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PHILOSOPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 2
Reason and revelation

The three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, agree in recognizing a single God who is the source for the existence of all other things, and who has revealed His will to us through a line of prophets. But how should we understand God as a being transcendent beyond all others? What is the nature of the causality He exercised in creating the universe? How does the knowledge granted to the prophet relate to the sort of knowledge available to other humans? If the prophet is also the leader of a community, how does his religious authority relate to his political authority? These questions will all be examined later in this book. First, we're going to look at a more basic issue: how should we go about answering them?

It is easy to assume that intellectuals of all three faiths faced a simple choice. They could either use unaided human reason, or they could turn to revelation, as found in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. This is a natural assumption for us to make, since we are nowadays quick to see an antithesis between science and religion, between reason and faith. Also, we might also expect the situation in the Islamic world to mirror the situation in Latin Christendom. Medieval Christian thinkers like Aquinas clearly distinguished between theology, which draws on revelation, and philosophy, which uses only the natural light of reason. Something like this distinction was embodied in the very structure of Latin medieval education, with the 'arts' faculty being distinct from the theology faculty in the newly risen universities.

But we should try to free ourselves of these assumptions in approaching the Islamic world. It is unhelpful to see the rivalry, and ultimate reconciliation, between kalam and falsafah as a confrontation between 'faith' and 'reason'. Rather, there was a struggle within kalam itself between more and less rationalist approaches to understanding the revelation brought by Muhammad. Nor should critics of philosophy be indiscriminately tarred with the brush of 'anti-rationalism'. Al-Ghazali criticized Avicenna not for doing philosophy, but for making mistakes in his philosophy (reckless precipitance of the philosophers) would be a more literal translation of the title of his Ta'htif al-Falasifa than 'incoherence of the philosophers'. Ibn Taymiyya insisted that reason (qiy) is in full agreement with the Qur'anic revelation, though his understanding of 'reason' was not the same as that of the philosophers. Other, more mystically inclined authors pointed to the limitations of reason. Yet they often granted, even emphasized, that rational argument was effective within its proper boundaries.

The standards of reasoning

Deciding what can, and cannot, be achieved using human reason presupposes an understanding of rationality itself. For authors drawing on the Greek tradition, such an understanding was readily available in the form of Aristotelian logic. Treatises from Aristotle's logical corpus, or Organon (see Box 5), were among the first Greek works translated into Arabic. They were immediately put to use, sometimes in surprising contexts. Al-Kindi, for instance, deployed ideas from Aristotle's Categories to prove the immateriality of the soul and to refute the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. (A couple of generations later, the Christian logician Yahya ibn 'Adi wrote a counter-refutation.) Adherents of falsafah
Box 6 The Organon

The ancients referred to a group of nine Aristotelian logical treatises as the Organon, or 'instrument', in keeping with their understanding of logic as the indispensable instrument for doing philosophy. The first text in the series was actually not by Aristotle: an Introduction (Eisogage) to logic by the late ancient Platonist Porphyry (d. c.305), a student of Plotinus. Students of philosophy would start with this, and then go through the following works of Aristotle: Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, Sophistical Refutations, Rhetoric, Poetics.

As a list of works on 'logic', this is rather surprising. Really only the Prior Analytics looks more or less like logic as we would imagine it, as Aristotle there set out the types of valid argument and how they relate to one another. (After Avicenna's pioneering work on logic, this also became the main focus of attention among logicians in the Islamic world.) Its sequel, the Posterior Analytics, is something more like a treatise on epistemology or philosophy of science. It delineates the requirements that have to be satisfied in order for us to take something as scientifically demonstrated. The Topics deals with dialectical debate, and was translated into Arabic very early, perhaps for use in religious disputation. As the title suggests, the Sophistical Refutations helps the reader to diagnose bad arguments. As for the Rhetoric and Poetics, they may seem to us to have nothing at all to do with logic. But great effort was made to fit them into a unified Organon, for instance by portraying poetic metaphors as implicit syllogisms.

were distinguished by nothing so much as their interest and expertise in logic.

The logical discipline was thus a tempting target for those who resented the spread of Greek ideas into Arabic-speaking culture.

We see this with the debate between the Christian philosopher Abū Bishr Matta and the grammarian al-Ṣarāfī. Our information about this event, which occurred in 937/8, is indirect and preserved by reporters sympathetic to al-Ṣarāfī. But it seems that the logician was indeed troubled by the grammarian. Abū Bishr apparently provoked the debate with the grand claims he made for logic. Quoting Greek commentators on Aristotle, he declared it the indispensable tool for 'knowing correct from faulty speech, and unsound from sound concept (ma'ān). This claim is likely to find our sympathy. How can we distinguish true from false without understanding the difference between valid and invalid arguments, which is surely the province of logic?

But Abū Bishr went further. He insisted that, whereas grammar operates with the linguistic 'expression' or 'utterance' (la'īf), logic's domain is the level of the mental concept (ma'ān) underlying the linguistic expression. Hence his Aristotelianism was showing. The idea that language expresses a mental concept can be found at the beginning of Aristotle's On Interpretation. There Aristotle adds that different people express the same 'affections of the soul' using different sounds—as when a German says 'Hund' where an English-speaker would say 'dog'. Logic, inferred Abū Bishr and other members of the Baghdad school, is a universal science that studies the standards of correct reasoning for all humankind. By contrast grammar is parochial, the study of correct expression within some given language. Against this, al-Ṣarāfī made the powerful point that an intimate knowledge of language is needed to avoid error when we are reasoning. One must be aware of the ambiguous meanings of terms and master grammatical constructions in order to phrase one's thoughts accurately.

Tellingly, he also challenged Abū Bishr to use 'his logic' to solve a hypothetical legal issue about land ownership. This would not be the last time that the reasoning involved in jurisprudence (fiqh) would appear as a rival to the theory of reasoning put forward by experts in logic. About four centuries later, Ibn Taymiyya wrote a
massive polemic with the self-explanatory title *Refutation of the Logicians*. Like al-Sirāfi, he pointed to the gulf between real-life reasoning and the idealized syllogisms studied in logic. For instance the number of premises required in a given argument depends, not on rules laid down by Aristotle, but on each person's background knowledge and assumptions. Ibn Taymiyya illustrated with a legal example: if a Muslim who knows that wine is intoxicating hears that the Prophet forbids drinking intoxicating beverages, he will thereby understand that he shouldn't drink wine. Someone who doesn't know that wine is intoxicating would have to add this as an additional premise. But even this premise would leave the argument ineffectual for non-Muslims.

More generally, Ibn Taymiyya argued that the sort of reasoning used in law is more feasible and effective than the sort fetishized by the philosophers. Aristotle and his followers had understood knowledge in the strict and proper sense (Greek *episteme*, Arabic *ilm*) as involving necessary and universal truth claims, in which one general term is predicated of another. So a standard scientific syllogism for the Aristotelians would be something like this:

- All giraffes are animals
- All animals have sensation
- Therefore all giraffes have sensation

The point of such a syllogism is to explain the universal truth that giraffes have sensation, by referring to the fact that they are animals. Against this, Ibn Taymiyya pointed out that our knowledge is always grounded in encounters with particular things, and that universal judgements are generalizations from such encounters. Isn't it as good or even better, then, to use judgements about particulars in our reasoning, as the jurist does? Besides which, as even the philosophers agreed, the best thing of all to know about is God, and He is not universal, but particular.

Some of the points Ibn Taymiyya made in his *Refutation* had already been made by authors with a friendlier attitude to philosophy and logic, like Suhrawardi and Fākhru al-Dīn al-Rāzī. They wanted to revise but not abandon logic as they found it in the Aristotelian *Organon* and, above all, in Avicenna. Avicenna himself had radically rethought Aristotelian logic, not least with new ideas about modality (that is, necessity, contingency, and impossibility). After him, logicians continued to notice and fill gaps in the system. They noticed, for instance, that many perfectly good inferences cannot be put into the form of an Aristotelian syllogism. One much-discussed example was the 'relational' syllogism, for example:

- The Eiffel Tower is bigger than the elephant
- The elephant is bigger than the mouse
- Therefore the Eiffel Tower is bigger than the mouse

Right down through the late Ottoman empire we find authors attempting to extend the resources of Aristotelian–Avicennan logic to deal with inferences like this (for another example of developments in logic, see Box 7).

**Box 7  The liar paradox**

The famous liar paradox, first discussed in antiquity, turns on self-referential assertions like 'this statement is false'. If that statement is false, then it is true; but if it is true, then it is false. In the Islamic world, this paradox already received attention from early *mutakallimān*. They posed the question whether someone who had never before told a lie, and then states, 'I am a liar', counts as a liar or not. Later on, in the post-Avicennan period, many philosopher-theologians offered analyses of the paradox. Some proposed that 'this statement is false' is actually neither true nor false. For instance al-Jūsṭ argued that the truth or falsehood of a sentence depends on whether what it says about something else (not itself) is accurate. Unfortunately this solution would make it
Box 7 Continued

impossible to make any true or false self-referential statements; yet it surely looks true to say, 'this statement is in English', and false to say, 'this statement is in German'. The liar paradox was further debated by the philosophers at Shiraz. One of them (the elder Dashtaki) suggested distinguishing between first- and second-order truth. Normally, he pointed out, one sentence can be about another sentence without causing any problems. If I say, 'what Mary says is false', then I have made a second-order statement, that is, a statement about a statement. In that case, what I say will be true just when what Mary says is false; this causes no difficulty. The problem is that in the liar case, the sentence is about its own truth or falsehood, so that we do have the possibility of inconsistency between the first- and second-order levels.

In the long run, and despite the complaints of critics like Ibn Taymiyya, logic became a standard part of the education of religious scholars across the Islamic world. Just like beginning philosophy students in late antique Alexandria, students at madrasas in early modern India, Persia, or Egypt would encounter logical textbooks early in their studies—not a work by Aristotle or the Introduction of Porphyry, but a post-Avicennan logical treatise like al-Kāṭibī's Risāla.

The supremacy of reason

The most confident, even aggressive stance taken in favour of philosophy in the Islamic world is to be found in al-Fārābī and in authors influenced by him, especially Averroes. Al-Fārābī begins from the idea that we want to achieve certainty. In a short treatise on this subject, he acknowledged that there may be different degrees of certainty. He might, for instance, count myself as having 'certainty' that Avicenna's real name was Ibn Sīnā because I read it in a book from a reputable publisher. But the highest degree of certainty, which al-Fārābī calls 'absolute certainty', cannot be acquired through this sort of second-hand information gathering. Nor can absolute certainty even be concerned with such things as Avicenna's real name. Absolute certainty is a feature of knowledge in the strict sense, or 'science' (ilm), which means being certain about universal and necessary truths.

How then to achieve certainty about such truths? Al-Fārābī's answer was burhān, or 'demonstration'. Burhān was also the name given to the Arabic version of the Posterior Analytics, in which Aristotle set down the requirement that scientific truths should be necessary and universal. In line with Aristotle's theory, al-Fārābī thought that demonstrations are syllogistic arguments that yield the appropriate, scientific sort of truths as conclusions. The syllogistic argument explains why the conclusion is true, as we saw with the giraffe example. But of course a syllogism is only as strong as its premises. Suppose, going back to that example, that I wonder why it is that all animals have sensation? This appeared as a premise in our argument, but it may itself have a further explanation—for instance that all animals need nourishment, and require sensation to locate that nourishment.

There is a threat of regress here. It would be troubling if every explanatory demonstration stood in need of further demonstrations to explain why its premises are true. To avoid this, Aristotle and his followers invoked first principles, truths which stand in no further need of explanation. These principles, which might be basic rules of reasoning like 'the whole is greater than the part' or general facts about the world gleaned from sensation, provide the foundations upon which Aristotelian science rests. Another member of the Baghdad school, Ibn Adi, used this idea to explain logic's role as an instrument for philosophy. The inference rules of Aristotle's syllogistic tell us how to combine first principles into valid arguments. These arguments securely establish further truths, which can then be further combined using the logical rules, to derive even more truths.
When it comes to human beliefs, first principles and demonstratively proven conclusions are the gold standard. But al-Farabi was prepared to hand out silver and bronze medals too. After all, as he himself admitted when he allowed for different degrees of certainty, not all true human beliefs reach the standard realized in demonstrative science. We routinely rely on testimony and on widely held beliefs, and accept arguments that we find merely persuasive rather than probative. Al-Farabi looked again to the Aristotelian Organon to understand these sorts of beliefs. When we argue on the basis of assumptions or commonly held opinions, we are engaging in ‘dialectic’, which is studied in the Topics. Merely persuasive arguments, meanwhile, are classified as ‘rhetorical’—no prizes will be awarded for guessing which Aristotelian work deals with these.

With these distinctions in hand, al-Farabi was ready to make a bold proposal about the relation between philosophy, theology, and religion. A prophet who brings revelation to his people would not get very far if he presented them with demonstrative syllogisms. So instead, he speaks to them with powerfully convincing images and symbols. In other words, the language of revelation is characteristically rhetorical. As for dialectical arguments, which simply presuppose premises rather than tracing them back to rock solid first principles, they are in al-Farabi’s eyes typical of kalām. This does not, of course, mean that the mutakallimān were always arguing for false conclusions. For instance al-Farabi would agree with the Mu‘tazilites that God exists, is one, is incorporeal, and is the first cause of all things. It’s just that the kalām arguments for these conclusions were not demonstrative.

These ideas were taken forward in Andalusia by Averroes, in his Kitāb al-maqāl, usually translated Decisive Treatise. Here Averroes wrote from the point of view of a jurist. (He came from a family of Mālikī legal scholars and was himself chief judge in Córdoba.) Islamic legal judgements often addressed the question of whether a given activity is required, encouraged, licit, discouraged, or forbidden. In the Decisive Treatise Averroes applied this sort of question to philosophy itself. On the basis of Qur’ānic injunctions like ‘take heed, you who have eyes’ (59:2), Averroes inferred that the revelation instructs believers to seek knowledge. And what is philosophy, if not the search for knowledge? Thus philosophy is not just licit or encouraged, but actually required for Muslims, albeit only for the few who have the talent and opportunity to travel the daunting path towards scientific understanding. Other Muslims must content themselves with true beliefs induced by persuasion. Averroes agreed with al-Farabi that this sort of belief is appropriate for the normal religious believer, and that kalām operates with dialectical arguments. Such argumentation could be dangerous. Averroes complained that the dialectical procedures of the theologians did not converge on agreement, leading to strife, and even violence, within the community.

Averroes was not saying that there are two different, even inconsistent, sets of beliefs, one for the philosophers and another for everyday believers. Rather, both groups have the same core of true beliefs. It’s just that the philosophers have certain knowledge attained through demonstration, whereas the rhetorical class of believers are persuaded of things they can’t prove, and grasp the truths symbolically. The normal believer may understand God to be powerful by picturing Him on a throne, whereas the philosopher can prove that He is the First Cause of the physical universe. This is another reason why it was unwise for the mutakallimān to debate the meaning of the revelation publicly. It could confuse the rhetorical class to hear the theologians arguing for God’s incorporeality. Exegesis of the Qur’ān should instead be left to the philosophers. They are the only readers who can be sure to interpret the revelation’s true meaning, since they can check their interpretations of scripture against what they already know to be true on independent grounds. They should, however, go about this quietly, being careful not to shake the convictions of other Muslims (for a related dispute within Judaism, see Box 8).
Box 8 Continued

His remarkable assault on Aristotelian physics was staged in order to show the unreliability of Maimonides' argument for God's existence. Not, of course, because Crescas denied the existence of God, but because he feared that Maimonides was placing the Law on shaky foundations. He also questioned Maimonides' idea that we are commanded to believe the principles. Belief doesn't respond to commands, but to good reasons for believing. Later, the Spanish exile Isaac Abravanel (d. 1508) denied that the Law has any genuine principles at all. Rather it must be accepted through faith (emunah) in its entirety. Nonetheless, Abravanel thought that Maimonides' axiomatic approach could be justified on pedagogical grounds. One might start instructing a believer with so-called 'principles' before moving on to more specific aspects of the law.

The limits of reason

A prime example of the sort of public disputation that bothered Averroes was al-Ghazâli's Incoherence of the Philosophers. Its project is basically a negative one. Al-Ghazâli sought not to offer an alternative set of theories but to show that Avicenna's theories are unproven. This was not because al-Ghazâli rejected the desirability of certainty. To the contrary, the quest for certainty is a leitmotif of his intellectual autobiography, the Deliverer from Error. It describes an epistemological crisis he experienced as a young man, born out of considering the way that sense perception can be corrected by the mind. For example, shadows cast by the sun look to be standing still, but we know that they are moving very slowly throughout the day. How can we rule out that the judgements of the mind are likewise subject to some higher court of epistemological authority? Even the apparently indubitable truths of mathematics and logic could fall prey to this sort of sceptical worry.
Al-Ghazālī was freed from the impasse only thanks to 'a light cast into his heart' by God. The experience taught him that human reason cannot provide the highest form of insight and certainty. That is rather the province of the mystic, whose direct connection to the divine trumps even the most certain demonstrative argumentation. On the other hand, human reason is reliable in its proper sphere. The problem is not using reason, but thinking that reason can do too much, for instance by claiming to discern rules that would govern even the actions of God, as the Mu'tazilites and Avicenna had dared to do. Averroes would later charge al-Ghazālī with being 'an Ash'arite with the Ash'arites, a philosopher with the philosophers, and a sufí with the sufis'. While it's true that kalām, philosophy, and sufism all played a role in his thought, this does not necessarily mean that he was inconsistent. His willingness to take over ideas from Avicenna was tempered by his Ash'arite commitment to the untrammeled freedom and transcendence of God, who is properly grasped only by the few who are granted mystical insight.

Another combination of philosophy and mysticism, though without the Ash'arism, can be found in Suhrawardi. Explaining the methodology of his new 'Illuminationist' approach to philosophy, he said that it travels not one but two paths. One is the method of discursive enquiry and argumentation, characteristic of the 'Peripatetics'. The other was the higher road of mystical intuition, enjoyed not only by the sufis of Islam, but also by the sages of Greece, Persia, and India. They were all granted a direct vision of God, the Light of lights, and on this basis (supposedly) agreed on a range of doctrines taken over by Suhrawardi. As we'll see later, he also proposed a novel epistemology that could help to explain such mystical insights.

Al-Ghazālī and Suhrawardi set the tone for developments in the later Islamic world. Al-Farābī and Averroes had claimed that certainty was the privilege of the philosopher alone, who achieves it through demonstrative arguments. Post-Avicennan theologians, including al-Ghazālī, agreed with them that certainty was an admirable goal. Whether that goal could be reached through nothing but human reasoning, though, was another matter. In the work of a theologian like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, we see the full flower of the dialectical method characteristic of kalām. He did follow earlier mutakallimūn in also recognizing a type of knowledge as 'necessary', meaning that we cannot help endorsing it. But when it came to more contentious and difficult points, his characteristic method was to consider all the positions that had been (or could be) adopted on a given philosophical issue. In the end, all but one position would be shown to be incoherent or implausible. Scrupulous in his methodology, al-Rāzī would not always assert the certain truth of the victorious position, the one that has survived the process of elimination. Instead it might be designated as 'most adequate (adhab)' among the options considered. When al-Rāzī concluded his arguments with the pious formula 'but God knows best', he meant it.

The later tradition of philosophical theology is a rebuke to the charge of methodological carelessness levelled at kalām by al-Farābī and Averroes. Al-Rāzī was as much a rationalist as the philosophers, but more modest when it came to the question of what reason can establish beyond all doubt. This was entirely in keeping with the tenets of Ash'arism, a tradition which would sometimes take refuge in the expression bi-lā kasyf, or 'without saying how'. For instance some Ash'arites would insist that God does have distinct attributes, but refuse to say how exactly we should understand these attributes and their relation to God's essence. Ash'arite kalām did not necessarily go hand in hand with mysticism—al-Rāzī was no sufī. But in al-Ghazālī and certain other, later thinkers the epistemic modesty of the mutakallimūn did serve the ends of mysticism, as for that matter did limits on philosophical demonstration recognized by the philosophers themselves. Both kalām and Avicennan philosophy admitted that God remains, at least to some extent, beyond the understanding of natural human reasoning. So there was plenty of room to say
that mystical insight must complement discursive rational argument.

The mystical tradition offered the prospect of going where reason could not. Sufi ascetic practices helped to direct the developing mystic's attention away from worldly things and towards the divine. Stories about the early Sufi Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya tell of her unconcern for the world around her and her yearning for God. She is said to have remarked, 'the love of God inhibits me from the love of His creatures.' The most famous Sufi of all, the Persian poet Rumi, famously used images of sex and drunkenness to convey the mystic's union with God. Ultimately, the Sufi's goal was to achieve not some sort of discursive account of God, but rather an obliteration or annihilation (fana) of the self, in which the mystic dissolves in God's being, like a drop of vinegar in an ocean of honey. Yet Rumi did not abandon reason entirely. He remarked that 'the leg of the reasoners is wooden' and hence unsteady, but he also retained a significant role for 'intellect (aqib), making it the capacity by which we grasp God.

The direct union with God achieved by the Sufis promised to remedy the deficiencies of the philosophers' reason. But talk of union was dangerous, too. At their most provocative, the Sufis could be taken to eliminate all distinction between God and what God has created—as when al-Hallaj notoriously remarked, 'I am the Truth.' Some, like Ibn Taymiyya, were quick to denounce this tendency among the more extreme Sufis. But the Sufis themselves were alive to the danger, and took pains to preserve God's transcendence despite recognizing His union with, or presence to, all other things. On this score, the greatest contribution was that made by Ibn 'Arabi, which was then systematized and fused with philosophical language by al-Qushayri and other members of the 'Akbari' school (an allusion to Ibn 'Arabi's epithet al-akbar, 'the greatest'). Ibn 'Arabi made much of the divine names found in the Qur'an, seeing them as the means by which God made Himself manifest to His creation. Had the names not been revealed to us, we could not speak of God at all. But the divine names are more than mere labels. They are the very relationships that God bears to created things, and ultimately identical with those things. The created universe is distinct from God, and characterized by multiplicity rather than God's total simplicity, in just the way that God's various names are distinct from Him and form a multiplicity, God in Himself, though, remains beyond all that He has made.

There is a strong parallel between these ideas and the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah, which is most likely no coincidence. Kabbalah emerged from the same cultural context that produced Ibn 'Arabi, and may have been influenced to some extent by Islamic mysticism. The sefirot of Kabbalistic theory play a role akin to the divine names in Ibn 'Arabi's thought, symbolically evoking the emanation of God's influence into the created world. Again, God Himself remains beyond our grasp. He is, as the Kabbalists of southern France put it, the ein sof or 'infinite.' This sefirotic theory looks to be a kind of theoretical account of God's relationship to the universe. But this was only one aspect of medieval Kabbalah. Again like Sufism, Jewish mysticism also had a practical dimension, with ritualistic and meditative practices designed to provoke the experience of union with the divine.

The mystics themselves noted that their enterprise transcended religious boundaries. We've already seen Sahrawardi claiming common cause with sages from multiple traditions, both within and outside Islam. Two thinkers of Islamic India, the Mughal prince Dārā Shikoh and Shah Wali Allāh, had a similarly ecumenical outlook. Particularly striking is Dārā Shikoh's treatise The Confluence of the Two Oceans. The title refers to the agreement between the traditions of Islam and classical India, as represented especially by the Upanishads (which Dārā translated himself). The Confluence lists correspondences between Sanskrit philosophical terminology and the technical terms of philosophical
sufism, and argues for the agreement of the two traditions on points such as the nature of the soul and bodily resurrection. Darā thus took very seriously an injunction he found in one Hindu sage, to the effect that the truth does not belong solely to any one religion.

Of course none of this deterred philosophical sufi's from a profound engagement with Islam and its key texts. Shah Wali Allāh's ecumenicism was tempered by his insistence that Islam is the most perfect manifestation of the truth shared by all religions. And if we consider another great philosopher of recent centuries who drew on sufiism, Mullā Sadra, we find a thinker whose thought and writing is steeped in the language of the Qur'anic revelation. Like several other Muslim philosophers (notably Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzi), Sadra wrote works of commentary on the Qur'ān and saw no tension between this activity and the pursuit of philosophy. Sadra wove concepts from the philosophical and sufi traditions into his exegesis. He echoed Ibn 'Arabi's idea that the divine names are manifestations of God and even applied this to the Qur'ān itself. The revelation is God's word, and thus contains within it all of creation (al-sūrat al-fātiha, the first or 'opening' chapter, in turn contains within it all that is expressed in the rest of the Qur'ān). Sadra's innovative metaphysics was ultimately an attempt to explain God's creation as an unfolding or manifestation of what, in God, is perfectly unified.

Chapter 3

God and being

'There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.' This is one version of the Muslim profession of faith, or shahāda, which one utters when converting to Islam. The first part of the shahāda, beautifully alliterative in Arabic (lā ilāha illā Allāh), sets out the fundamental Islamic belief in God's oneness, or tawḥīd. Muslims, like Jews and Christians, recognize no other divinities but the all-powerful Creator of the universe. This might seem to make pagan philosophy a poor match for the Abrahamic religions. After all, we associate ancient paganism with a pantheon of multiple gods. But the philosophical treatises that came into Arabic-speaking culture thanks to the 'Abbasid translation movement typically recognized a single first cause of all things, even if those treatises also spoke of other, inferior supernatural principles too. The fā'ilisīf accordingly had no hesitation in using Hellenic sources to argue for, and explicate, the doctrine of tawḥīd, taking them as a jumping-off point for their own original ideas.

God as the True One

The first fā'ilisīf to exploit the potential of the Greek–Arabic sources for this purpose was al-Kindī. In his On First Philosophy, he portrayed God as 'the True One', free of all multiplicity. As an interpretation of tawḥīd, this goes well beyond the mere assertion.