

IBN SINA

Medical Contribution & Influences

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Ibn Sina (Avicenna) 980-1037 A.D. (After)

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) lived between 980 and 1037 A.D. during which time he concerned himself with writings about many different fields of life. Two of his major contributions were to medicine and philosophy. Avicenna contributed many advancements to medicine and philosophy, whereby he provided an influential education for the people of the world. His best medical work was a book called the "Canon of Medicine" which greatly influenced the medical world of seven centuries. Avicenna's collection of philosophical ideas is arranged in his book "The Healing" which was used in Europe and the East as a great source. These two books have changed the line of thought and are still considered influential today.

Avicenna contributed advancements to the medical institutions of his lifetime and the future of mankind. Avicenna's medical mastery, *Al Qanun* ("Canon") compiles all of Avicenna's medical knowledge. The "Canon" was not all of Avicenna's work, he received many facts and ideas from other famous medical giants. This book follows the works of Galen and ancient traditions. Although he follows these thoughts, the book includes his own medical observations that were not published before in other writings. His medical works are systematically based on the achievements of Greek physicians of the Roman imperial age. As he studied, Avicenna had acquired the ability to pull together previous knowledge and his own that changed the medicine of the future. Many of Avicenna's ideas also came from another famous physician, Al-Razi, and his work *Al-Hawi*. In his writings "Avicenna returned to the distinction between theoretical and practical science, holding that the aim of the former was to obtain certain knowledge (truth) of objects whose existence did not depend upon human action, while the aim of the latter was to study those objects on which man's

actions could have direct effects."¹ This great book must first be examined before its impact can be shown. The "Canon" is divided into five subbooks that deal with separate topics of medicine; those subjects are as follows: generalities of body, medical drugs, bodily diseases, diseases not specific to organs and compound drugs. The first book is the most complicated in that it brings out the four elements, the psychic force, the natural force, and the animal force. This book is a great anatomical book. Avicenna's second book is concerned with a general account of physical properties of drugs and an alphabetical list of drugs. The drugs are used for medical treatments. His third book deals with diseases of the major organs in humans (i.e. the brain, eyes, ears, feet, toes). This book along with book one constitute the human anatomy. The fourth book deals with diseases not specific to certain organs (i.e. fevers, genera, and symptoms). Book five is on compound drugs and pills and their medicinal applications.

The teachings of medicine in Europe and the Middle East soon accepted Avicenna's "Canon". This book was used for many centuries. "The Canon" became *the* medical authority for many centuries."² Many people felt that this book that vividly described the functions of the human body was perfect and could not be changed. The book soon replaced other medical authorities in universities. "Some writers suggested that it was complete and sufficient, and could not be improved by additions from other sources."³ His text book was a chief medieval source in medicine and surgery. It introduced a mystical and marginal factor into science. Many sources have considered this book to be the source of knowledge in medicine. "It (Canon) is the most famous single book in the history of medicine in both East and West."⁴ The book was prestigious in Europe and was used until the middle of

the seventeenth century. "The rich information provided in *Al Qanum* invited numerous physicians (until the 19th century) to write commentative and marginal notes, while others chose to extract epitomes that became very popular among physicians and medical students."⁵ Avicenna has earned a place of honor with Galen and Hippocrates. Even today, his influence is still alive in the East. He has had a definite impact on the line of medical thought.

Avicenna contributed educational works to the philosophical thoughts for the future of man. His main philosophical book is *Al-Shifa* ("The Healing") which brings together his four main topics about philosophy. "His most detailed philosophical work is the voluminous *Al-Shifa* ("The Healing")."⁶ Much of his thought was gathered by outside influences. Avicenna treated the Samanid ruler and by doing so he was granted access to using the rich library of the prince. He emerged knowledgeable about Hellenistic philosophy. He received some of the basic Islamic thought which outlined some of his philosophical thought. He also mastered these subjects by the age of 18. His cultural surroundings also influenced his philosophy, basically Islamic theology and philosophy. His thought probably belongs to that of Aristotle and also the Greek influence, "but his system cannot be strictly called Aristotalism."⁷ In his epistemology and metaphysics Avicenna adopted Neoplatonic doctrines, but he developed them in his own way. The Greek influences came from Plato who influenced Avicenna's political philosophy. "The Islamic philosopher who influenced him the most was Alfarabi."⁸

Avicenna's greatest philosophical collection is in the book "*Kitab Al-Shifa* ("The book of Healing"). To understand why Avicenna's book had a great impact on philosophical education, the basic tenants of his book must be looked at. His book is a philosophical and scientific work, probably the largest of its kind written by one man. His philosophical ideas are about the conception of God as the necessary existent; in God alone essence, what God is, and God's existence that He is, all coincide. This work is a four part encyclopedia with logic that corresponds very closely to Aristotle's *Organon*, physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. Avicenna used the logic of the Aristotelian and Stoic tradition as taught by the

Baghdadi school of logic, by using syllogism. "He found the then current classification of syllogisms into "attributive" and "conditional" too narrow. Instead he classified them as "connective and exceptive."⁹ Avicenna's conception of science came from the physics of his time and it therefore came from Greek science. "In his view, body consists of a material substance that acts as a subject and of a form that inheres in the matter."¹⁰ Avicenna's mathematical science consist of four principle sciences that are arithmetic, geometry, geography, and astronomy, and science of music. Avicenna's metaphysics are based on his conception of the Necessary Existent which is God.

This book has had a definite impact upon the education of both the East and West. His book has exerted influence on the development of the East. "The Book of Healing" was translated to Latin in the 12th century. His thought spread westward and became the basic part of the thought of Medieval Scholastics. He also influenced the development of logic and science. Jewish philosophy was also changed by Avicenna. "The influence of Avicenna on Jewish philosophy remains largely to be studied. While it is quite clear that he influenced a number of Jewish philosophers, it is difficult to determine just what his influence was."¹¹ Besides influencing groups of people, he has influenced persons. One Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, made use of certain Avicennian doctrines. He accepts the Avicennian metaphysical views, political views, and some religious views. His influences are also visible in the Islamic world's Islamic philosophers. In the West, his philosophy along with others became the basic ingredient of their thought until the seventeenth century.

In conclusion, Avicenna provided an influential education for the people of the world through his medical and philosophical doctrines. His works were not all his own ideas, but he was influenced by many sources. Without Avicenna's contribution to medicine and philosophy, the world could have been in the dark in these two subjects for a longer period of time. Avicenna's books were used in Europe until the seventeenth century in the educational systems. They are still being used today in the East. Many of his works influenced people to create other books just as influential as his which in turn caused an advancement in society's approach to medicine and philosophy.

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