

A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY
WITHOUT ANY GAPS



PHILOSOPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

PETER ADAMSON

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volume 3

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For Ursula

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PREFACE

With any luck, you are not merely browsing this volume in a bookstore or online, but are a proud owner who has just lovingly taken it down from the special shelf you reserve for books likely to impress house guests. With even more luck, it resides there alongside the first two installments of *The History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*. If so, you may already have noticed that it is somewhat fatter than the second volume—*Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*—which was, in turn, already fatter than the initial offering, *Classical Philosophy*. Like a middle-aged parent whose work and family duties allow no time for regular exercise, the *History of Philosophy* has good excuses for its weight gain. In the second volume, we devoured a whole millennium of philosophy, stretching from contemporaries of Aristotle in the fourth century BC to the end of late antiquity with Boethius and Maximus the Confessor. In a further bid to satisfy your appetite for philosophy, this book will cover an even larger time-span, and a far larger geographical area to boot.

Like its predecessors, the volume you're about to read is aimed at a general audience. You need to be armed with nothing but interest in the topic. I've tried not to assume familiarity with the territory covered in the first two volumes, though this certainly wouldn't hurt. As ever, my approach is chronological, though certain themes act as leitmotifs for the story as a whole. (For a briefer survey which instead adopts a thematic structure, see my recently appeared *Very Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*.¹) Some of the themes are predictable: reactions to the Greek philosophical tradition; and the use of philosophy to defend and interpret Islam; proofs of God's existence; and the nature and fate of the human soul. Some, I think, may be less expected. Among recurrent philosophical themes, one of the more prominent is the critique of *taqlīd*, or blind acceptance of traditional teaching. I was so struck by the frequency with which this issue arose that, while revising the book, I decided to add further material on *taqlīd* in the Ottoman empire (Chapter 58).²

For many readers, the most unexpected feature of the book will probably be the attention I devote to non-Muslim thinkers in the Islamic world. Other introductory volumes have been devoted to either "Islamic philosophy" or "Jewish (medieval) philosophy," and these may glance along the way at the faith tradition not in focus.³ But as far as I know this is the only general introductory volume that offers detailed

and dedicated coverage of philosophy in the Islamic world among all the Abrahamic faiths. Most of the material on Jewish philosophy will be found in the second section on Andalusia, though there are discussions of earlier Jewish thinkers in the first part too. This allows me to present medieval Jewish philosophy in its proper cultural and intellectual context. Of course there will be more to say about the history of Jewish philosophy in future volumes, with Renaissance Jews and figures like Spinoza and Mendelssohn still to come. But covering philosophy in the Islamic world “without any gaps” means examining one of the most important stretches in the history of Jewish philosophy. Less extensive but no less important to the volume is the discussion of Christian philosophy in the Islamic world, especially the so-called “Baghdad School” of Christian Aristotelians.

The book is based on the scripts for the *History of Philosophy* podcast,⁴ though as with the earlier volumes I have revised these substantially and added some material, for instance the aforementioned consideration of *taqlid* under the Ottomans. This version also has the advantage of giving references to the primary texts I am discussing, as well as additional notes and suggestions for further reading. I hope that this will inspire and assist you to read more widely about a topic that has become a dynamic and exciting field within the history of philosophy over the past couple of decades. With the increasing number of reliable translations, it is no longer necessary to know Arabic (or Hebrew, or Persian) to familiarize yourself with the amazing quantity and quality of philosophical literature in the Islamic world. Indeed, when I launched this series of podcasts and books, part of my aim was to build up an audience with curiosity about ancient philosophy, who I hoped might stick with me once I reached the less widely known territory covered in this book. If you are indeed coming to this after reading the first two books, then thank you for continuing the journey. If you are new to the series, then hopefully you’ll agree that the book does stand on its own. Either way, I now invite you to embark on the third volume of the *History of Philosophy*, without any gaps.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Given that my own main area of research is philosophy in the Islamic world, you might think that in writing this book I would have needed little advice and assistance from other scholars. To be honest, I might have thought that myself at some point, but it turned out to be very much otherwise. So sprawling and complex are the intellectual traditions surveyed here that I was glad to profit from the advice of many friends and colleagues. Invaluable advice and feedback on the chapters concerning Jewish philosophy were provided by Jeremy Brown and Daniel Davies, and especially by Steven Harvey, who kindly and carefully read all these chapters in their revised form and saved me from numerous imprecisions and errors. I'd also like to give a special mention to Lukas Mühlethaler, who convinced me that it would indeed make sense to integrate Jewish philosophy into this book, rather than giving it separate treatment. For the rest of the volume, I received helpful advice from Asad Ahmed, Lisa Alexandrine, Ahab Bdaiwi, Sonja Brentjes, Jonathan Dubé, Khaled El-Rouayheb, Jan-Peter Hartung, Andreas Lammer, Jon McGinnis, Christoph Neumann, Reza Pourjavady, Sajjad Rizvi, M. Sait Özervarlı, and Eric van Lit, as well as three anonymous referees who made numerous valuable corrections and suggestions. I'd further like to thank the impressive line-up of scholars who agreed to be interviewed for the podcast: Deborah Black, Farhad Daftary, Gad Freudenthal, Frank Griffel, Dimitri Gutas, Sarah Pessin, Peter E. Pormann, Sajjad Rizvi, Tamar Rudavsky, Mohammed Rustom, Sarah Stroumsa, Richard C. Taylor, Anke von Kügelgen, and Robert Wisnovsky. I am grateful also to Julian Rimmer for his tireless help with the podcast website, Andreas Lammer for his work editing the podcasts, and Fedor Benevich for his labors on the index to this book. The whole project has thrived thanks to the financial support of the Philosophy Department at King's College London, the Leverhulme Trust, and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich.

As ever, my greatest debt is however to my family, especially my two daughters Johanna and Sophia and my wife Ursula, to whom this book is dedicated with love.

DATES

All dates given here are AD. Dates in the Muslim calendar (AH) are approximately the dates given here minus 622, though this will not give you an exact figure because the Muslim calendar uses a lunar year and is thus a slightly different length.

For historical events, use has been made of G. Endress, *Der Islam in Daten* (Munich, 2006).

Abbreviations used: death date (d.); flourished (fl.).

| <i>Philosophers and Other Authors</i> | <i>Selected historical events</i> | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Sergius of Resh'aynā | d. 536 | Emigration of Muslims to Medina, which marks start of Islamic calendar 622 |
| Jahm ibn Ṣafwān | d. 745/6 | Death of the Prophet Muḥammad 632 |
| Wāṣil ibn 'Aṭā' | d. 748 | |
| Rābī'a al-'Adawiyya | d. ca. 790s | Muslim army defeats Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmūk 636 |
| David al-Muqammiṣ | early 9th c. | Murder of 'Alī, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, seen as rightful leader by Shiite Muslims 661 |
| al-Nazzām | d. 845/6 | Beginning of Umayyad caliphate 661 |
| Abū l-Hudhayl | d. 849 | Beginning of 'Abbāsīd caliphate 749 |
| al-Kindī | d. after 870 | Caliphate of al-Manṣūr 754–75 |
| Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq | d. 873 | Caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd 786–809 |
| Umm 'Alī of Balkh | d. second half 9th c. | Caliphate of al-Ma'mūn 813–33 |
| Iṣḥāq ibn Ḥunayn | d. 910/911 | Death of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal 855 |

DATES

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|--|----------|
| al-Ḥallāj | d. 922 | Sāmānid takeover of Khurāsān | 900 |
| Abū Bakr al-Rāzī | d. 925 | | |
| Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī | d. 934 | | |
| Abū Zayd al-Balkhī | d. 934 | | |
| Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī | d. 935/936 | | |
| Abū Bishr Mattā | d. 940 | ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III declared caliph in Islamic Spain | 929 |
| Saadia Gaon | d. 942 | Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim relocates capital from Baghdad to Samarra | 836 |
| Isaac Israeli | d. ca. 950 | | |
| al-Fārābī | d. 950/951 | Būyids take power in Iraq | 945 |
| Brothers of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’) | 10th c. | | |
| Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī | d. ca. 971 | Establishment of Cairo as capital of the Fāṭimids | 973 |
| Yahya ibn ‘Adī | d. 974 | | |
| Abū Sa‘īd al-Sīrāfī | d. 979 | | |
| al-‘Āmirī | d. 991 | Incursion of Maḥmūd of Ghazna into north-west India; al-Bīrūnī writes about Indian culture | 998–1030 |
| al-Bāqillānī | d. 1013 | | |
| al-Kirmānī | d. after 1020 | Last Umayyad caliph in Spain followed by political fragmentation | 1031 |
| ‘Abd al-Jabbār | d. 1024/5 | | |
| Miskawayh | d. 1030 | Seljūqs take power in Baghdad | 1055 |
| Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) | d. 1037 | | |
| Ibn al-Haytham | d. 1039 | | |
| Abū al-Faraj ibn al-Ṭayyib | d. 1043 | | |
| Abū Sa‘īd Ibn Abī l-Khayr | d. 1048 | End of Fāṭimid dynasty in Egypt | 1076 |

DATES

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--|------|
| Solomon Ibn Gabirol | d. 1057/8 | Beginning of Almoravid rule in Spain | 1090 |
| al-Juwaynī | d. 1085 | | |
| Ibn Ḥazm | d. 1063 | | |
| Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī | d. 1111 | | |
| Aḥmad al-Ghazālī | d. 1126 | | |
| ʿAyn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadhānī | d. 1131 | The First Crusade culminates in a massacre at Jerusalem | 1099 |
| Moses Ibn Ezra | d. after 1135 | | |
| Ibn Tūmart | d. 1130 | Disintegration of Seljūk state | 1118 |
| Ibn Bājja (Avenpace) | d. 1139 | | |
| Judah Hallevis | d. 1141 | Defeat of Almoravids by Almohads | 1147 |
| al-Shahrastānī | d. 1153 | | |
| Bahya Ibn Paqūdā | d. ca. 1156 | | |
| Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī | d. 1160s | Second Crusade ends in failure | 1148 |
| Abraham Ibn Ezra | d. 1167 | | |
| Abraham Ibn Daud | d. ca. 1180 | | |
| Ibn Ṭufayl | d. 1185 | Saladin founds the Ayyūbid sultanate | 1171 |
| Moses Ibn Tibbon | fl. 1244–83 | | |
| Suhrawardī | d. 1191 | | |
| Ibn Rushd (Averroes) | d. 1198 | Saladin smashes Crusader army at the Battle of Hattin | 1187 |
| Abraham ben David (Rabad) | d. 1198 | | |
| Moses Ibn Maymun (Maimonides) | d. 1204 | Death of Saladin | 1193 |
| Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī | d. 1210 | | |

DATES

| | | | |
|--|---------------------|--|---------|
| Afdal al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (Bābā Afdal) | d. 1213/14 | Mongols attack Khurāsān | 1220 |
| ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī | d. 1231 | Death of Genghis Khan | 1227 |
| Isaac the Blind | d. ca. 1235 | Mongols attack Anatolia | 1242 |
| Ibn ‘Arabī | d. 1240 | | |
| Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī | d. 1265 | Mongols attack Anatolia | 1242 |
| Naḥmanides | d. 1270 | | |
| Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī | d. 1273 | | |
| Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī | d. 1274 | Mongols take Baghdad under leadership of Hülegü | 1258 |
| Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī | d. 1274 | | |
| Najm al-Dīn al-Kātībī al-Qazwīnī | d. 1276 | | |
| Ibn Kammūna | d. 1284 | Mamluks dislodge Crusaders from Palestine and Syria | 1265–71 |
| Bar Hebraeus | d. 1286 | | |
| Ibn al-Nafīs | d. 1288 | | |
| Shams al-Dīn Shahrazūrī | d. after 1288 | | |
| Isaac Albalag | fl. 1280s– 1290s | Mamluks end Mongol advance in Syria | 1303 |
| Abraham Abulafia | d. ca. 1291 | | |
| Shem Tov Ibn Falaqera | d. ca. 1295 | | |
| Moses de Leon | d. 1305 | | |
| Solomon Ibn Adret | d. 1310 | | |

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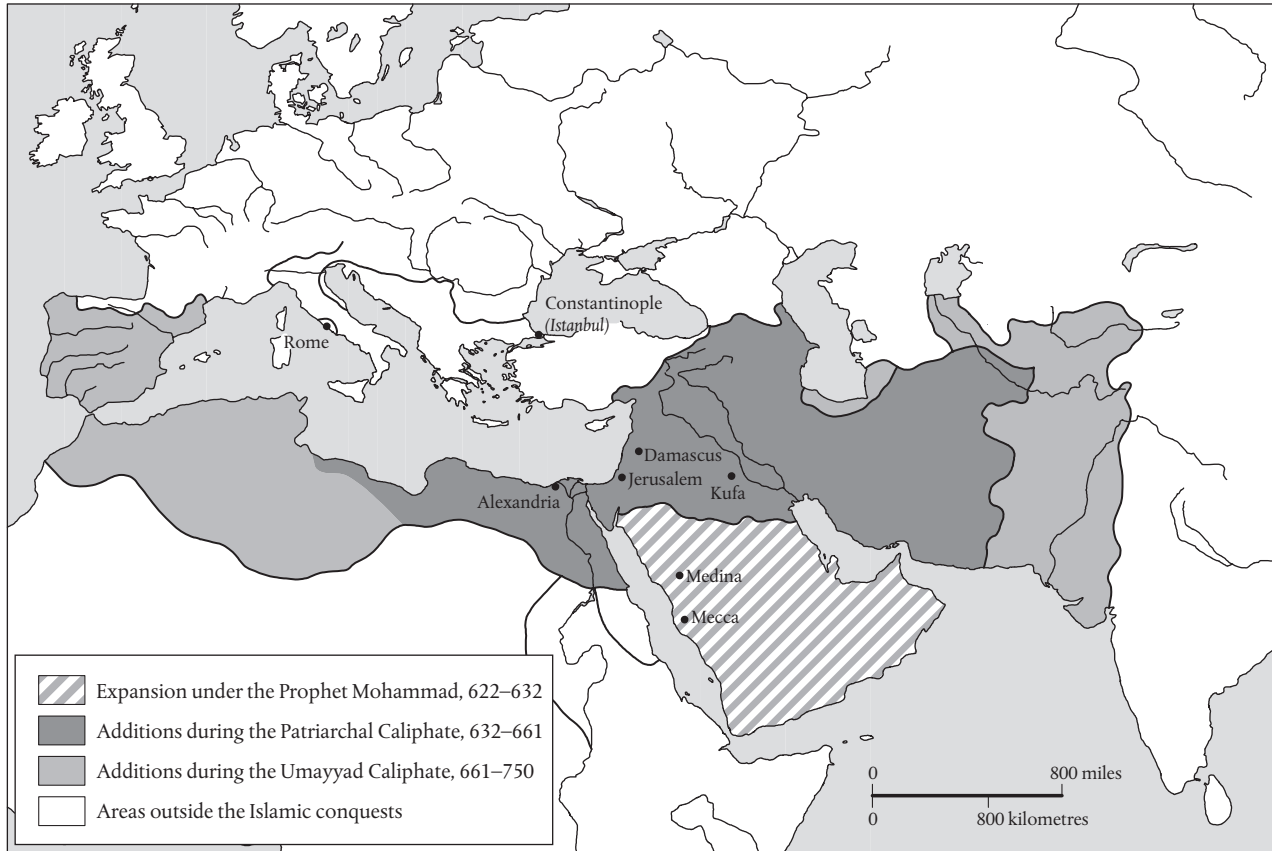
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|-------------------------------|---------------|---|-----------|
| Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī | d. 1311 | Death of Osman, founder of Ottoman dynasty | 1326 |
| ‘Abd Allāh al-Bayḏāwī | d. 1316 | | |
| ‘Allamā al-Ḥillī | d. 1325 | Tughluq dynasty in Delhi | 1351–1414 |
| Ibn Taymiyya | d. 1328 | | |
| Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides) | d. 1344 | Ottomans victorious at Battle of Kosovo | 1389 |
| ‘Adud al-Dīn al-Ījī | d. 1355 | Tamerlane (Tīmūr) invades northern India | 1398 |
| al-Taftazānī | d. 1390 | | |
| Ibn Khaldūn | d. 1406 | | |
| Ḥasḏai Crescas | d. 1410/11 | Tamerlane defeats Ottomans at Ankara | 1402 |
| Mullā Fanārī | d. 1431 | | |
| Joseph Albo | d. 1444 | Death of Tamerlane | 1405 |
| Ḥōter ben Shelōmō | fl. 1430s | | |
| ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Qūshjī | d. 1474 | Building of observatory at Samarqand | 1425 |
| ‘Alā’ al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī | d. 1482 | Constantinople falls to Ottomans | 1453 |
| Khwāja Zāda (Khojazāda) | d. 1488 | Muslims and Jews expelled from Spain | 1492 |
| Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Sanūsī | d. 1490 | | |
| Ṣadr al-Dīn Dashtakī | d. 1498 | Savafids established in Azerbaijan and Iran | 1501–24 |
| Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī | d. 1501 | | |
| Isaac Abravanel | d. 1508 | Ottomans defeat Mamluks in Egypt | 1517 |
| Najm al-Dīn al-Nayrīzī | d. after 1526 | | |
| Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dashtakī | d. 1541 | First siege of Vienna by Ottomans | 1529 |
| Ṭāškōprīzāde | d. 1561 | | |
| Muṣliḥ al-Dīn al-Lārī | d. 1572 | Reign of Tahmāsp in Iran | 1524–76 |

DATES

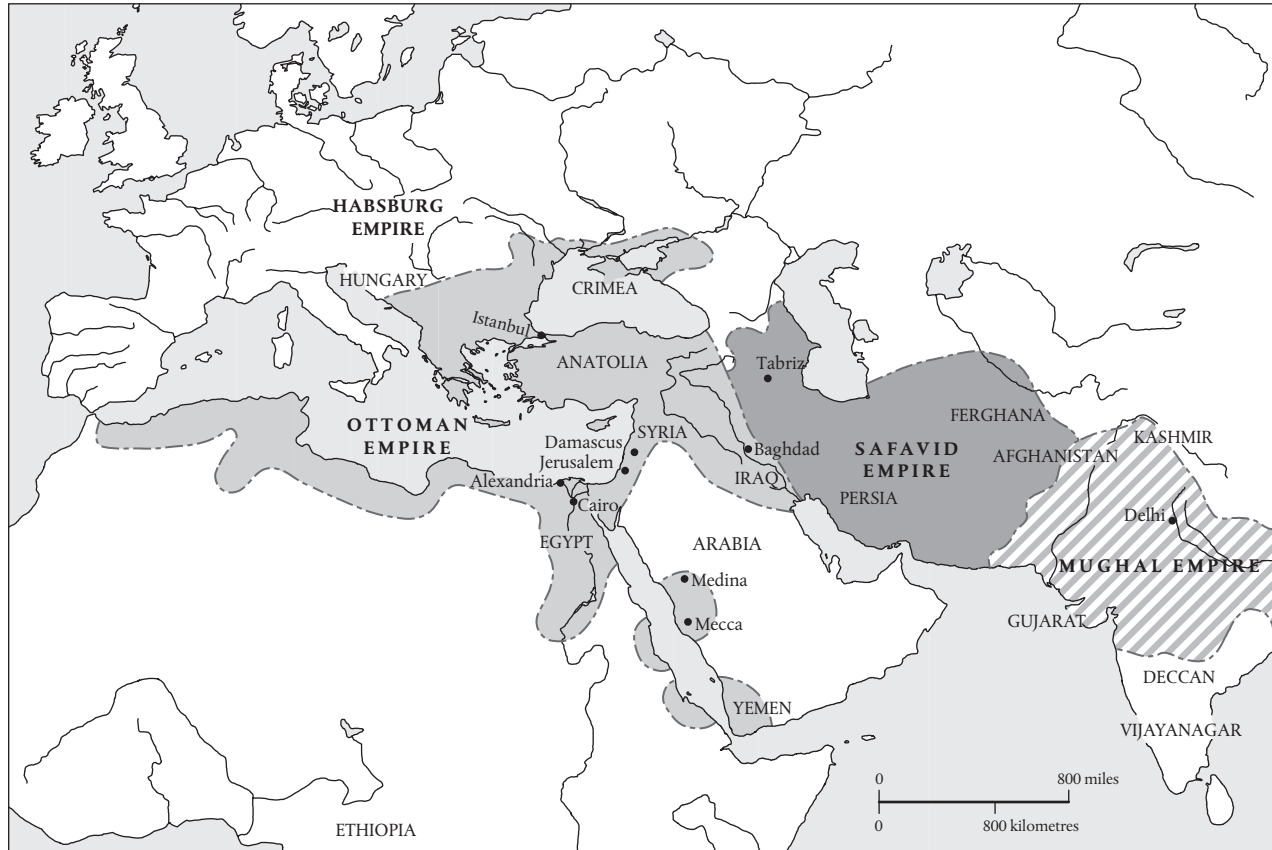
| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|--|-----------|
| ‘Alī Çelebi Kinalizāde | d. 1572 | Uniting of Muslim states in the Dekkan | 1565 |
| Mehmed Bergevi | d. 1573 | | |
| Moses Almosnino | d. ca. 1580 | Death of Suleyman the Magnificent | 1566 |
| Fatḥallāh Shīrāzī | d. 1589 | Expansion of Safavids under Shah ‘Abbās | 1588–1629 |
| Shaykh Bahā’ī | d. 1621 | | |
| Mīr Damād | d. 1631 | Death of Mehmed Kādīzāde, leader of a popular religious movement in the Ottoman empire | 1635 |
| Aḥmed Rūmī Āḥīsārī | d. 1632 | Second siege of Vienna | 1683 |
| Mullā Şadrā (Şadr al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī) | d. 1640 | Death of Mughal emperor Aurangzīb | 1707 |
| Maḥmud Jawnpūrī | d. 1652 | End of effective Safavid rule | 1722 |
| Kātib Çelebi | d. 1657 | Invasion of India by Nādir Shāh | 1738 |
| Dārā Shikūh | d. 1659 | | |
| al-Ḥasan ibn Mas‘ūd al-Yūsī | d. 1691 | British take control of Calcutta | 1757 |
| Muḥibballāh al-Bihārī | d. 1707 | Napoleon invades Egypt | 1798–1801 |
| ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī | d. 1731 | Russian–Iranian War | 1804–13 |
| Nizām al-Dīn Sihālvī Farangī Maḥallī | d. 1748 | Muḥammad ‘Alī reigns in Egypt | 1805–48 |
| Shāh Walī Allāh | d. 1762 | End of Mughal dynasty | 1858 |
| Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb | d. 1792 | Founding of the Young Turks | 1865 |
| Aḥmad Aḥsā’ī | d. 1826 | Written constitution as climax of <i>tanzimat</i> reforms | 1876 |
| Faḍl al-Ḥaqq Khayrābādī | d. 1861 | | |

DATES

| | | | |
|---|-----------|---|------|
| Sabzawārī | d. 1878 | British invade Egypt | 1882 |
| Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī | d. 1897 | Death of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, modernist founder of Aligarh University | 1898 |
| Sayyid Aḥmad Khān | d. 1898 | | |
| Muḥammad ‘Abdūh | d. 1905 | Armenian genocide in Turkey | 1915 |
| Ahmed Hilmi | d. 1914 | | |
| Ziya Gökalp | d. 1924 | Sykes–Picot Agreement formalizes post-Ottoman arrangements | 1916 |
| Abdullah Cevdet | d. 1932 | | |
| Fatma Aliye | d. 1936 | Founding of Turkish Republic | 1923 |
| Muḥammad Iqbāl | d. 1938 | End of Qajar rule in India | 1925 |
| İzmirlī İsmail Hakkı | d. 1946 | | |
| Said Nursi | d. 1960 | Death of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) | 1938 |
| Ṭabāṭabā’ī | d. 1981 | | |
| ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Bint al-Shāṭi’) | d. 1998 | Egyptian revolution | 1952 |
| Mohammed Arkoun | d. 2010 | | |
| Seyyed Hossein Nasr | born 1933 | Iranian revolution | 1979 |
| Fatema Mernissi | d. 2015 | | |



Map 1. Expansion of the Islamic Caliphate



Map 2. The Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Empires

PART I

THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

THE STRAIGHT PATH PHILOSOPHY AND ISLAM

Like a policeman following a silverware thief with a hole in his pocket, we have reached a fork in the road. At the end of the previous volume in this series, we reached the end of antiquity, and looked ahead to three traditions of the medieval age. First, there is Byzantine philosophy, which we left with Maximus Confessor. Greek-speakers in the Eastern empire did not get a memo from some headquarters, telling them that antiquity was over and that they had to stop philosophizing. To the contrary, scholars of the Byzantine empire simply carried on what had been business as usual in late antiquity. They commented on Aristotle. They applied the tools of Hellenic thought to expound Christian doctrine. And they copied out manuscripts in Greek, which is why so much ancient philosophy survives today in its original language. Meanwhile, in most of the former Western empire, Latin became the sole language of philosophy, and knowledge of Greek became rare. As a result, philosophers of late antiquity who wrote in Latin, such as Augustine, Martianus Capella, and Boethius, were indispensable sources in this part of the world. Most of Aristotle and nearly all of Plato were inaccessible in Latin for several centuries.

We will reach these Byzantine and Latin traditions in further installments of the series. But first we're going to venture down a third road, one that you need to travel from right to left: philosophy in Arabic. It unfolded in the lands dominated by a new faith that announced itself as the "straight path": Islam.¹ We will, of course, be talking about philosophers who were Muslims, and about the impact of Islam itself on philosophy. But exploring philosophy in the Islamic world also means looking at Christian and Jewish thinkers. Christians played a major role in the early development of philosophy in Arabic. They served as translators, and some of the leading early exegetes of Aristotle in Arabic were Christians. Meanwhile, Jewish philosophy between the ninth and thirteenth centuries took place almost entirely within the territories dominated by Islam. Nowadays, scholarship on philosophy written in the Islamic world generally deals with these two faith traditions separately. But a more revealing approach is to look at the whole history of philosophy in the Islamic

world in chronological order. This will allow us to situate Jewish philosophy in Islamic culture. You cannot, for instance, understand the thought of the great early Jewish philosopher Saadia Gaon without knowing something about early developments in Islamic theology. An even more prominent example is Maimonides. He was one of the two greatest exponents of philosophy in the Iberian peninsula, or “Andalusia,” in the twelfth century; the other was a Muslim, Averroes.

Our story begins several centuries earlier. Of all the dates provided in the table at the beginning of this book, the one most worth committing to memory is AD 622. This is the year in which the Prophet Muḥammad led his followers away from the city of Mecca, to the definitively named Medina (*madīna* just means “city”). The Islamic calendar is dated beginning from this event. You might see years of that calendar labeled with “AH,” which stands for the Latin phrase *anno hegirae*, that is, the year of the *hijra* (“emigration”). So if you take an AD year and subtract 622 you’ll be in the general ballpark of the corresponding AH date, albeit not exactly right—because the Islamic calendar is lunar, so that one of its years doesn’t have quite the same length as one year in a solar calendar. (Throughout this book I’ll be using dates from the AD calendar, on the assumption that this is what would be of use to most readers.) The emigration to Medina was taken as the starting point for the calendar because it marked the beginning of a distinct Muslim society. From this beginning would grow a great empire. Within just a few generations, the religion of Islam spread with spectacular speed across not just the Arabian peninsula, but also to the West across northern Africa and ultimately into Iberia, and to the East through Iraq, and then further still into Persia and central Asia.

With Islam spread the Arabic language. The Koran is, of course, written in the language spoken by Muḥammad, and several verses call attention to this fact. God says to Muḥammad such things as “we have made it for you an Arabic Koran.”² The very name of the Holy Book draws our attention to the importance of language in this new faith. “Koran” (*Qurʾān*, if you transliterate it properly) means “recitation,” and the first word that the Prophet heard from the angel Gabriel, who delivered God’s message to him, was the command *iqraʾ*, “recite!” When Christianity emerged in antiquity, it quickly became acceptable to read the Bible in languages other than the original—especially authoritative was the Greek Septuagint, whose authors were supposedly under divine inspiration as they worked. Not so with the Koran, which gave Arabic the divine seal of approval when it was given to Muḥammad, the seal of the prophets. In much of the Islamic world, Arabic duly became and remained the primary language. Even in places that held on to their local tongue, like Persia, Arabic became an important and even dominant language for writing literature, including philosophy. This is why philosophers from Persia and central

Asia—including no less a thinker than Avicenna—wrote in Arabic, which was not necessarily their native language.

Nor was the use of Arabic restricted to Muslims. The Christian exegetes of Aristotle wrote Arabic commentaries on Arabic translations of Aristotle's logical works and his *Physics*, and the two Jewish authors just mentioned, Saadia and Maimonides, also wrote in Arabic. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to equate philosophy in the Islamic world with philosophy in Arabic. That's largely true for the earlier period. But Maimonides wrote in Hebrew as well, and this became even more common among Jewish thinkers in the generations after him. A third important language for philosophy in the Islamic world was Persian. Users of this language already resisted the hegemony of Arabic as Islam spread into the Persian realms. As I say, even in these areas Arabic established itself as the main language for philosophy. But Avicenna did use Persian for one of his treatises; at about the same time the Ismā'īlī author Nāṣir Khusraw also wrote in this language. Starting with al-Ṭūṣī in the thirteenth century, Persian will become an increasingly common language for philosophical writings in the Iranian sphere.

What I've said so far explains why the title of this book is *Philosophy in the Islamic World*, rather than *Islamic Philosophy* or *Arabic Philosophy*. You'll see both of those phrases used, and I have been known to use them myself. But speaking of "Islamic philosophy" excludes the Christians and Jews who will be such an important part of our story; "Arabic philosophy" is closer to the mark, but wouldn't cover texts in other languages. (By the way, please don't confuse the words "Arabic" and "Arab": "Arabic" refers to a language, not the people among whom Islam first began. Actually very few of the philosophers we'll be looking at were Arabs, yet almost all of them wrote mostly or exclusively in Arabic.) Thus the title indicates the broad aims of the book, which covers philosophers from three religions, who wrote in several languages, and lived across a swathe of land from modern-day Spain to modern-day Afghanistan.

Like this geographical territory, the intellectual territory to be covered is vast and complex. Yet the most illuminating way to divide it chronologically is a simple division into two periods: before Avicenna and after Avicenna. His career ends what I call the "formative period" of philosophy in the Islamic world.³ During this formative period, the main concern of philosophers was the translation and interpretation of Greek philosophical texts, especially Aristotle. Figures like al-Kindī and al-Fārābī championed these texts and insisted that they contained truths of paramount importance for any reader—whether pagan, Christian, or Muslim. Yet these same thinkers pondered the question of how the Hellenic philosophical heritage could be reconciled with the teachings of Islam, and whether it might

offer answers to questions being posed by contemporary Muslim theologians. This dynamic too went beyond the confines of the Islamic faith, as Jewish and Christian authors staged their own appropriation of Aristotle and Neoplatonism. Not unlike Philo of Alexandria and the Christian Fathers in the ancient world, they used philosophy to explain the descriptions of God in the Old Testament, or expound the doctrine of the Trinity.

Then Avicenna came along, and changed everything. He was a philosopher of considerable self-confidence, which is a polite way of saying that he was arrogant. But, to be honest, he merited his high opinion of himself. Drawing together themes from Aristotle, from Neoplatonism, and from Islamic theology, he forged something new. His self-consciously original works had something to contribute on nearly every major area of philosophy, from logic to physics to metaphysics. He also found time to become the single most influential medical author of any medieval tradition (a film released in 2013, *The Physician*, picks up on this part of his legacy by portraying him primarily as a doctor—and a rather saintly one, at that). After Avicenna, philosophy in the eastern heartlands of the Islamic empire was consumed with the task of responding to him, instead of Aristotle. The very language of philosophy became distinctively Avicennan, even in authors who opposed his ideas strenuously. His terminology and ideas were woven into the fabric of Islamic theology and into the mystical tradition of the Sufis. One of the most seminal figures of the post-Avicennan generations, Suhrawardī, founded yet another tradition within this tradition: “Illuminationism.” It can best be understood as an intricate critique and reworking of Avicenna, much as Avicenna had offered a critique and reworking of Aristotle.

But in the eleventh century, news traveled slow, and texts often failed to travel at all. That is one reason we see a mostly autonomous tradition arising on the far western fringe of the Islamic empire, in Andalusia. If you take Jewish and Muslim philosophy together, as I am doing, then you see just how enormous were the contributions of philosophers living on the Iberian peninsula from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. This was the time and place not only of the aforementioned philosophical giants, the Jew Maimonides and the Muslim Averroes, but also numerous other figures from both religions. Avicenna’s works did reach and influence Andalusian philosophers, but much less so than philosophy in the East. In Andalusia, it was still possible for thinkers of both faiths to adopt broadly Aristotelian or Neoplatonic systems of thought—even to complain that this con-founded Avicenna was ruining everything, and that right-minded philosophers should return to Aristotle. That pretty much sums up the attitude of Averroes, though his associate Ibn Ṭufayl had a far more positive attitude towards Avicenna.

Meanwhile, the greatest mind in the history of philosophical Sufism was Ibn ‘Arabi—and he too hailed from Andalusia.

To take account of all this, once we get past Avicenna I’m going to devote a series of chapters to Andalusian philosophy, before returning to the eastern tradition and following it all the way to the time we think of as “early modernity.” Ultimately, we will see the Islamic world fracturing into three great empires: the Ottomans, the Safavids in Persia, and the Mughal empire in India. All three empires offered something to the history of philosophy, though I should warn you that when we reach that late period we will be entering territory that has barely been touched by modern scholarship. So that’s a historical sketch of the journey ahead: a formative period of engagement with both Greek philosophy and Islamic theology; a decisive intervention by Avicenna, the greatest philosopher of the Islamic world; and then another forking path, leading on the one hand west, to Muslim Spain and the continued use of Hellenic materials, on the other hand east, with Avicenna having become the new king of the road.

As for the philosophical issues that will be occupying our attention along the way, some of them have to do with where we started: the philosophical milieu of late antiquity. Both Muslim and Jewish philosophers will have a great deal to say about whether or not the universe is eternal. Not only will they remind us of the late ancient dispute between John Philoponus and upholders of eternity like Aristotle and Proclus—they will actually be drawing directly on these very arguments, since Philoponus’ anti-eternity polemic was available to read in Arabic. Appropriately enough, therefore, the eternity debate didn’t really stop after late antiquity, but went on and on. An equally long-running issue was the problem of how to understand Aristotle’s remarks on the human intellect in the third book of his work *On the Soul*. This will provide us with a particularly prominent illustration of the continuity of the Greek and Arabic traditions of commentary on Aristotle.

But of course, philosophy in the Islamic world wouldn’t deserve a whole book to itself if it offered nothing but rehashed debates and puzzles from the ancient world. In late antiquity, paganism and Christianity were powerful spurs to philosophical innovation. We’ll now see that the same is true of Islam. To start thinking about why, we can do no better than to begin with the *shahāda*, or Muslim profession of faith: “There is no God but God, and Muḥammad is His prophet.” In the first half of that sentence we have the core Muslim theological commitment to monotheism. *Tawḥīd*, the Arabic word for “oneness,” is at the core of both the Islamic faith and of philosophy in the Islamic world. The Prophet Muḥammad clearly taught the centrality of *tawḥīd*, not only with his words but also with his actions—as when he entered the holy shrine of the Kaaba in his home city of Mecca, and emptied it of

the pagan idols that stood there.⁴ Monotheism gave Muslims something in common with members of other faiths, notably Christians and Jews, but also Zoroastrians, who were still numerous in the lands that fell under the sway of this new faith.

Yet God's oneness could also be the basis for interreligious dispute. From a Muslim point of view the Christians' admirable acceptance of *tawhīd* was fatally undermined when they went on to insist that God is three, as well as one. Accordingly, we're going to see Muslim philosophers using the tools of their trade to attack the Trinitarian doctrine. Christians writing in Arabic responded to these attacks and also defended their own particular conception of the Trinity against the views of other Christians. It's not only the tradition of debate over the Trinity that continues from late antiquity, but also the emphasis on the oneness of God. When Greek sources came to be translated into Arabic, Muslim readers immediately detected resonances between the Muslim doctrine of *tawhīd* and certain Hellenic ideas. In particular, it looked tempting to find agreement with Plotinus and other Neoplatonists, who likewise taught that the first cause of all things was a transcendent One.

More potentially problematic, for both interfaith agreement and the appropriation of the philosophical tradition, was the second half of the *shahāda*: "and Muḥammad is His prophet." Muslims recognized Jesus and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible as genuine messengers from God, while of course denying the Christian claim that Jesus was the Incarnation of God. But Christians and Jews were, naturally enough, not going to return the favor and admit that Muḥammad was the final prophet that God would send to mankind. The Koran itself identifies Christians and Jews, among other groups, as "peoples of the book"—communities favored by God with a revelation.⁵ But the Koran was a book whose status as revelation was accepted by Muslims alone. As for philosophy, there soon arose the difficulty of how, and indeed whether, prophecy could be explained within rational theories of knowledge. What was the mechanism by which Muḥammad and other prophets had come to possess a wisdom beyond other humans? Did this wisdom go beyond any understanding that can be achieved through human resources? How do prophecy, and knowledge more generally, serve to legitimize the political power wielded by leaders like Muḥammad? And, not to put too fine a point on it, but once God has sent numerous messengers with divinely revealed books to bring us the truth, do we really need Aristotle and Plotinus too?

Islam, in fact, gave rise to philosophical reflection in the absence of any explicit reference to Hellenic thought. We can see this by looking at the earliest representatives of the tradition known as *ʿilm al-kalām*. This phrase literally means "science of the word," and may allude to the fact that the theologians were trying to understand

God's word.⁶ But the phrase, usually shortened simply to *kalām*, is typically translated more loosely as "rational theology." *Kalām* was indisputably theological in character, consisting mostly of disputes over the correct understanding of Islamic revelation, albeit that these disputes often appealed to rational intuition and argument. For this reason *kalām* is often sharply contrasted to philosophy. Indeed, philosophers who wrote in Arabic themselves drew this contrast, with figures like al-Fārābī and Averroes comparing the dialectical debates of *kalām* unfavorably to the demonstrative knowledge offered by Aristotelian philosophy. Yet *kalām* is going to play an important part in our story. Not only because it exercised a huge influence on philosophers—among Jews as well as Muslims—but also because *kalām* was eventually fused together with philosophy to form a unified tradition. Especially important will be the way that theologians of the Ash'arite school took over and criticized ideas from Avicenna. But well before that happened, there emerged another tradition of philosophically minded Muslim theologians. Collectively, they are known as the Mu'tazilites.

ALL FOR ONE THE MU‘TAZILITES

History teaches some lessons the hard way. For instance, the lesson that the strongest leaders often leave the most disruption and discord when they die. The Greeks learned this from the chaos that followed the death of Alexander the Great. The same was brought home to the Romans by the demise of Constantine, and a few centuries later early Islamic society faced a similar experience. In this case the question of political legitimacy was compounded by a problem of religious authority. When the Prophet Muḥammad died in the year 632, it was not entirely clear who should succeed him, nor was it even clear what principles of legitimacy might justify one candidate over another. Was it crucial that the next leader be from the family of the Prophet, or were personal qualities and suitability for the post decisive? On the religious front, who would guide the Muslim community now that Muḥammad was gone, and with him the direct link to divine revelation? The Koran by itself could not provide all the answers. Like any text, it stood in need of interpretation. But who should be recognized as an authoritative interpreter? And who could be trusted to extrapolate from the Koran to settle issues not addressed explicitly in the revelation itself?

These questions would dominate much of the history of Islam, including the fundamental division between Sunnis and Shiites. This split did not occur immediately, but its origins can be traced back to events immediately following Muḥammad's death. The Prophet's cousin, and husband to his daughter Fāṭima, was ‘Alī. Shiite Muslims believe that rightful leadership of the Muslim community is inherited through a familial line, beginning with ‘Alī. In fact, the word “Shiite” comes from the phrase *shī‘at* ‘Alī, meaning “the party of ‘Alī.” ‘Alī did succeed to the caliphate eventually, but only after being passed over for three other caliphs, Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān. These four are known as the *rashidūn* or “rightly guided” caliphs, and they played an enormous role in shaping Islamic society. During their reigns, the Muslims launched startlingly effective military and cultural conquests from their base in what is now Saudi Arabia. Within a few generations the Islamic empire would stretch from the Iberian peninsula to central Asia. The sequence of

rightly guided caliphs ended with the assassination of ‘Alī in the year 661 by one of the Khawārij, former supporters of ‘Alī who had broken with him over his willingness to accept arbitration between himself and his political opponents. About twenty years later ‘Alī’s son Ḥusayn was killed in civil war over the caliphal succession.

When Ḥusayn died, so did the prospect that the house of ‘Alī might hold political rule. The next few centuries would see two lines of caliphs, neither of which was descended from him. The word “caliph” derives from the phrase *khalīfat rasūl Allāh*, “successor to the Prophet of God.” From 661 until 749 the succeeding would be done by the Umayyads from their capital in Damascus. And they were, in fact, fairly successful: this period saw continued expansion of the Islamic empire. Indeed, the Umayyad line continued in the far West, maintaining a foothold in Iberia even when the Umayyads were otherwise vanquished by the ‘Abbāsids in the mid-eighth century. This new line of caliphs drew their strength from the East—from the central Asian lands known as Khurāsān and from Iraq, which had already been a power base for ‘Alī. The ‘Abbāsids could not claim descent from ‘Alī himself, but at least took their name from their forefather ‘Abbās, an uncle of the Prophet. Thus they could say that they were keeping the caliphate in the family. Accordingly, much more than the Umayyads, the ‘Abbāsīd caliphs made explicit claims to religious as well as political authority.¹ For example, the caliph al-Ma‘mūn claimed the title of *imām* while contending with his brother in a civil war over the caliphate. The supporters of the house of ‘Alī would likewise refer to the figures they recognized as rightful leaders as *imāms*, and ascribe to them unique status as interpreters of Islam, as well as secular legitimacy.

Al-Ma‘mūn is important not only for political history, but also for the history of Islamic theology and philosophy. At the end of his reign in AD 833, al-Ma‘mūn lay down the so-called “*miḥna*”—a “test” or “inquisition.”² He instructed that judges and scholars should be required to admit that the Koran was created by God, and not eternal like God Himself. This may seem a rather abstract point, but al-Ma‘mūn thought it important enough to persecute and imprison anyone who disagreed. It’s worth emphasizing how unusual this was. Tests of religious orthodoxy had not been imposed by caliphs before al-Ma‘mūn. Rather, the rights and wrong of religious belief had usually been determined by the judgment of scholars, men who were steeped in the study of the Arabic language, the life and deeds of Muḥammad, and the text and context of the Koran itself. It was no doubt part of al-Ma‘mūn’s objective to assert his own authority over that of the scholars, and towards that end he may even have liked the idea of denying divine status to the Koran itself. But this doctrine of the Koran’s createdness was not invented by

al-Ma‘mūn. He took it from a group of thinkers who can with some justice claim to be the first philosophers of Islam—the Mu‘tazilites.

Justice was, in fact, one of the main concerns of the Mu‘tazilites. They liked to style themselves *ahl al-tawhīd wa-l-‘adl*, “the upholders of oneness and justice.” Like Augustine arguing that the whole message of the Bible boils down to charity, for Mu‘tazilites the core teaching of Islam was that God is one and that He is just. Their most distinctive positions came directly from these two principles. Before we get to those distinctive positions, though, I should explain the sense in which one might reasonably describe these thinkers as “philosophers.” They certainly were not spending most of their time reading Aristotle, albeit that some of them did show (or at least claim) that they were familiar with his works. Rather, these were theologians, and their sacred texts were not Hellenic philosophical treatises, but actual sacred texts: the Koran itself, of course, and also the collected sayings and anecdotes about the Prophet known as *ḥadīth*. Muslims are enjoined to follow the example of the Prophet (Koran 6:90, 33:21). On this basis, the practice of collecting *ḥadīth* emerged in order to address the problem mentioned above: if the Koran is silent on a given question, whether it deals with practical arrangements or abstract religious belief, how should we know the Islamic teaching on that question? An obvious strategy was to follow whatever Muḥammad had said or done in his lifetime, insofar as this could be ascertained through reliable reports. *Ḥadīth* scholarship, which blossomed during the ‘Abbāsīd era, determined which reports were reliable by recording chains of testimony all the way back to eyewitnesses and Companions of the Prophet. The accepted *ḥadīth*, alongside the Koran, became a second principal source for both Islamic law and Islamic theology.

The Mu‘tazilites certainly did base their theories on these two sources, but they also drew on a third resource: *‘aql*, or reason. It is really this that distinguishes the kind of theology we call *kalām*, and separates its practitioners (the *mutakallimūn*) from other Muslim scholars who often had a more conservative, traditionalist bent. Mu‘tazilite *mutakallimūn* had no hesitation in adopting a figurative reading of Koranic descriptions of God as having a face, or sitting on a throne—since reason shows that God has no body. Traditionalists instead accepted such statements at face value. This point connects to the first of the Mu‘tazilites’ principles: God’s unity. Here their signature teaching was that God must be recognized as “one” not only in the sense that He is unique—all Muslims would, after all, affirm that there are no other gods but God—but also one in the sense that He is utterly free from multiplicity of any kind. It was not only the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that fell afoul of this restriction, but also certain views concerning a central issue of *kalām*: the status of God’s attributes, such as His knowledge and power.

The Mu'tazilites tended to deny the reality of attributes, or at least, deny that they had any reality distinct from God's own reality. The role of reason here was to explain how it could still be true to say that God is "knowing" or "powerful," if there is no distinctly existing knowledge or power that belongs to Him. In this, God is unlike the things He creates. As we'll see shortly, Mu'tazilite theologians did not always agree about the physical make-up of created things. But in general, they endorsed a theory according to which God connects certain attributes to atomic bodies.³ These atoms are indivisible bearers of properties, which are distinct from the atoms themselves in precisely the way that God's attributes are *not* distinct from Him.

When it came to the second core principle of God's justice, reason again lay down a fundamental ground-rule: no one can be morally responsible for actions that are not in their own power. Thus if humans are to be responsible for what they do, and if God is therefore to be just in rewarding and punishing them for what they do, then humans must have free will. This was sometimes expressed in terms of the physical theory. A human is an atom or compound of atoms, and the human's actions or choices are attributes or properties that inhere in the atomic subject. Since the human is responsible for these actions or choices, it must be up to the human, and not to God, whether the relevant attributes come to belong to that human. Some Mu'tazilites even admitted that humans "create" their actions, whereas everything else is created by God.

All of this relates to the apparently obscure teaching on the Koran's createdness, the one enforced in al-Ma'mūn's inquisition. Theologians understood the Koran as being a sort of divine attribute—as God's "word." So in denying the eternity of the Koran, the Mu'tazilites were simply adhering to their standard position on God's attributes. To make God's "word," the Koran, a separately existing thing that is co-eternal with God, would be to deny *tawhīd*, God's uniqueness and oneness, and would in fact be tantamount to *shirk*, or "polytheism". The createdness of the Koran was also important for God's justice. It includes verses that condemn specific opponents of Muḥammad as sinners who are surely destined for hellfire (e.g. 111:3). The Mu'tazilites worried that, if such verses had been eternally established as part of God's word, then the sinners in question would simply be doing what had always been inevitable, rather than exercising their free will. In that case, God's justice would be compromised. He would be eternally promising damnation to people who had no choice in sinning.

In part because of the political situation out of which they emerged, the Mu'tazilites and other *mutakallimūn* had a particular interest in this question of sin and moral responsibility. In fact, the origins of the name "Mu'tazilite" are supposedly

bound up with this issue. According to tradition, the man who began the Mu‘tazilite school in the first half of the eighth century was Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ (d. 748). One day he was sitting with another early theologian named Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, discussing the moral status of sinners. Ḥasan al-Baṣrī held that sinners still count as “believers,” which Wāṣil found too generous. He did not go so far as other hardline theologians who condemned sinners as “non-believers,” but instead offered what would become the standard Mu‘tazilite position: that Muslim sinners occupy an “intermediate position,” neither believers nor non-believers. To express his disagreement, Wāṣil “withdrew” from the circle gathered around Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and walked away, taking some new followers with him—they were the Mu‘tazilites, meaning “the ones who withdrew.” An unkind observer might think that Wāṣil’s “intermediate position” looks less like a solution and more like dodging a politically and theologically fraught issue. That is typical of *kalām*. Theologians frequently offered positions that seem designed mostly to defuse intractable debate. In this respect, *kalām* could be compared to late ancient debates over the Trinity, where verbal compromises were put forward in an attempt to satisfy rival groups who would never really agree. But also as in late antiquity, many theologians persisted in wanting a rigorous and detailed, and indeed philosophical, account of the matters at hand.

We should not allow this story, with its pleasingly vivid etymology of the term “Mu‘tazilite,” to mislead us into thinking that the Mu‘tazilite movement had a history like that of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, with a founder laying down a set of doctrines that subsequent members took pride in following. Indeed, even calling these early theologians “Mu‘tazilites” is to some extent anachronistic, a habit borrowed from later authors who wanted neat classifications of theological groups. Eventually, the Mu‘tazilites did cohere into two stable groups, associated with the cities of Baghdad and Basra. The two groups agreed about the main principles of Mu‘tazilite *kalām*, including the points just sketched—a denial of real and separate divine attributes, an insistence on human freedom, and an analysis of created things as atoms that bear properties. But there were points of dispute too, and there had been even more disagreement among earlier so-called Mu‘tazilites. To reconstruct those early views we unfortunately have to depend on later accounts, often written by hostile theologians. (Our knowledge of early *kalām* is, in this respect, not unlike our knowledge of the Pre-Socratics or early Stoics.) For a really complete overview of Mu‘tazilite doctrine we need to wait for the enormous and aptly named *Sufficing Work*, or *Mughnī*, of the Basran theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār, who lived around the turn of the first millennium (935–1025).⁴

The lack of unanimity among early theologians of a “Mu‘tazilite” persuasion is well illustrated by an eighth-century theologian named Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 745/6).⁵

Jahm put forward a view on divine attributes like the one I just described, which led some later authors to see him as linked to Mu‘tazilism. But if card-carrying Mu‘tazilites might have liked his stance on attributes, they would have been appalled by his remarks on freedom, which look straightforwardly determinist. Jahm remarked that belief in God is bestowed by the choice of God, not of the believer himself. Without pushing the point too far, it might be helpful to think of the standard Mu‘tazilite view as being akin to that of the Pelagians. They were late ancient Christians who insisted that humans must have it within their power to be righteous or to sin, since otherwise God could not punish sinners with justice. Jahm’s view was more like that of Augustine, in maintaining that God alone could bestow the gift of faith.⁶

Mu‘tazilite discussions of this issue attained a remarkable level of sophistication, which would not embarrass a modern-day metaphysician working on the free-will problem (not that modern-day metaphysicians are easily embarrassed). Consider the aforementioned Basran Mu‘tazilite, ‘Abd al-Jabbār. He identified a problem that is familiar in the free-will debate nowadays, when he worried that our choices might be determined by our own motivations.⁷ Suppose I see an almond croissant and stuff it eagerly into my mouth. It seems to be my powerful desire for the croissant that causes me to perform this action. Where then is free will? Whether my action is caused by my desire, or by God, there was no possibility that I would do anything different; and if my action is inevitable, how can it be freely chosen? ‘Abd al-Jabbār solves the puzzle by saying that even if some motivations compel us to act, not all motivations are like this. We can see this from the fact that people sometimes reflect on their already existing desires—perhaps with the help of external advice—and form a view as to whether those motivations are appropriate ones. In such a case, what began as a weaker motivation (such as the desire to lose weight) might wind up trumping an originally stronger motivation (like the desire to eat delicious pastries). Motivations, then, are causally relevant to action, but not irresistible causes. So there remains space for free will.

Similar ingenuity was applied in the other areas of Mu‘tazilite theory. An impressive early example is Abū l-Hudhayl (d. 849). To draw another analogy to late antiquity, he might be seen as the Chrysippus of Mu‘tazilism. Chrysippus was not the founder of Stoicism, but an early member of the school who systematized the teachings of the movement.⁸ Abū l-Hudhayl played something of the same role for the Mu‘tazilites. One of his teachings concerned the much-debated issue of divine attributes.⁹ On the one hand, for the reasons already mentioned, he wanted to deny that the attributes have real and distinct existence. On the other hand, the Koran itself describes God as “knowing,” “powerful,” “merciful,” and so on. How can such

statements be true, if there is no such thing as divine knowledge, power, or mercy? Abū l-Hudhayl's suggested solution was that God is, as Abū l-Hudhayl put it, "knowing with a knowledge that is nothing other than God." This yields the desired result that God is really knowing, even though His knowledge has no independent reality: for He simply is knowledge. Of course, the same analysis can be applied to other attributes.

But that leads to a further problem: if God is identical to both His knowledge and His mercy, for instance, then won't His knowledge be the same thing as His mercy? That doesn't sound right. Here Abū l-Hudhayl remarked that the attributes are neither the same as nor distinct from one another. Again, this at first looks uncomfortably like someone playing with words. But it is a more sophisticated solution than it seems. Abū l-Hudhayl meant that it is only in relation to the things God creates that His knowledge becomes distinct from His mercy. He knows exactly how many hairs are on my head (not many), but this is not an object of His mercy (though perhaps of His pity). In itself, however, God's essence remains one. A related Mu'tazilite distinction contrasts the so-called "attributes of essence" to the "attributes of action," with the former describing the unity that is God Himself, and the latter relations that God bears to the things He creates.

When it came to the nature of those created things, we see a similar dynamic of innovation and disagreement among early Mu'tazilites. Like *mutakallimūn* of all persuasions, both during this period and later in the tradition, Mu'tazilites emphasized the radical dependence of such bodies on God. They even devised an argument for God's existence on the basis of their atomist physics. Since bodies cannot exist without possessing properties, and since the properties themselves come into and out of existence, bodies themselves must be created. And if the universe is made of created bodies, then the universe itself must have a Creator.¹⁰ Again, though, broad consensus masks extensive dispute concerning the details of the physical theory. There was disagreement, for instance, about how many atoms were the minimum needed to make up a discrete body. (Abū l-Hudhayl, like an expert cricket batsman, went for six.) A particularly radical version of *kalām* physics was put forward by al-Nazzām (d. 845/6), who was the nephew of Abū l-Hudhayl and one of the most innovative of the ninth-century Mu'tazilites. Al-Nazzām questioned the rigorous distinction between bodies and properties, using the word "body" to describe even things like colors, tastes, hardness, coldness, and so on. What we naively consider as bodily substances are nothing but interpenetrating properties. Some of these properties remain "latent" until they are caused by God to become "manifest." When, say, wood lights on fire its latent heat and brightness suddenly manifest themselves.

Not content with this rather daring theory, al-Nazzām went on to deny the underlying atomic theory embraced by other Mu'tazilites, asserting instead that bodies are infinitely divisible. This left him with a problem that had already bedeviled anti-atomist philosophers in antiquity, familiar from the paradoxes of motion proposed by Zeno. If bodies and spatial intervals are infinitely divisible, then won't motion be impossible? After all, any given body will have to pass through an infinite number of points to complete even the smallest motion, but nothing can finish an infinite series of tasks. Al-Nazzām avoids the difficulty by proposing that bodies do not glide continuously over all points in an interval. Rather, they "leap" from one position to another. Thus the physical world around us is like a motion picture, with seemingly continuous motion in fact emerging from a more fundamental reality of discontinuous bodily arrangements.

Of course, with these examples of early philosophical *kalām* I am, like one of al-Nazzām's bodies, skipping over a lot. But I hope I've managed to persuade you that Mu'tazilism offers plenty of material for the historian of philosophy. As I've said, figures like Abū l-Hudhayl and al-Nazzām did not engage carefully with the legacy of Greek philosophy, though some have suggested possible Hellenic sources, such as the Stoics. Their project was more akin to that of the more rationalist Church Fathers, like Origen or Augustine in some of his moods: they believed in order to understand, placing their trust in God's gift of reason. Here too, some scholars have claimed to find more than a parallel, and pointed to the possibility of real historical influence of Christian theology on early Islamic *kalām*. This is not impossible. Greek ideas, including those of the Fathers, were kept alive in places like Syria in the seventh and eighth centuries. Indeed, it can be hard *not* to think of ancient thought when reading about early Mu'tazilism; Abū l-Hudhayl's move of identifying God with His attributes is very like what we can find in Boethius.

Still, it would be a mistake to reduce Mu'tazilism to a mere echo of Christian theology or Greek philosophy. In fact, the direction of influence is at least as much the other way. Mu'tazilites and other *mutakallimūn* had a great impact on the way that Greek ideas were used and understood by more explicitly philosophical authors in the Islamic world, like al-Kindī and Avicenna. Of course, for that to happen the Greek texts first needed to be translated into Arabic. This too took place in the same period that saw the high point of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, and the first flowering of *kalām* and of *ḥadīth* scholarship. It happened, in part, thanks to our new friend al-Ma'mūn. Legend relates that he once had a dream in which he was visited by Aristotle. The legend goes on to say that, once his alarm clock went off, al-Ma'mūn decided to sponsor a massive translation movement. He would make Aristotle and

the rest of Hellenic philosophy and science accessible to Islamic civilization. This story doesn't have much historical credibility, sadly, and not just because I added the bit about the alarm clock. But it is true enough that al-Ma'mūn and his fellow 'Abbāsīd caliphs supported translations from Greek, even as they were imposing the Mu'tazilite-inspired *miḥna* on their subjects.

FOUNDED IN TRANSLATION FROM GREEK TO SYRIAC TO ARABIC

One of the remarkable things about Germany, where I live, is that so much of what they see on TV and in cinemas was originally in English. American sitcoms and crime serials, romcoms and action blockbusters, are put before the public, with the significant difference that it is all dubbed into German. They even use the same German actors to dub characters played by the original, English-speaking characters—so that stars like Will Smith or Meryl Streep always sound the same in every movie. Of course, German is a rather different language than English, and the translators of these movies and TV shows occasionally have to make difficult choices. Like French, Spanish, and Italian, it distinguishes between a formal and informal version of “you.” Thus, every time anyone in an original version addresses anyone else, the translators must decide what sort of relationship is in play—and render the scene accordingly, with an informal *du* or formal *Sie*.

As the Germans would say, “das ist doch nichts Neues.” More than a millennium ago, another civilization did their level best to import the entire output of another culture—and did a fair bit of interpretation in the process. I refer to the Greek–Arabic translation movement. It began in the late eighth century AD, at the behest of the wealthy and influential elite of the ‘Abbāsīd era. When the second ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr founded his new capital at Baghdad, he made it a round city, perhaps inspired by the geometry of Euclid. The translation movement is more often associated with the later caliph al-Ma’mūn, who had the dream in which he met Aristotle. But that’s more a reflection of the success of propaganda put out by admirers of al-Ma’mūn than of historical reality. Indeed, the dream is itself a carefully constructed bit of propaganda, and not one intended to justify the translation movement.¹ We know that translations in fact began already under al-Manṣūr, who reigned from the 750s to the 770s. The later al-Ma’mūn is also given credit for the famous Baghdad institution known as the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, or “House of Wisdom.” Sometimes rather inflated claims are made about the *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, even

that it was like a research university. Actually, though some research did go on there, like astronomical observations, it seems to have been mostly a library, staffed more by copyists and bookbinders than chemists and biologists.

But never underestimate the power of libraries, copyists, and bookbinders. By the end of the translation movement, in the tenth century, an astonishing range of Greek scientific and philosophical texts had been rendered into Arabic. Their influence would last far beyond the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate. The translations included works on mathematics by authors like Euclid and Ptolemy, medical writings by Galen and other Greek authorities, and pretty much the same range of works by Aristotle that we can read today. Without al-Manṣūr, his successor caliphs, and other rich patrons of the ‘Abbāsīd age, there would have been no tradition of Hellenizing thought in the Islamic world. The very word for philosophy in Arabic is telling: it is *falsafa*, which is simply a loan word from the Greek *philosophia*. While we’re on the subject of etymology, I’ll mention that the translation movement has left its traces even in modern English. Our word “alchemy” comes ultimately from the Greek *chēmeia*, and the *al-* at the beginning is simply the Arabic definite article.

So why did they do it? The answer is complex and much debated, but let’s start with a few basic and uncontroversial points. First, it was not a mere whim or the casual fancy of idiosyncratic caliphs. The translators were handsomely paid for their services, and the process stretched over more than a century, representing a sustained effort sponsored at the highest levels. This was, quite literally, a major investment in the value of Hellenic culture. Second, the translations were to some extent motivated by common-sense usefulness. We don’t need to invoke some kind of ideology to explain why people might want to be able to read the great works in such practical disciplines as medicine, geography, and engineering. Just as useful, if not more, was the tradition of Greek astrology and its sister science astronomy—the two were both called by the same Arabic phrase, *‘ilm al-nujūm*, “the science of the stars.” As in antiquity, astrology was desired for use in imperial propaganda, and of course to predict the future—which would be pretty useful if it could actually be done.

But that doesn’t explain why the ‘Abbāsīds would have wanted an Arabic version of, say, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Some Aristotle may have been translated early on for pragmatic reasons, since his logical works provided weapons to be deployed in disputation over the relative merits of the Muslim and Christian faiths. (This might explain why the now-obscure *Topics*, Aristotle’s study of dialectic, was one of the first texts translated into Arabic.²) Cultural one-upmanship may also have played a part. The new Islamic empire had a large, and hostile, neighbor in the shape of the Byzantine empire. What better way to demonstrate superiority than to translate

works of Greek science, and show a better understanding of them than the Greeks themselves? Efforts were also made to provide a lineage for Hellenic culture that traced the wisdom of Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras, and so on back to a much earlier time. Much as Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria had done, the ‘Abbāsids were claiming not to take wisdom from the Greeks, but to take it *back* from the Greeks.

If it’s true that the translation movement was in part inspired by cultural rivalry with the Christian Byzantines, then there is an irony here worth savoring: the movement depended extensively on the involvement of Christians. If you had already heard of the translation movement before reading this chapter, you may have had the following idea about it. With the collapse of the Roman empire in late antiquity, Greek philosophy and science fell into disuse. Several centuries passed in which the Hellenic heritage was effectively ignored. Finally, Muslims got hold of precious texts, blew the dust off, and started a cultural renaissance that could rival the goings-on in Europe in the fifteenth century. What this story leaves out is the crucial role of Christian intermediaries, who most often came from Syria. They wrote in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic and thus, like Hebrew and Arabic, a member of the Semitic language group. As in much of the Eastern Roman empire, Greek also remained a commonly used language in Syria. Thus this region boasted bilingual scholars who produced Syriac translations and commentaries on Greek philosophical literature.

A model for their work was provided by the fifth- and sixth-century school of Neoplatonic commentators in Alexandria, and its leader Ammonius. At the same time, philosophy was already being done in Syriac, notably by Ammonius’ contemporary Sergius of Resh‘aynā. Like his colleagues in Alexandria, Sergius concentrated on logic, with forays into physics and metaphysics. For instance, he produced a Syriac paraphrase of a work on cosmology by the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias.³ It’s worth noting that Sergius didn’t yet translate Aristotle—instead, he wrote in Syriac about the meaning of Aristotle’s works, which he assumed would still be read in Greek. But already in the sixth century, other translators were producing versions of works from Aristotle’s logic. And as the generations progressed, knowledge of Greek decreased and Syriac translations became increasingly necessary. Scholars connected with the monastery of Qeneshre in the seventh and eighth centuries continued the process of putting Aristotle’s logical writings into Syriac. These scholars bridge the time between the school of Alexandria and the Arabic translation movement. As a result, the transmission of Hellenic ideas to the Islamic world occurred just in the way this book series would want: without any gap.

Of course, these Christians were not motivated by a desire to prepare the way for a future philosophical tradition in Arabic. So we can ask, as we just did about the ‘Abbāsid translation movement: why did they do it? It’s commonly assumed that their interest in logic must have been for the sake of theological dispute. That may have been one motive for the later Arabic translations, as already mentioned. But there’s little evidence that it spurred on our Syriac authors. Rather, it seems likely that they concentrated on logic for the same reason the pagan Neoplatonists did: they thought it was the first thing you needed to learn in order to become a philosopher. But there was at least one difference between their approach and that of pagan thinkers like Proclus and Ammonius. For these Christians, philosophy would culminate not with Plato, but with the Pseudo-Dionysius. His *Divine Names*, a meditation on the possibility and ultimate impossibility of describing God, was translated into Syriac in this period. Another influence was the philosophical asceticism of late antique Christian authors like Evagrius, whose writings were likewise translated. Though our textual evidence for this Syriac interlude in the history of philosophy is not as rich as we would like, enough survives to show that these were men with a systematic plan for doing Christian philosophy.⁴

The continuing significance of Syrians and Syriac in the translation movement is clear from the personnel of the two most important groups of translators into Arabic, both of which were active in the ninth century. One was gathered around a Christian of Syrian extraction who lived in Iraq: Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq. He specialized in the works of the Greek medical authority Galen. We have a fascinating report from Ḥunayn’s own pen which tells us what he translated, and recounts his efforts to track down manuscripts of Galen and his strategies for producing the best possible versions of the works he could find. Ḥunayn occasionally translated from Greek into Arabic, but mostly from Greek into Syriac. If an Arabic version was needed, this would typically be provided by another member of the circle. Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s son, the confusingly named Ishāq ibn Ḥunayn, produced a number of highly skillful Arabic versions of Aristotle and other philosophical texts. When philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes read Aristotle, it was never in Greek—a language of which they were ignorant. They were in the hands of the translators, and if the translator was Ishāq those were good hands to be in.

Less widely admired, even in the medieval Arabic tradition itself, were the Arabic versions of Greek texts executed by a group we call the “Kindī circle.” Their name comes from their leader al-Kindī, who is usually recognized as the first philosopher to write in Arabic. He was a Muslim, but he collaborated with Christians of Syrian background, like the members of the Ḥunayn translation circle. These Christians could offer expertise in the relevant language, and also the intellectual background

needed to understand what was going on in a work like Aristotle's *Categories* or *On the Soul*. Nonetheless, the translations of the Kindī circle were frequently criticized as being overly literal. A faithful, word-by-word translation might be a useful crutch if you're trying to decipher a difficult Greek text. But if you don't know any Greek or the Greek version is not available, such a translation is decidedly unhelpful.

A good example is the Kindī circle version of the *Metaphysics*. Admittedly, that's not the easiest work to understand, in any language. But this version of the *Metaphysics* is at times almost incomprehensible. I add the word "almost" only because I have read Averroes' commentary on it. For some parts of the *Metaphysics*, Averroes was dependent solely on the Kindī circle translation. His deep understanding of Aristotle allowed him to make plausible sense of passages that you'd think would seem total gibberish to anyone who is not in a position to compare them with the original Greek. By the way, that version of the *Metaphysics* supplies us with a nice example of how translation could affect philosophical interpretation. One of the most important technical terms used by Aristotle is *eidos*: we would translate it either as "species" or as "form," depending on context. Likewise, Arabic translators had to use two different words to render *eidos*—either *nawʿ*, corresponding to "species," or *ṣūra*, the Arabic for "form"—the way a German translator needs to decide between formal *Sie* and informal *du* every time someone says "you" in an American movie. Thus the translators of the *Metaphysics* effectively decided for future readers what Aristotle had in mind every time he used the word *eidos*—"form" or "species"—without the readers even knowing that any decision had been taken.

Though the standard complaint about the Kindī circle was that their style was overly literal, some of their translations went the other way and took startling liberties with their source texts. The most famous example is their version of the works of Plotinus. The works of Plato were not well known in Arabic, and to some extent the Arabic Plotinus filled the gap left by their absence.⁵ It was apparently part of a collection of Hellenic works on the soul and other topics of advanced philosophy—what the scholar Fritz Zimmermann called al-Kindī's "metaphysics file."⁶ Other items in the collection included selections from Alexander of Aphrodisias, and an Arabic version of Proclus' overview of Neoplatonism, the *Elements of Theology*. Through a process of edition and reworking that scholars are still trying to piece together, some of the Proclus materials were presented as a newly organized text called the *Book of the Pure Good*. Later, it would be translated again into Latin, and called the *Book of Causes* (*Liber de Causis*). In this guise, it would become one of the most influential sources of Neoplatonic ideas in Latin medieval philosophy.

The story of the *Book of Causes* teaches us an important lesson, which is that if you want to make a text influential in medieval Latin philosophy, it's a good idea to say that it was written by Aristotle. (Unfortunately, that advice probably comes too late to help you now.) It may, though, have been only an accident of mislabeling that led to some of the contents of al-Kindī's metaphysics file being falsely ascribed to Aristotle. The Arabic version of Plotinus begins with a prologue, which explains that what we are about to read provides a capstone to Aristotle's philosophy. Perhaps this confused a later scribe into thinking that the text before him was actually *by* Aristotle. But whatever the reason, parts of both the Arabic Proclus and the Arabic Plotinus were presented as Aristotelian works. A selection of materials from the Arabic Plotinus was even called the *Theology of Aristotle*—"Theology" because it dealt with higher divine causes like the soul, intellect, and first cause. Other chunks of Plotinus in Arabic have survived, but without the aura of Aristotle's name. Some are simply ascribed to a "Greek sage," which, I've just realized, sounds like something you'd find on a spice rack. But the *Theology* was the most widely read bit of the metaphysics file, still being made the subject of interpretation and commentary as late as the Safavid period (Chapter 53).

As I say, the *Theology of Aristotle* is not a particularly faithful version of Plotinus.⁷ I don't mean that, as in a German version of an English-language comedy, so much is lost in translation that the exercise becomes pointless. Rather, original phrases and whole paragraphs of interpretive material were deliberately inserted into this version, the equivalent of filming new scenes in German and splicing them into the original movie. The changes made in the Arabic Plotinus are anything but philosophically innocent. Consider its version of a passage in which Plotinus discussed Aristotle's theory of soul. Aristotle had defined the human soul as the actuality or perfection of a living body. Plotinus disagreed, if only because this would mean that the soul must go out of existence when the body dies. So he mounted a series of criticisms against Aristotle's definition. In the Arabic version, Aristotle is carefully protected from Plotinus' refutation, by the very way that this refutation is translated. When Aristotle's characterization of soul as the body's perfection is first mentioned, the Plotinus who has been dubbed into Arabic says that this is the view of the "most excellent philosophers." The translation goes on to reframe Plotinus' criticism as a warning against a possible *misunderstanding* of Aristotle. His definition could be taken to indicate a strong dependence of soul on body, because a perfection needs the thing that it perfects. But it should instead be understood to mean that the soul is the source of the body's perfection, a source that transcends the body. Thus Aristotle's definition is not just quietly defended from Plotinus, but even assimilated to Plotinus' own theory of soul.⁸

Another example comes from the other end of Plotinus' system: the first cause, or One. Plotinus offers a strenuously negative treatment of this principle. His advice for understanding the One is to "take away everything,"⁹ and with a few exceptions he consistently presents the One as beyond anything we can say or think. The Arabic Plotinus makes several changes here. The most obvious is that it refers to the One as "the Creator," so that Plotinus' philosophical theology is itself unified with that of the Abrahamic faiths. Furthermore, the first principle is described much more positively than in Plotinus. God is, in fact, presented more or less the way that Plotinus presented his second principle, namely *nous* or mind. The Creator is said, for example, to think all things, and is equated with being itself—whereas Plotinus had insisted, quoting Plato's *Republic*, that the One is "beyond being."¹⁰ Occasionally, Plotinus' remarks about the intellect are simply translated as descriptions about the One. Meanwhile, the translator borrows language from the contemporaneous theologians we looked at in the last chapter, the Mu'tazilites. For instance, it speaks of *ṣifāt*, divine attributes, using their *kalām* terminology.

It's not entirely clear what inspired these changes, or even who made them. One possibility is that they were introduced by al-Kindī himself, since the prologue to the *Theology* says that he "corrected" the text. Perhaps some of his corrections were philosophical ones. But I think the changes are partially or entirely the work of the translator himself, a Christian member of the Kindī circle named al-Ḥimṣī. Either way, the Arabic version takes liberties with its source, helping Plotinus speak to the theological and philosophical needs of a ninth-century readership. That intended readership included Aḥmad, the son of the 'Abbāsīd caliph al-Mu'taṣim—the prologue tells us that the Greek text was rendered into Arabic for him (it brings a whole new meaning to the phrase "render unto Caesar"). When you have friends in such high places, fidelity to a Greek philosophical source is probably not going to weigh as heavily on your mind as making the source seem interesting and useful for the intended reader. The customer is always right, especially when the customer's father controls one of the largest empires in the history of mankind.

PHILOSOPHER OF THE ARABS
AL-KINDĪ

This chapter is devoted to a man I've spent much of my adult life coming to know. He was a pioneer in his field, who drew inspiration from an earlier tradition but expressed that inspiration in a new medium. In so doing he created some of the earliest, and still classic, works of their kind. I refer of course to my favorite silent film star, Buster Keaton. No, just kidding! I'm actually talking about al-Kindī, one of the few historical figures who has occupied more of my attention than Keaton has over the last couple of decades. I've written a book about al-Kindī and, with my colleague Peter Pormann, translated all of his philosophical works into English.¹ In fact, maybe my enthusiasm for al-Kindī can be explained by his having a lot in common with Keaton. Apart from their names beginning with K, they were indeed both pioneers. Buster used ideas from his vaudeville youth in the new medium of silent film, while al-Kindī was the first to make explicit use of Greek philosophy while writing in Arabic. Whether al-Kindī walked the streets of Baghdad wearing a pork-pie hat, though, is more doubtful.

Al-Kindī could, of course, read the Greek philosophical works hot off the presses, so to speak, as they were translated into Arabic. A devout Muslim, he oversaw the work of a circle of Christian translators. It seems he did not himself read Greek, but he improved the translated texts—possibly just in terms of style, possibly also with respect to content—and may have played some role in choosing the works selected for translation. Certainly, he was an intermediary between the translators and the patrons whose wealth was making the whole thing possible. Al-Kindī's family background put him in touch with the higher echelons of the 'Abbāsīd society of ninth-century Iraq. His name "al-Kindī" indicates that he belonged to the Arab tribe of the Kinda, which had been very powerful in earlier times, including the period before the coming of Islam. Our al-Kindī was, we are told, a direct descendant of their kings, one of whom had been a Companion of the Prophet. Al-Kindī's own father was emir of the city of Kufa. To emphasize his noble lineage, al-Kindī was honored in the later tradition with the epithet "philosopher of the Arabs." The

honorific also alludes to the fact that he was unusual among philosophers in claiming descent from an Arab tribe.

On the strength of this privileged background, al-Kindī ascended about as high as a philosopher could at this time, becoming attached to the court of at least one caliph, al-Muʿtaṣim. He was tutor to this caliph's son Aḥmad, and dedicated several works to him. Al-Kindī's masterpiece, *On First Philosophy*, was addressed to the caliph himself—even though al-Muʿtaṣim was more the type to crack together the skulls of enemies like the Byzantines than to crack his own skull against the formidable ramparts of Aristotelian metaphysics. In *On First Philosophy* and other works, al-Kindī was doing not just philosophy, but also public relations. He was explaining in detail why the newly translated texts emanating from his circle were valuable for a Muslim readership, especially the wealthy elite who sponsored the translations. In *On First Philosophy* al-Kindī responds stridently to certain unnamed critics, religious scholars who protested against the use of Hellenic philosophical materials (§III.1–2). These opponents may have thought that the revelation of the Koran made such materials superfluous, at best. Al-Kindī responds that the truth is valuable, wherever we find it. He puts that sentiment into practice in his philosophical writings, showing that Greek ideas can provide support and explication for Muslim beliefs, ranging from the oneness of God to the immortality of the soul.

The title *On First Philosophy* indicates that al-Kindī is here giving us his version of the highest philosophical science covered in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. But whereas that work deals with a variety of topics that have to do with principles, from principles of reasoning to the nature of substance, al-Kindī seems to understand metaphysics rather narrowly as philosophical theology.² For him, first philosophy should study the first cause, which is of course God. Thus one of the main topics of the work is what we can say about God—or rather, what we can't say. The other main topic is the eternity of the universe. Why is this on the agenda? One might expect his reason to be that if the universe is not eternal, it must have been created, which proves that there is in fact a Creator God. But if this is what al-Kindī is thinking, he keeps that to himself. Instead, the point would seem to be that if God alone is eternal, then His eternity distinguishes Him from everything He creates. If we consider again the motives of the Muʿtazilites in denying the eternity of the Koran, we may be struck by a parallel. They too wanted to say that nothing is eternal other than God, not even God's own word. This might help account for al-Kindī's interest in the eternity question.

But when al-Kindī comes to give arguments against the eternity of the universe, he does not draw on contemporary theologians. His main source is instead the late ancient Christian philosopher John Philoponus.³ Philoponus wrote works against the eternity of the universe, aiming refutations at both Aristotle and Proclus.

Al-Kindī borrows from Philoponus extensively in *On First Philosophy*, but avoids mentioning that Aristotle was one of Philoponus' targets. (What with all this reticence, maybe the comparison to silent film stars isn't so far-fetched.) Of course, as a public-relations man for Hellenic thought, it would hardly do for al-Kindī to criticize the great Aristotle. Indeed, he seems to be trying to agree with Aristotle as far as he can. He provides a meticulous proof that no body, including the body of the universe, can be infinitely large (§VI.1–5). He then asserts, with less argument than we might ideally have liked, that any feature of a finite body must itself be finite. Since time measures motion, as Aristotle said, and since motion applies to body, neither motion nor time can ever be infinite (§VI.6).

Aristotle would agree with almost all of this, up until the last step. He would want to distinguish between the kind of infinity at stake in an unending body—where the infinite is actually present in its entirety—and the kind of infinity involved in unending time. The second kind of infinity is not actual, but potential. It is like the infinity of numbers: just as you can count as high as you want without ever reaching an actually infinite number, so you can count backwards how many years have already elapsed, without reaching a time when the universe began. By simply assuming that eternal time is on a par with infinite size, al-Kindī misses the whole point of the Aristotelian distinction between actual and potential infinity. Somewhat more convincing is another consideration that al-Kindī takes from Philoponus. If the universe has already existed eternally, then an infinite time must *already* have elapsed in order to reach the present moment. But an infinite time cannot finish elapsing. This proves that the past is not eternal (§VIII.1–2).

Despite the central role played by Philoponus in this discussion, al-Kindī continues his selective silence by saying nothing about the biggest point of contention between Philoponus and Aristotle: the nature of the celestial sphere. Aristotle had argued that the heavenly bodies are made out of a so-called “fifth element” which, unlike air, earth, fire, and water, can be neither generated nor destroyed. Philoponus spent most of his refutation of Aristotle arguing against this conception of the heavenly bodies. Al-Kindī, by contrast, wrote a little treatise *defending* Aristotle's conception of the heavens as being made from a unique, indestructible material. This at first seems inexplicable, until we get to a little caveat towards the end of that treatise. The heavenly spheres are indestructible, al-Kindī says, so they will exist forever...for as long as God wants them to (*On the Nature of the Celestial Sphere* §13). He's changed the rules, by implying that even a body whose nature is not subject to destruction will vanish if God stops making it exist. Perhaps this is why al-Kindī thinks the universe's eternity is a matter for metaphysical theology, and not physics. It is not the nature of the universe that determines how long it exists, but the will of God.

When it comes to the question of how that divine will is exercised, al-Kindī again thinks he can mostly agree with Aristotle. Drawing on works by Aristotle's most faithful ancient commentator, Alexander of Aphrodisias, al-Kindī says in several treatises that the heavens serve as an instrument of divine providence. They move at God's command, and their motions stir up the four elements in our realm—good old air, earth, fire, and water—so that they come together to form more complex bodies like rocks, plants, and giraffes. This means that al-Kindī's God is a rather stand-offish chap. He does not directly cause things to happen down here among us, but works indirectly through the heavens, which al-Kindī calls the "proximate" cause of such things. That may seem like a high price to pay for fidelity to Aristotle. Theologians like the Mu'tazilites conceived God as a much more "hands on" deity, seeing Him as the direct cause for all created things and events in our world, except perhaps freely willed human actions. But al-Kindī had an ulterior motive to say that the heavens are an instrument of providence. He was a staunch believer in astrology, and thought that observing heavenly motions would allow us to predict specific events in our lower world. Like Ptolemy before him, al-Kindī thus managed to get astrology and Aristotelianism into a single theory, along with an emphatic endorsement of divine providence.⁴

It's looking as though al-Kindī has a lot to say about God. But if we take a closer look, this has all concerned God's effects in our world. We have learned that they are providentially ordered through divinely commanded heavenly motion. But we haven't learned much regarding God Himself, and we aren't going to. Indeed, a Keaton-esque silence is forced upon us, once we take seriously al-Kindī's portrayal of God as what he calls a "true One." This theme takes up the rest of *On First Philosophy*. Al-Kindī offers us a proof that there must be such a true One, on the basis that all the things we see in our world are characterized by both unity and multiplicity. A single body will have multiple parts. A single species, like humanity, will have many particular instances, like Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd. The single genus of animals to which human beings belong will contain other species, like goat, horse, and giraffe. In general, al-Kindī insists that anything we can conceive as a unity will also involve some kind of many-ness.

Al-Kindī knew his Neoplatonism. After all, the works of Plotinus and Proclus were translated in his circle. So he has no hesitation in drawing the same conclusion they did, namely that there must be a principle of unity, which bestows oneness on all these things that are both one and many (§XVI). This will be the "true One," which al-Kindī wants to identify with God. Although the Greek sources of the doctrine are clear, what al-Kindī is doing here also resonates with Islam, and with the ideas of those Mu'tazilite theologians I keep mentioning.⁵ We've seen how much