

3 Aristotelian Concepts that Influenced Ibn Sina

How was Ibn Sina influenced by Aristotle? We will take a look at his ideas about the soul, and his theory about how intelligence is acquired.

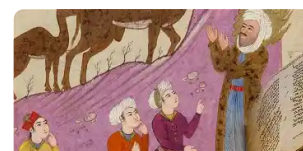
Mar 26, 2023 • By Luke Dunne BA Philosophy & Theology



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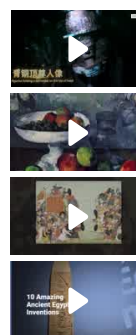
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Ibn Sina was a highly original philosopher, who wrote at a time when extraordinary poise was required to balance the requirements of reason and faith in a way that satisfied him. Equally, he was self-conscious about the debt he owed to his philosophical predecessors in a way only matched by scholastics in Europe and never really seen since, and this article hopes to explain some of the concepts he borrows from [Aristotle](#).

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This article begins by briefly touching on Ibn Sina's life and intellectual legacy. The first concept it explores is the basic structure of the soul which Ibn Sina derived from Aristotle, and considers its appropriateness for the religious conception of the human being as both created and free. The second concept is that of 'theoretical intelligence', and the implications of the view Ibn Sina adapts from Aristotle on the status of perception. The third and final concept is Ibn Sina's theory of intelligence acquisition, which also has its origins in several Aristotelian concepts.

A bust of Ibn Sina in Bukhara (from Wikimedia Commons)

Who Was Ibn Sina?

A miniature depicting Ibn Sina (anonymous and undated, from Wikimedia Commons)

Ibn Sina was a Persian philosopher, politician and poet. He wrote at a time when a small group of philosophers (*falāsifa*) were challenging the religious establishment across [the Islamic world](#), and attempting to reconcile certain elements of [Islam](#) with concepts derived from Greek philosophy. Ibn Sina lived at a time of extraordinary political upheaval, as Persia was challenged and gradually consumed by the Turks.

Consequently, his life was peripatetic. More than once he was imprisoned or forced to flee from the city in which he had settled due to changing political circumstances. He entered politics himself on several occasions, and made many enemies. His work similarly faced profound opposition, both from his contemporaries and from later philosophers. Yet today he is regarded as the greatest philosopher of an exceptionally rich and varied philosophical tradition, and one which had an enormous influence on later European philosophers.

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1. The Structure of the Soul and Human Freedom

A postcard depicting Ibn Sina (from Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Santé, Wikimedia Commons)

Ibn Sina's definition of the soul follows Aristotle, in the following three part division. First, the *vegetable* component of the soul is 'the first entelechy (perfection or actuality) of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it reproduces, and grows and is nourished.'

Second, there is the *animal* component, which is 'the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it perceives individual things and moves by volition.'

Third and last, there is the *human* component, which is 'the first entelechy of a natural body possessing organs in so far as it commits acts of rational choice and deduction through opinion; and in so far as it perceives universal matters.'

The two defining traits of human life, the only things which separate us from non-human animals, are our capacity to reason and to apprehend universal concepts. Yet these two traits might be understood to contradict one another when faced with complexity that is so extensive that none of our rational strategies will render it conceivable, and such that we can perceive through it anything universalizable.

An inscription of Ibn Sina on a silver vase from Ibn Sina's Mausoleum, Wikimedia Commons.

The human soul is preconditioned, but its functions surpass its preconditions. We can pause to observe how Aristotle's theory of the soul is appealing from a [religious](#) point of view, insofar as it preserves both the role of the human being as an object of creation, with a nature which we do not make ourselves but which God has made for us, and the human being's role as a free agent, for which not everything is wholly settled.

This surpassing of our 'preconditioned' nature seems to allow the possibility of human freedom. The two faculties of the animal soul are the 'motive' and the 'perceptive'. The motive in turn can be subdivided into the 'active' and the 'impulse'. Motive giving impulse is operating the faculty of appetite, and can be subdivided into desire and anger. When motive is active, it is a power – that of movement.

"The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch" by Paul Gauguin, 1892, from Wikimedia Commons.

The perceptive faculty is also subject to division, that of internal perception and external perception. Ibn Sina refutes at length the Platonic theory of sight, as given in the [Timaeus](#):

"The eyes were the first of the organs to be fashioned by the gods, to conduct light. The reason why they fastened them within the head is this. They contrived that such fire as was not for burning but for providing a gentle light should become a body, proper to each day. Now the pure fire inside us, cousin to that fire, they made to flow through the eyes."

Indeed, before Aristotle, all philosophers tended to treat sensation in a passive way, as sense-organs being changed by external objects. [Aristotle](#) viewed it as the 'realization of potentiality', which Ibn Sina refutes, returning a more traditional conception of sensation: "All the sensibles convey their images to the organs of sensation and are imprinted on them, and are then perceived by the sensory faculty". Some internal senses perceive the form of sensed objects, whilst others perceive their meaning or purpose.

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2. Theoretical Intelligence

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A photograph of Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, 2008, from Wikimedia Commons.

Theoretical 'intelligence' is the faculty by which universal forms can be abstracted from the material; this relates to the critical Aristotelian thesis that universals do not exist in their own realm, but can be inferred from the material world; the world as we perceive it. Theoretical intelligence removes any trace of the material origins of these forms; they are entirely separated from their material origins.

Here too we might wish to acknowledge something about the structure of [Aristotelian](#) thought, as it relates not to any particular theory but to an outlook on the world, or an epistemic *ethos*. Our perceptions are the instrument by which abstract thought is made possible, but in doing so and thereby making inferences about universals, those universals themselves bear no resemblance to or sign of their material origins.

This puts us in a rather strange position with respect to perception, and any other kind of imminent or direct understanding. We know that understanding of abstract truth is literally inconceivable without it, but nonetheless we are equally well aware that such truths are entirely separable from such experience. Insofar as experience has its own structure – recurrence, contrast, intensity or numbness – these have nothing to do with any kind of abstract truth.

"Soul in Bondage" by Elihu Vedder, 1892, via the Brooklyn Museum.

This kind of yearning for truths that are quite separate from experience, and yet knowing that experience cannot be entirely denied or ignored, is at the core of many idiosyncrasies of much of the philosophy which positions itself as part of the tradition which follows from Greek thought, whether we should wish to call that 'Western' philosophy or a more accurate name.

For one thing, it encourages an approach to experience which is non-holistic. The point is not to reconcile experience in its entirety, but to put it to use in the service of abstract truth. For another, the body is to be seen – from a philosophical perspective – as a kind of prison, perhaps even more so than it is for Plato. For Plato, the world of physical things is simply illusory, and we must put it aside in order to apprehend universals. From the Aristotelian point of view that Ibn Sina takes up, the body – or at least, its perceptual machinery – is intractable if we wish to know universal concepts, yet what we can learn from the body in itself is totally misleading.

3. The Acquisition of Intelligence

A photograph of the Shah Mosque, also in Isfahan, 2020, from Wikimedia Commons.

The last concept we shall touch on concerns the process by which the aforementioned theoretical intelligence is acquired. What Ibn Sina takes from Aristotle is a teleological or progressive outlook on human development.

The human or 'rational' soul has two internal faculties – a practical faculty, and a theoretical one. Theoretical intelligence performs its functions in stages. First, we have the stage of 'material potentiality', which can be found in an infant. Second, the 'relative' potentiality, when the instrument for the reception of actuality is developed. Third, there is the stage in which the original material potentiality we found in the third stage is perfected.

Ibn Sina characterizes the relation of theoretical reality to abstract material by way of a classification which is not Aristotelian. This relation begins at the stage of material potentiality, constituting a kind of intelligence (*intellectus in habitu*, or *al-'aql hil-malaka*) which every human being possesses. It then proceeds through to *intellectus acquisitus* (*al-'aql al-mustafad*), by which the forms can be acquired from the outside world.

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