

*The
Cambridge Companion*
to

Arabic Philosophy



EDITED BY
PETER ADAMSON AND
RICHARD C. TAYLOR

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
ARABIC PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy written in Arabic and in the Islamic world represents one of the great traditions of Western philosophy. Inspired by Greek philosophical works and the indigenous ideas of Islamic theology, Arabic philosophers from the ninth century onwards put forward ideas of great philosophical and historical importance. This collection of essays, by some of the leading scholars in Arabic philosophy, provides an introduction to the field by way of chapters devoted to individual thinkers (such as al-Fārābī, Avicenna, and Averroes) or groups, especially during the 'classical' period from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. It also includes chapters on areas of philosophical inquiry across the tradition, such as ethics and metaphysics. Finally, it includes chapters on later Islamic thought, and on the connections between Arabic philosophy and Greek, Jewish, and Latin philosophy. The volume also includes a useful bibliography and a chronology of the most important Arabic thinkers.

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The Cambridge Companion to
**ARABIC
PHILOSOPHY**

Edited by

Peter Adamson
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“*De Generatione et Corruptione*” (2001), and his edition of the *De Generatione et Corruptione* will appear in the Budé series in 2004. He is currently working on the edition of the fragments of Alexander of Aphrodisias’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

Please note that all names in this volume are given in full transliteration (e.g., al-Fārābī, not Alfarabi or al-Farabi), except for Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd, where we defer to tradition and use the familiar Latinized names Avicenna and Averroes. The same goes for all Arabic terms; thus we write Ismā'īlī rather than Ismaili, Qur'ān rather than Koran, etc. We have generally followed the transliteration system used in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, but used the simplest transliteration conventions possible: the feminine ending *tā' marbūṭa* is always written *-a*, and the definite article is always written *al-*.

There is a numbered bibliography at the end of this book. Chapter authors refer both to items in this bibliography and to unnumbered works specific to their chapters.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR PHILOSOPHERS IN THE ARABIC TRADITION

The following is a list of the dates of the major philosophers and other authors in the Arabic tradition who are mentioned in this volume, in approximate chronological order according to the date of their death. The main sources used in compiling this set of dates are *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* [16], Nasr and Leaman [34], and C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Leiden: 1937–49). (Note that the dating of the *Epistles* of Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' is disputed. For a discussion see *Encyclopaedia of Islam* [16], vol. II, 1072–3). Dates are given in A.H. (the Muslim calendar) followed by C.E. Jewish authors' dates are given in C.E. only. Dates elsewhere in this volume are generally given in C.E. only. For conversion tables between the two calendars, see G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Muslim and Christian Calendars*, 2nd edn. (London: 1977). Figures from the twentieth century are not included here; for these thinkers see chapter 19. The editors thank David Reisman for corrections and suggestions.

Sergius of Resh'aynā (d. 536 C.E.)
Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 139/757)
Al-Muqammaṣ, Dāwūd (early 9th c.)
Māshā'allāh (d. ca. 200/815)
Ibn al-Biṭrīq (fl. ca. 200/815)
Abū al-Hudhayl (d. ca. 226/840)
Al-Nazzām (d. between 220/835 and 230/845)
Al-Ḥimṣī, Ibn Nā'ima (fl. ca. 215/830)
Al-Kindī (d. after 256/870)
Ibn Ishāq, Ḥunayn (d. ca. 260/873)
Al-Balkhī, Abū Ma'shar (d. 272/886)

- Ibn Qurra, Thābit (d. 288/901)
Ibn Ḥaylān, Yuḥannā (d. 297/910)
Ibn Ḥunayn, Ishāq (d. 298/910–11)
Ibn Lūqā, Qusṭā (ca. 205/820–300/912)
Al-Jubbā'ī, Abū 'Alī (d. 303/915–16)
Al-Dimashqī, Abū 'Uthmān (d. early 4th/10th c.)
Al-Rāzī, Abū Bakr (d. 313/925)
Abū Tammām (4th/10th c.)
Al-Balkhī, Abū al-Qāsim (d. 319/931)
Al-Jubbā'ī, Abū Hāshim (d. 321/933)
Al-Rāzī, Abū Ḥātim (d. 322/934)
Al-Balkhī, Abū Zayd (d. 322/934)
Al-Ash'arī, Abū al-Ḥasan (d. 324/935–6)
Ibn Yūnus, Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 328/940)
Gaon, Saadia (882–942)
Al-Nasafī, Muḥammad (d. 332/943)
Al-Fārābī (d. 339/950–1)
Israeli, Isaac (d. 955)
Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' (The Brethren of Purity) (4th/10th c.)
Al-Sijistānī, Abū Ya'qūb (d. ca. 361/971)
Ibn 'Adī, Yaḥyā (d. 363/974)
Al-Sirāfī, Abū Sa'īd (d. 369/979)
Al-Sijistānī (al-Manṭiqī), Abū Sulaymān (d. ca. 375/985)
Al-Andalūsī, Ibn Juljul (d. after 377/987)
Al-'Āmirī (d. 381/991)
Ibn al-Nadīm (d. either 385/995 or 388/998)
Ibn Zur'ā, Abū 'Alī 'Īsā (d. 398/1008)
Al-Kirmānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn (d. ca. 412/1021)
'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024–5)
Ibn Miskawayh (d. 421/1030)
Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) (370/980–428/1037)
Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) (d. ca. 432/1040)
Ibn al-Ṭayyib, Abū al-Faraj (d. 434/1043)
Al-Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048)
Ibn Gabirol, Solomon (Avicbron) (1021–58 or 1070)
Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064)
Ibn Marzubān, Bahmanyār (d. 459/1066)
Ibn Ṣā'id al-Andalūsī, Abū al-Qāsim Ṣā'id (d. 462/1070)
Ibn Mattawayh (d. 469/1076–7)

Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. ca. 470/1077)
 Al-Shīrāzī, al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn (d. 470/1077)
 Al-Juwaynī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn (d. 478/1085)
 Al-Lawkarī, Abū al-Abbās (fl. 503/1109–10)
 Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid (450/1058–505/1111)
 Al-Nasafī, Abū al-Mu'īn (d. 508/1114–15)
 Ibn Bājja (Avempace) (d. 533/1139)
 Halevi, Judah (d. 1141)
 Al-Baghdādī, Abū al-Barakāt (d. after 560/1164–5)
 Ibn Da'ud, Abraham (ca. 1110–80)
 Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185–6)
 Suhrawardī (549/1154–587/1191)
 Averroes (ibn Rushd) (520/1126–595/1198)
 Al-Bīṭrūjī (fl. ca. 600/1204)
 Maimonides (1135 or 1138–1204)
 Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn (d. 606/1210)
 Al-Baghdādī, 'Abd al-Laṭīf (d. 628/1231)
 Ibn 'Arabī (560/1165–638/1240)
 Ibn Yūnus, Kamāl al-Dīn (d. 639/1242)
 Ibn al-Qiftī (d. 646/1248)
 Falaquera, Shem-Tov (d. ca. 1295)
 Al-Abharī, Athīr al-Dīn (d. 663/1264)
 Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a (d. 668/1270)
 Al-Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn (d. 672/1274)
 Al-Kātibī, Najm al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī (d. 675/1276)
 Ibn Kammūna, Sa'd al-Dīn (d. 1277)
 Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286 or 691/1292)
 Al-Shahrazūrī, Shams al-Dīn (d. after 688/1289)
 Albalag, Isaac (late 13th c.)
 Al-Shīrāzī, Quṭb al-Dīn (d. 710/1311)
 Al-Ḥillī, al-'Allāma (d. 726/1325)
 Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728–9/1328)
 Gersonides (Levi ben Gerson) (1288–1344)
 Al-İsfahānī, Maḥmūd (d. 749/1348)
 Al-Ījī (d. 756/1355)
 Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1375)
 Al-Taftāzānī, Sa'd al-Dīn (d. 792/1390)
 Ibn Khaldūn (732/1332–808/1406)
 Crescas, Ḥasdai (d. ca. 1411)

xviii Chronology of major philosophers

- Işfahānī, Ibn Torkeh (Şā'in al-Dīn) (d. ca. 836–7/1432)
Dashtakī, Şadr al-Dīn (d. 903/1497)
Dawwānī, Jalāl al-Dīn (d. 907/1501)
Al-Dimashqī, Muḥammad b. Makkī Shams al-Dīn
(d. 937/1531)
Dashtakī, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Manşūr (d. 949/1542)
Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1631)
Mulla Şadrā (Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī) (979/1571–1050/1640)
Al-Lāhījī (d. 1072/1661)
Sabziwārī (d. 1289/1872)

1 Introduction

The history of philosophy in Arabic goes back almost as far as Islam itself. Philosophically interesting theological disputes were underway within two centuries of the founding of Islam in 622 C.E. At the same time some important scientific, medical, and philosophical texts from the Greek tradition were being studied and used in the Syriac tradition, with Aristotelian logic being employed in theological debates. By the third century of the Muslim calendar (the ninth century C.E.), a great translation movement centered in Baghdad was in full bloom. In response, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophers writing in Arabic began to make important contributions to a tradition of philosophizing that continues alive to the present day. Debates and contests on logic, grammar, theology, and philosophy by Muslims, Christians, and Jews took place at the caliphal court. The structure and foundation of the cosmos, the natures of entities in the physical world, the relation of human beings to the transcendent divine, the principles of metaphysics, the nature of logic and the foundations of epistemology, and the pursuit of the good life in ethics – in sum, the traditional issues of philosophy, old wine, albeit in new skins – were debated with intensity, originality, and penetrating insight.

This was the beginning of what one might call the classical or formative period of philosophy in Arabic, which goes from the ninth to the twelfth centuries C.E. During this period, authors working in Arabic received and reinterpreted the philosophical inheritance of the Greeks, especially Aristotle. This process culminated at the end of the classical period with the massive body of commentaries on Aristotle by Averroes. But the formative period involves more than just the continuation of the Greek philosophical tradition. Most

important for the later Islamic tradition was the towering achievement of Avicenna. He was one of many thinkers to grapple with the ideas put forward by the tradition of theology in Islam (*'ilm al-kalām*). Post-classical philosophy in Arabic would in turn be dominated by the need to respond both to Avicenna and to the *kalām* tradition. While Averroes' project of explicating and exploiting the works of Aristotle continued in Latin and Hebrew, other concerns drove the development of post-classical philosophical inquiry.

In fact interesting philosophical ideas have appeared in the Islamic world across a wide range of traditions and over a period of many centuries. There is much of philosophical interest not only in the obviously "philosophical" writings of authors like Avicenna, and in the complex tradition of *kalām*, but also in works on the principles of jurisprudence (*'uṣūl al-fiqh*), Qur'ānic commentary, the natural sciences, certain literary (*adab*) works that are relevant to ethics, contemporary political philosophy, and so on. It goes without saying that the present volume cannot hope to cover such a broad range of topics. For reasons made clear below, this *Companion* focuses on the formative, classical period of philosophy in Arabic, though we hope to convey a sense of the richness and complexity of the tradition as a whole. In the present volume we take account especially of three sorts of complexity that confront any student of the classical period: the nature of the philosophical corpus received in the Arabic-speaking world, the nature of Arabic philosophy in the classical period itself, and the classical period as a foundation for a continuous indigenous tradition of later philosophy.

THE GREEK INHERITANCE

One should not suppose that early Arabic philosophers, any more than scholastic Christian philosophers, worked primarily through a direct and independent reading of Aristotle. The most obvious reason is that the outstanding "Aristotelian" philosophers in Islam all had to read Aristotle in translation. This was made possible by the aforementioned translation movement in the eighth–tenth centuries C.E., which in a short space of time rendered a vast array of Greek scientific and philosophical works into Arabic. It was made possible by, among other things, the previous tradition of translation and intellectual endeavor in Syriac, the ideologically motivated support

of the 'Abbāsid caliphs, and, at a more mundane level, the invention of paper.¹ The translation movement was the single most important impetus and determinant for the Arabic philosophical tradition. It began to establish the technical vocabulary that would be used (including the word *falsafa* itself, which is a calque from the Greek *philosophia*) and, like the Latin translation movement centuries later, it set forth the challenge of interpreting a Greek tradition that included much more than just Aristotle. The authors of the classical period also read commentaries on Aristotle and independent works by Neoplatonists like Plotinus and Proclus, as well as Greek science (especially medicine, but including a wide range of sciences from physics to astrology).

We hope to draw attention to the decisive impact of the translation movement by calling this a companion to Arabic, and not Islamic, philosophy. It is *Arabic* philosophy because it is philosophy that begins with the rendering of Greek thought, in all its complexity, into the Arabic language. Note that it is not "Arab" philosophy: few of the figures dealt with here were ethnically Arabs, a notable exception being al-Kindī, who was called the "philosopher of the Arabs" precisely because he was unusual in this regard. Rather, philosophy spread with the Arabic language itself throughout the lands of the expanding Islamic empire.

Related to this are two more reasons why it is sensible to call the tradition "Arabic" and not "Islamic" philosophy. First, many of those involved were in fact Christians or Jews. Some of the most important translators (above all Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq and his son) were Christians, as were such philosophers as Abū Bishr Mattā and Yaḥyā b. 'Adī, who along with the Muslim al-Fārābī were pivotal figures in the Baghdad Peripatetic movement of the tenth century C.E. The intertwining of the Jewish and Islamic philosophical traditions begins with ninth-century philosophers like Isaac Israeli and Saadia Gaon, and is evident in the work of the famous Maimonides (see chapter 16).

Second, certain philosophers of the formative period, like al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, and Averroes, were interested primarily in coming to grips with the texts made available in the translation movement, rather than with putting forward a properly "Islamic" philosophy. This is not to minimize the importance of Islam for any of the figures dealt with in this volume: even the Aristotelian commentator *par excellence* Averroes, who was after all a judge and expert on Islamic

law, dealt explicitly with the relationship between *falsafa* and Islam. And once Avicenna's philosophy becomes absorbed into the Islamic *kalām* tradition, we can point to many self-consciously "Islamic" philosophers. Still the term "Arabic" philosophy identifies a philosophical tradition that has its origins in the translation movement.² It is important to pay attention to the motives and procedures of this movement – which texts were translated, and why? How were they altered in translation? – rather than assuming the relatively straightforward access to the Greek tradition we now take for granted. Some sense of this complex and often rather technical set of issues is conveyed below (chapters 2 and 3).

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

Arabic philosophy in the formative classical period was not exclusively, or even always primarily, "Aristotelian." We can certainly identify a dominantly Peripatetic tradition within the classical period. It began in the tenth century C.E. with the school of the aforementioned Abū Bishr Mattā in Baghdad, and al-Fārābī was its first great representative. This tradition tended to see the practice of philosophy as the task of explicating the works of Aristotle, and thus reflected the Greek commentary tradition, especially the commentaries produced by the Neoplatonic school at Alexandria. Al-Fārābī imitated them in writing his own commentaries on Aristotle. His lead was followed by the philosophers in Muslim Spain, or Andalusia (see chapter 8), and the Arabic Peripatetic tradition reaches its apex in the work of Averroes (chapter 9).

Yet the Greek inheritance included not only Aristotle and his commentators, but also original works by Neoplatonists. In fact it is impossible to draw a firm line between the impact of Aristotelianism and the impact of Neoplatonism on Arabic philosophy. It is customary to mention in this regard the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, which is in fact an interpretive paraphrase of the *Enneads* of Plotinus. But even more important was the already well-established Neoplatonism of the Aristotelian tradition itself: with the exception of Alexander of Aphrodisias, all the important Greek commentators on Aristotle were Neoplatonists. Neoplatonism was thus a major force in Arabic philosophy, and we have accordingly emphasized it

in the present volume. Chapters below show that the philosophical curriculum inherited by the Arabic tradition was itself an artifact of Neoplatonism (chapter 2), as well as how al-Fārābī made use of this curriculum (chapter 4). A chapter on al-Kindī emphasizes the influence of the Neoplatonists in early Arabic thought (chapter 3), while its later manifestations are made clear in the chapters on the Ismā'īlīs, Avicenna, Suhrawardī, and on Ibn 'Arabī and Mulla Ṣadrā (chapters 5, 6, 10, 11).

A third important strand of the classical tradition is the impact of *kalām* on Arabic philosophical works. This too begins already with al-Kindī. And even those philosophers (al-Fārābī and Averroes) who were dismissive of *kalām* as, at best, a rhetorical or dialectical version of *falsafa*, felt the need to respond to *kalām* authors. They were provoked by the independent ideas of the *mutakallimūn*: an example of the productive interchange between *falsafa* and *kalām* can be found here regarding physics (chapter 14). And they were provoked by direct attacks on the philosophical tradition from the *kalām* viewpoint. In this regard the outstanding figure is al-Ghazālī, still one of the great theological authorities in Islam, and of particular interest to us for both his adoption and his critique of philosophical ideas (chapter 7). If not for space restrictions, one could certainly have expanded this volume to include other authors who were critical of the *falsafa* tradition, such as Ibn Taymiyya. Several additional chapters would perhaps have been needed to do any justice to the philosophical significance of *kalām* in its own right.³ But some of the main themes, for example the problems of divine attributes and human freedom, are explored here in discussing the reaction of philosophers to *mutakallimūn*.

All these factors are important for understanding the most important achievement of the classical period: the self-consciously original system of Avicenna, the greatest philosopher in this tradition. In recognition of this we have here devoted a double-length chapter to his thought (chapter 6). It shows that Avicenna needs to be understood in the context of the classical period as we have described it: he is heir to the Neoplatonic tradition in his understanding of Aristotle, and engages directly with problematics from the *kalām* tradition as well. Indeed, one way of viewing Arabic philosophy is as the tradition that leads up to and stems from the work of Avicenna. Like Kant in

the German tradition or Plato and Aristotle in the Greek tradition, Avicenna significantly influenced everything that came after him in the Arabic tradition.

THE POST-AVICENNIAN TRADITION

Admittedly, defining the Arabic philosophical tradition in this way has the disadvantage that it tends to obscure those aspects of earlier Arabic philosophy that Avicenna pointedly ignored.⁴ It is however a very useful way to understand later Arabic philosophy. From the time of Avicenna's death in the eleventh century, all philosophical work of note in Arabic responded to him, often critically. We have already alluded to the critiques leveled from the *kalām* point of view. Equally, Averroes criticized him from an Aristotelian point of view, though Avicenna was a major influence for other Andalusians like Ibn Ṭufayl (see chapter 8). An important development of the late classical period was yet another critique and adaptation of Avicenna: the idiosyncratic thought of Suhrawardī, which inaugurated the tradition known as Illuminism (chapter 10).

The systems of Avicenna and Suhrawardī, an ongoing tradition of *kalām*, and the mysticism of figures like Ibn 'Arabī provided the major impetus to thinkers of the post-classical era. At this point the translation movement was no longer the immediate spur to philosophical reflection; this was rather provided by indigenous Muslim authors. The post-classical era presents us with a forbidding corpus of philosophical work, much of it unedited and unstudied by Western scholars. In the present volume it has been possible only to scratch the surface of this corpus, focusing on a few aspects of the later tradition that are relatively accessible, that is, supported by further secondary literature and some editions and translations. We hope that, by devoting some attention to these later developments, we may encourage the reader to inquire further into this period. It has been remarked that the "Golden Age" of Arabic philosophy could be said to begin only in the *post-Avicennian* era, with a vast number of thinkers who commented or at least drew on Avicenna's works.⁵ A companion to Arabic philosophy might look much different once this material is more fully understood. For now, we have devoted particular attention to the reception of Avicenna. Emphasis is placed on Avicenna's inheritance as well as his sources (chapter 6). Another

chapter takes up the contentious issue of whether the strand of later Avicennism represented by the great Persian thinker Mulla Ṣadrā can really be called “philosophical,” given the mystical aspects of Ṣadrā’s system (chapter 11). It shows that we can understand mysticism as the practical complement of Ṣadrā’s quite technical and theoretical metaphysical reflections. The last chapter takes our historical narrative down to the present, tracing the themes of later Arabic and Persian philosophy from their roots in Illuminationism and Ṣadrā’s version of the Avicennian system (chapter 19). Together, chapters 10, 11, and 19 make the case that the later Illuminationist tradition, which is often treated as dominated by mysticism and symbolic allegory, actually has rational, philosophical analysis at its core.

This, then, is a rough guide to the historical coverage we aim to provide in this *Companion*.⁶ Though such a historical summary is needed to orient the reader, it must be said that our aims here remain first and foremost philosophical. That is, we want the reader to come away not just with a grasp of how this tradition developed, but above all with an appreciation of the main ideas that were put forward in the course of that development. Of course many of these are canvassed in the chapters devoted to particular thinkers. But in order to press the point home we have included five chapters on general areas of philosophy ordered according to the late ancient philosophical syllabus, which came down to the Arabic tradition (cf. chapters 2 and 4): Logic, Ethics,⁷ Natural Philosophy or Physics, Psychology, and Metaphysics.⁸ While some repetition with earlier chapters has been unavoidable, these thematic chapters explore certain topics not dealt with elsewhere (see especially the chapters on logic and physics) and put other topics in a broader context tracing philosophical developments through the tradition. Many of the themes raised will be familiar to students of Christian and Jewish medieval philosophy. This is, of course, not accidental, since as already mentioned Christian and Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages were thoroughly engaged with the Arabic tradition. The impact of Arabic philosophy on scholastic Latin philosophy is an enormous topic in its own right, one that has been explored to some extent in other *Companions*.⁹ Chapter 18 explains the historical background of this influence, detailing the transmission of Arabic philosophical work into Latin, just as chapter 2 explains the transmission of Greek philosophy into Arabic.

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