

## Some great Persian philosophers were closely connected to Western philosophy: Weber

by Javad Heirannia

**TEHRAN** — Professor Eric Thomas Weber believes “some great Persian philosophers were closely connected to Western philosophy through their readings of Plato and Aristotle.”

Weber also says, “It is underappreciated in Western philosophy that Avicenna developed ideas quite similar in form and implication to Descartes’s famous Meditations, though Avicenna lived more than a half-millennium before Descartes.”

Weber, a professor of public policy leadership at the University of Mississippi, makes these remarks in an interview with the Mehr News Agency.

Following is the text of the interview:

**Q:** What is your perception of Iranian philosophers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Farabi (Al Farabi)? What is their status in the history of philosophy?

**A:** The history of philosophy includes many traditions from various parts of the world. Contemporary philosophical developments tend to be treated quite regionally, however. In the public sphere and news media, furthermore, Iranian and other non-Western cultures tend to be differentiated significantly from Western outlooks and philosophies. This development is unfortunate, especially in places that treat foreign philosophy as dangerous or unwelcome. In fact, some great Persian philosophers

were closely connected to Western philosophy through their readings of Plato and Aristotle and covered in courses on medieval philosophy. Today the world has come to recognize that education is the road to health, wealth, security, and happiness. We call this road “academia,” but few note the origin of this word. It refers to the grove of Akademos, who was a Greek warrior. The warrior’s name is famous because Plato founded his academy there, in a location related to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. So, in a sense, all settings referred to as “academic” pay homage to the founding of Plato’s academy, the descendants of which make up some of the most important and lasting institutions in the world. Beyond the superficial reference to Plato’s academy, Iranian and Western cultures connect in the work of Persian philosophers, as I have suggested. Al-Farabi and Avicenna both built on the wisdom of Aristotle, responding in various ways to his agreements with and departures from Plato’s teachings. In fact, it is underappreciated in Western philosophy that Avicenna developed ideas quite similar in form and implication to Descartes’s famous Meditations, though Avicenna lived more than a half-millennium before Descartes. Today, the legacy of these philosophers is especially to be found in their rich responses to Aristotle, but also in the applications of their ideas to religion. Anyone who



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believes in a soul distinct from one’s body must make sense of how form or essence is different from matter and existence. Aristotle saw less strict a divide between these things than Plato, and Avicenna challenged Aristotelian thinking on this front. Today scientists are learning a great deal about the brain and its processes, which has led many people to return to ideas about the nature of the mind or soul, as well as its ties to matter, in this case the brain. What is most inspiring to me and what bears the greatest potential, I believe, in considering the influence of Persian philosophers like Avicenna concerns their engagement in intelligent debate with brilliant thinkers, from no matter what culture they come. Human beings all face moral challenges, challenges of understanding, and

finitude in death. The sad truth today is that differences in culture between Iran and the West have been emphasized when so many connections and common interests could inspire greater openness and interaction. If there is a central and most important lesson that philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna learned clearly it is that the philosophical exchange of ideas is vital for pursuing truth, justice, and moral lives.

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I would hope that Western philosophy could be welcomed with open arms in places that have been closed to it, and I would also encourage Western schools of thought to continue to expand their engagement with scholars of many traditions, including certainly Iranian philosophers among them.

Dr. Eric Thomas Weber is Assistant Professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS, USA. His second book, *Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy*, has recently been released and his third book, *Democracy and Leadership* will be published in 2012.