

الحِكْمُ العَطَائِيَّة

The Aphorisms of Ibn 'Aṭā' Allah

Introduction and Translation
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Introduction

In seeking to tackle the difficult task of defining beauty and aesthetics, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (d. 1910 CE) wrote the following: *“The aim of art is located in the pleasure we derive from it, and not in its purpose in the life of man and mankind...considering art in this way, we can not fail to see that art is a means of communion among people.”* Art so defined, according to Tolstoy, could only be that which reflects, *“the absolute perfect – idea, spirit, will, God,”* and the communion that ensues is something that *“pleases without awakening lust.”* In casting a wide definition, Tolstoy argued that art should not be limited to “high art” far beyond the reach of the everyday person. Rather, art is something that can be found in virtually anything to inspire and communicate with all.

While there are indeed multiple forms of art, it is the gift of language and its ability to communicate great swathes of emotions and information via words and phrases that represents one of the greatest and mightiest forms of art and beauty we yield as a species. There are endless examples of the beauty of the written word since there are an endless number of languages, as well as numerous forms

of writing and literature. The British novelist D.H. Lawrence (d. 1930 CE) argued that, “*The novel is the one bright book of life,*” but we also have other forms of literature that we enjoy and appreciate. Poetry is perhaps one of the oldest and most beautiful forms of communication and art in existence. The epic poems of the ancient world: the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from Mesopotamia, the *Kojiki* of Japan, and most famously in the West, perhaps, the epic poems of Homer (death unknown, between 8th-7th BCE), the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are all masterpieces of narrative, myth, origin stories, and literature. However, these poems are not only works of art *qua* art. They are that, without doubt, but they also serve another very important function. These poems were a way of encapsulating timeless themes, wisdoms, and lessons and offered a way to pass them down through the ages. It is much easier to remember the line, “*Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus, Accursed, which brought countless pains upon the Achaeans,*” which begins the *Iliad* conflict *in medias res*, than it would be to write and read an epistle on the struggle of man with his base desires, rage, and jealousy, etc. The fact is that people still remember Achilles and will continue to do so into the future.

There is, however, another form of communication and art form that perhaps predates even poetry itself. The aphorism has been a part of human speech since the beginning of time and served as both a linguistic *tour de*

force, as well as an elegant packaging of wisdom. In this regard, aphorisms are even more powerful than poetry since they are pithy. This is their fundamental nature, and cut out the dramatic narrative to grab onto the unvarnished truth, reality, and axiom they seek to articulate. Like poetry, this makes aphorisms easy to commit to memory and even easier to pass on as conventional wisdom. We might not all equally be familiar with great works of literature of the past, but almost everyone knows the statements: *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts*; *The early bird catches the worm*; and, *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. While the origins of these aphorisms might elude us (Aristotle–William Camden–Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt, by the way), we know that they represent something true and honest about life and are therefore worthy of remembering and recalling at appropriate times.

One might find comparing both aphorisms and works of literature as examples of art peculiar. While there are great differences between the two styles, they both are forms of art because of the simple fact that they are able to communicate deep emotion, feeling, and wisdom. When you unravel the aphorism and peel back its layers, you are oftentimes astounded by the elegance and beauty of the statement. Standing at the summit of an aphorism yields just as much joy and liberation as the protagonist's joy and liberation at discovering art at the end of Marcel Proust's

Remembrance of Things Past. Yet, while many of the works of literature we hold up are relatively new, but by no means all of them, the fact that we still memorise and quote aphorisms that date back thousands of years is a testament to their perennial nature as they continue to evoke wisdom and hope in humanity.

In the Western tradition, there are many famous examples of aphorisms. As school children, hopefully, we will remember the aphorisms of Pythagoras (d. 495 BCE) (*Silence is better than unmeaning words; Anger begins in folly and ends in repentance*) and Euclid (d. mid-3rd century BCE) (*You can join any two points using exactly one straight line segment – The laws of nature are but the mathematical thoughts of God*). We also find that nearly all the major Stoic philosophers and writers wrote aphorisms, either exclusively or as part of their greater literary output. Perhaps most famous in the West is *Meditations* by the Roman Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (d. 180 CE), which is currently enjoying a resurgence of popularity amongst entrepreneurs and high-performance athletes, amongst others. The Western canon has no shortage of aphorisms. More modern and notable examples are the *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal (d. 1662 CE), the collection of aphorisms and essays by Schopenhauer (d. 1860 CE), and the aphorisms of Nietzsche (d. 1900 CE). The list goes on and on with contemporary “thought leaders” using mediums such as Twitter to attempt to add to their

popularity and thought legacy by cloaking their pithy statements in the garb of the aphorism. It is too early to tell how successful they will be, but it is my opinion that such attempts are misdirected as they debase the literary construct of the aphorism by using old techniques for the purposes of modern marketing. Again, the chances are we will continue to memorise and pass on the wisdoms of Pythagoras and Marcus Aurelius, not the Tweets of a particular influencer.

These are just Western examples. Other cultures and civilisations also used and continue to use aphorisms to highlight truths and pass them on. The *Tao-te-Ching* of Lau-Tzu (death unknown, between 6th–4th century BCE) and the *Analects* of Confucius (d. 479 BCE) are popular Asian examples, and I have already mentioned the *Kojiki* of Japan; but we should never forget that there is a treasure of aphorisms and proverbs from Hindu and Buddhist writers, Buddhists *Sutras* perhaps being amongst the more well known, that span the entirety of the Dharmic world.

The focus of this volume is to highlight and bring to life a collection of aphorisms from the Islamic world. It is unfortunate that, like the Indic world, Islamic civilisation is often forgotten for its intellectual contributions to humanity. Perhaps this is a function of history and Islamic conquest, perhaps it is a function of Islamophobia that continues to dominate news cycles. One can never tell, and

honestly the reason is not as important as the solution: to share these contributions. This collection of aphorisms is not only one of the most famous and celebrated throughout the Muslim world, like so many aphorisms before it, they are literary gems that summarise and encapsulate vast concepts and truths about life into bite-size phrases. They are a gift, not just to Muslims, but to humanity and deserve to be shared, studied, memorised, and ultimately passed on.



مَنْ الْحِكْمِ الْعَطَائِيَّةِ

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مِنْ عَلَامَةِ الْإِعْتِمَادِ عَلَى الْعَمَلِ نُقْصَانُ الرَّجَاءِ
عِنْدَ وُجُودِ الزَّلَلِ

A sign that you rely on your actions
and not on God is that you give up
hope at times of tribulations.

