religion

It is not easy to believe that a person such as myself is an infidel; my faith in God is of the firmest. If I am thought an infidel, then there will never be a true Mahomedan on earth.²⁸

God is the Alpha and the Omega. He manifests Himself everywhere and in everything.²⁹

Man, who cannot remain eternally on this earth and who can-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bibliothèque de Hamidyé. Section Lala N. 579.

²⁵ Bibliothèque de Halet Efendi. N.773, Atif Ef. N. 2257, and Chehid Ali Pasha N. 2251.

²⁶ See note 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See note 12.

²⁹ See note 3.

not act as he thinks, must seek to rise above pettinesses and soar toward Heaven.³⁰

The human soul is a lamp of which science is the flame and divine knowledge the oil.³¹

On envy

Often, for a word of no importance, for a mere trifle, we envy our neighbor and consider him a rival. We must be above these petty comparisons; we should ignore this sphere and rise above the crowd.³²

I have never paid the slightest attention to those who envy me; I have never mentioned their names, while they have spent their whole life envying me.³³

On Love

Oh my beloved, your beautiful eyes, that are the cause of my sickness, are also the remedy that can heal me.³⁴

Nothing has been able to try the patience of my heart nor soften yours. Oh my beloved, we are two hard stones on the path of love.³⁵

To feign for myself the return of night, I unbound your ebony hair but the brightness of your face dissipated my illusion.³⁶

³⁰ Bibliothèque d'Avicenne N. 4829, p. 5, and N. 4849, P. 82.

³¹ See note 3.

³² See note 30.

³³ See note 3.

³⁴ See note 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See note 1.