PETER ADAMSON

PHILOSOPHY IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

a history of philosophy without any gaps

volume 3

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
For Ursula
CONTENTS

Preface xi
Acknowledgements xiii
Dates xv
Maps xxii

Part I. The Formative Period

1. The Straight Path—Philosophy and Islam 3
2. All for One—the Mu’tazilites 10
3. Founded in Translation—From Greek to Syriac to Arabic 19
4. Philosopher of the Arabs—al-Kindī 26
5. The Chosen Ones—Philosophy and Judaism 33
6. Reasoned Belief—Saadia Gaon 41
7. High Five—al-Rāzī 48
8. Aristotelian Society—The Baghdad School 55
9. The Second Master—al-Fārābī 63
10. State of Mind—al-Fārābī on Religion and Politics 70
11. Eye of the Beholder—Theories of Vision 77
12. Strings Attached—Music and Philosophy 84
13. Balancing Acts—Arabic Ethical Literature 91
14. Undercover Brothers—Philosophy in the Būyid Age 98
15. God Willing—The Ash’arites 106
16. The Self-Made Man—Avicenna’s Life and Works 113
17. By the Time I Get to Phoenix—Avicenna on Existence 120
CONTENTS

18. By All Means Necessary—Avicenna on God 126
19. Into Thin Air—Avicenna on the Soul 133
20. Special Delivery—al-Ghazāli 140
21. Miracle Worker—al-Ghazāli against the Philosophers 147

Part II. Andalusia

22. Philosophy’s Reign in Spain—Andalusia 157
23. Laying Down the Law—Ibn Ḥazm and Islamic Legal Theory 163
24. Fantasy Island—Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭūfayl 171
25. Back to Basics—Averroes on Reason and Religion 179
27. A Matter of Taste—Ibn ʿArabī and Sufism 194
28. Team Spirit—Ibn Khaldūn 201
29. Matter over Mind—Ibn Gabirol 208
30. Choosing My Religion—Judah Halevi 215
31. Born Under a Bad Sign—Freedom and Astrology in Jewish Philosophy 222
32. With All Your Heart—Ethics and Judaism 229
33. The Great Eagle—Maimonides 236
34. He Moves in Mysterious Ways—Maimonides on Eternity 242
35. Burnt Offerings—The Maimonidean Controversy 249
36. Man and Superman—Gersonides and the Jewish Reception of Averroes 256
37. Neither the Time nor the Place—Ḥasdai Crescas 263
38. When Bad Things Happen to Good People—Suffering in Jewish Philosophy 271
39. Chariot of Fire—Kabbalah 278
CONTENTS

Part III. The Later Traditions

41. Golden Ages—The Later Traditions 295
42. All Things Considered—Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī 302
43. For the Sake of Argument—Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 309
44. Let There Be Light—Suhrawardī 316
45. Bright Ideas—Illuminationism 323
46. A Man for All Seasons—Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī 330
47. To Be or Not To Be—Debating Avicenna’s Metaphysics 337
48. Eyes Wide Shut—Rūmī and Philosophical Sufism 344
49. Proof Positive—The Logical Tradition 351
50. By the Book—Ibn Taymiyya 358
51. Aftermath—Philosophy and Science in the Mongol Age 365
52. Family Feud—Philosophy at Shīrāz 372
53. Follow the Leader—Philosophy under the Safavids 379
54. To Be, Continued—Mullā Ṣadrā on Existence 386
55. Return to Sender—Mullā Ṣadrā on Motion and Knowledge 393
56. Subcontinental Drift—Philosophy in Islamic India 400
57. Turkish Delights—Philosophy under the Ottomans 407
58. Blind Alley—Taqlīd, Sufism, and Philosophy 414
59. The Young Ones—Encounters with European Thought 421
60. The Stronger Sex—Women Scholars in the Islamic World 426
61. All for One and One for All—Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Iqbāl 434
62. Iran So Far—The Heirs of Mullā Ṣadrā 441

Notes 449
Further Reading 489
Index 503
India may not be the first nation to leap to mind when you think about the Islamic world. But in fact Islam is the second most common religion in today's India, embraced by 13 percent of the population. And India has played a major role in the history of Islam. At a very early stage, scientific ideas filtered into the Arabic-speaking world, something we can trace especially in texts about astronomy and astrology. There was literary influence too; I've already made mention of the *Kalila wa-Dimna*, an animal fable from India that was translated into Persian and Arabic (Chapter 14). But up until the eleventh century, the time of Avicenna, the subcontinent was still more or less foreign terrain from the Muslim viewpoint. The great scientist al-Bīrūnī, a contemporary of Avicenna, wrote a massive treatise intended to change that. Titled *A Truthful Account of India* (*Tahqiq mā lī l-Hind*), it was a wide-ranging discussion of the cultural practices and religious and philosophical beliefs of the inhabitants of this exotic land. Al-Bīrūnī was in a unique position to gather and present this information, since he found himself in the entourage of the Muslim warlord Maḥmūd of Ghazna, who was making incursions into northern India from his base in modern-day Afghanistan. Al-Bīrūnī learned Sanskrit and interviewed members of the brahman class who were brought from India by Maḥmūd, receiving a crash course in classical Indian teachings. He was struck, as many have been since, by the parallels between these teachings and the ideas he knew from the Greek works available to him in Arabic translation.

The Ghaznavid dynasty founded by al-Bīrūnī's master Maḥmūd was the first Islamic power to dominate territory in India. But it was certainly not the last. A series of less enduring sultanates based at Delhi in the north maintained Islamic political presence there for several centuries. The Delhi sultanate managed to repel the advances of the Mongols around the year 1300, which is more than we can say for many other Muslim leaders of that era. But in the late fourteenth century India was invaded, and Delhi sacked, by a new Mongol wave led by Tamerlane. In Chapter 51, I mentioned that Tamerlane's grandson Ulegh Beg established a scientific center and observatory in Samarqand, following the precedent set by Hülegü's
patronage of the Marāgha observatory. It was in turn a descendant of the same line as Ulegh Beg, the warlord Babur, who founded the powerful and long-lasting Mughal dynasty in the early sixteenth century. At first the Mughals, like the Delhi sultans, held only the territory in northern India. But Akbar, the grandson of Babur, pushed both north and south, now making use of gunpowder-based weaponry. (The only thing more dangerous than Mongols? Mongols with gunpowder.) By the beginning of the seventeenth century most of India was held by the Mughals, whose power extended into the southern plateau called the Deccan.

The Mughals rose to power at about the same time as the Safavids in Iran, and these powerful empires set the stage for two vibrant philosophical traditions. Actually, it might instead be better to think of a single tradition with two branches. Ideas traveled from Persia into India even as the empires were establishing themselves. Dawānī, one of the philosophers of Shīrāz, was invited to come to India; he turned down the offer, but did dedicate a work to a vizier of the subcontinent. Maybe he should have come in person, though, since as things turned out his rivals, the Dashtakīs, would be much read in Mughal India. Credit for this is often given to a scholar and politician named Fathallāh Shīrāzī. As his name implies, he hailed from the city of Shīrāz, where he studied with the younger of the two Dashtakīs, Ghiyāth al-Dīn. Fathallāh came to India and joined the court of Akbar. Here he proved himself an all-round intellectual, doing astronomical research and even designing military equipment.

It's not entirely clear how large a role Fathallāh really played in disseminating the philosophical tradition of Shīrāz. At least a share of the credit for building up a new tradition of philosophy in Muslim India should also go to ʻAbd al-Ḥakim Siyālkoṭī. A scholar of the Punjab region, Siyālkoṭī was in favor at the court of the Mughal Shāh Jahān. He was invited by the Shāh to pass judgment on the disputes between al-Ghazālī and Avicenna, on the usual contentious issues of the eternity of the universe, God's knowledge of particulars, and bodily resurrection. But arguably, the first really major Muslim thinker in India was the slightly later Maḥmūd Jawnpūrī. He lived in the first half of the seventeenth century, and was active in northern India. Like Fathallāh and Siyālkoṭī, Jawnpūrī was a well-connected individual, serving as tutor to one of Shāh Jahān's sons in Bengal. He wrote a philosophical commentary on one of his own works, called The Rising Sun (al-Shams al-Bāzigha). This commentary became a standard text on philosophy for subsequent generations of students in India.

Jawnpūrī exemplifies the response of Indian scholars to the intellectual tradition in Iran. As I've already said, the works of the Dashtakīs were widely read, probably to a greater degree than philosophers whose names are more famous today, like

401
Mullā Şadrā and even Avicenna himself. We do, however, find Jawnpūrī engaging with Şadrā’s teacher Mir Dāmād, and in particular with the latter’s characteristic doctrine of “perpetual creation,” according to which all things are first created at the level of the perpetual, then made manifest in our temporal realm (Chapter 53). Jawnpūrī sympathizes with what Mir Dāmād was trying to do here, but believes the theory has one small flaw: it’s incoherent. We are asked to believe that the same thing is created twice, once “perpetually” and then again within time. Hiawatha the giraffe would exist perpetually as part of God’s everlasting creative act, but she would also turn up round about the early twenty-first century on the African savannah. Thus Hiawatha would, absurdly, be prior to herself. Mir Dāmād also spoke of things at the level of perpetuity as being “non-existent,” and “existent” only when created in time. This Sufi-inspired notion makes no sense to Jawnpūrī. If anything, the perpetual things at the level of the divine should be more existent than the things in the temporal realm. Thus Jawnpūrī respectfully suggests that it would be better to return to the idea of eternal emanation already found in al-Fārābī and Avicenna. It’s an indication that, even with all the Mongol-era, Shirāzī, and Safavid authors being read in this later period, philosophers of the formative period too continue to exert their influence.

Nonetheless, Avicenna’s influence in India was most often mediated through later authors. He was read at least occasionally, hardly surprising, given his importance to thinkers like the Dashtakīs, who represented the cutting edge of philosophical thought in this period. For the most part, though, India saw the emergence of a less Avicenna-centered approach to the rational sciences, known as the dars-i niẓāmī. This curriculum seems to have evolved over generations, but it is called dars-i niẓāmī in honor of Niẓām al-Dīn Siḥalavī, a scholar who took a significant hand in devising its standard version. He was a member of the leading scholarly family of Mughal India in the eighteenth century, the Farangi Maḥall. This clan, based in the city of Lucknow, received favor from the Mughal princes and could count a number of influential scholars among their ranks. The earlier thinkers I’ve been mentioning, like Fathallāh Shirāzī, ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Siyākotī, and Maḥmūd Jawnpūrī, paved the way for the Farangi Maḥall family. In fact, Niẓām al-Dīn was a fifth-generation student of Fathallāh, and a work by Jawnpūrī was one of the texts in the dars-i niẓāmī curriculum. The dars-i niẓāmī was not necessarily intended to produce philosophers. Rather, students would read a selection of canonical texts, sometimes only in summarized versions, and receive training in logic and other fields, so as to prepare them for work as government officials and jurists. Still, this pedagogical activity in the madrasas naturally gave rise to a large number of commentaries and glosses on the texts included in the curriculum. And hopefully, you’re by now convinced that
the commentary form is entirely compatible with philosophical innovation and originality.

Just in case, though, here's another example. One work on logic produced in India was the Ladder of the Sciences (Sullam al-ulûm), by Muḥībballâh al-Bihârî, who died in the year 1707. Al-Bihârî's treatise was tailor-made to be the subject of commentary, offering a dense survey of issues in logic, philosophy of language, and epistemology. His successors duly composed more than ninety commentaries and glosses on the Ladder of the Sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not only did the original text of al-Bihârî find its way into the dars-i niżâmî curriculum, but glosses and commentaries on the work also became standard reading, and provoked still further reflection from still later authors. A fascinating issue that emerged in this layered textual tradition concerned the question of whether God can be defined. The obvious answer, in light of the usual Muslim belief in divine transcendence, was "no." But how to justify this answer philosophically? Avicenna suggested one possible strategy, which was developed in one of the standard commentaries on al-Bihârî: since God has no body, and since His essence is the same as His existence, God is simple. But definitions always have multiple parts. The definition of human, for example, is rational mortal animal, and one can think of these three items (rationality, mortality, animality) as the "parts" of the definition. So to define God would be to compromise His simplicity by breaking Him up into conceptual parts.

But what Avicenna gave, he could also take away. We've seen numerous times that later thinkers were fascinated by his distinction between mental and concrete existence. If we apply that distinction to God, we can see that there is a problem with the argument just sketched. All will admit that God is simple in concrete reality. But need He be simple when He exists in my mind? If my idea of Him has parts, that should allow me to offer a definition of Him, without implying that God Himself has parts. In other words, God might have conceptual parts while remaining simple in reality. To take a not-so-random example of how this proposal might be filled out, I might define God as the "necessary existent." God Himself lacks all multiplicity, as Avicenna argued, but the idea of a necessary existent is obviously not simple. It has two ingredients: necessity and existence.

There is a more troubling issue lurking here, and the commentators and super-commentators on al-Bihârî were not slow to notice it. If the rules that apply to God outside the mind may differ from those that apply to Him as He exists mentally, why not think this is true for other things besides God? If I am only getting mental representations of the things out there in reality, how can I be sure that the features of these representations match the features of the things in themselves? The
commentators’ skeptical worry mirrors a central problem of early modern European philosophy, found in philosophers like Descartes and Hume. The commentators of India were led to the same destination, along a path entirely characteristic of later philosophy in the Islamic world: the issue that provoked the debate was a theological one, and the debate centered on one of Avicenna’s standard distinctions, in this case the contrast between mental and external existence.

This was not entirely new. The skeptical implications of mental existence were already noticed by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (Chapter 43). But it’s remarkable to see it being formulated here as a general problem of epistemology. In the end, the Mughal-era commentators on al-Bihārī did stop short of drawing the radically skeptical conclusion that there can be no correspondence between our ideas and things in the outside world. Rather, we have universal knowledge gleaned from our experience of external things, and are also able to grasp the peculiar characteristics of those things. As a result, we have mental representations that, as the commentators say, “reveal” the nature of the outside things. But this still leaves a skeptical worry. We have no independent confirmation that our representations do “reveal” the things they are meant to represent. This point led a nineteenth-century philosopher of India, Faḍl al-Ḥaqq al-Khayrābādī, to go even further and doubt that our ideas ever succeed in capturing the essences of things in themselves. 8

So far, we’ve been looking at the transplanting of ideas from elsewhere in the Islamic world onto Indian soil. But of course, this soil was not barren. To the contrary, the Indian subcontinent had its own ancient philosophical and religious traditions. Did Muslim intellectuals attempt to come to grips with these indigenous belief systems? Indeed they did. Under the Mughal emperor Akbar, it was decreed that religious scholars should work through a range of intellectual sciences, including medicine, logic, physics, mathematics, metaphysics, and history. They should also learn about the Hindu traditions, studying the Sanskrit language and acquainting themselves with the teachings of the Nyaya and Vedanta schools. 9 Akbar was remarkable among Muslim rulers in India for his friendliness towards Hinduism, a policy which happened to be politically expedient as well. He himself married Hindu women and allowed them to keep their religion rather than converting to Islam.

You might think it doesn’t get much more friendly than that. But at least one member of the Islamic ruling class in India could give Akbar some serious competition when it comes to affection for classical Indian culture. He was a seventeenth-century prince by the name of Dārā Shikūh, the son and intended successor of the Shah Jahan. Upon his father’s death conflict erupted between Dārā Shikūh and his brothers. This ended in Dārā’s untimely death, on charges of irreligion. These
accusations were obviously politically motivated, since Dārā Shikūh’s death paved the way for the accession of one of his brothers. Still, the prosecuting attorneys would have had plenty to work with, since in fact Dārā was pretty daring in his ideas about religion. From a young age he was enthusiastic about the teaching of the Sufis, and trained with a beloved master to achieve ever greater degrees of spiritual enlightenment. He also engaged in Sufi practices like breath control, writing that he was able to pass through an entire night inhaling only twice.

What really left him breathless, though, was the wisdom contained in ancient Sanskrit works like the Upanishads. Dārā produced translations of this body of sacred literature, and pronounced it the oldest of the revelations sent by God to humankind. He considered the Upanishads superior to other revealed books, like the Torah and the New Testament of the Christians. For him, this Sanskrit source could provide the key to unlock the deeper meaning of the revelation sent to Muḥammad. Surprising though this may sound, to some extent it reflects a well-established attitude towards Hinduism among Muslims. Islam traditionally recognized Hindus and Buddhists, alongside Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, as “peoples of the book,” favored with prophets who brought the word of God. But Dārā Shikūh went further by giving the Upanishads privileged place above all other revelations, apart, of course, from the Koran itself. He even daringly suggested that the Koran alludes to the Upanishads in a much-discussed verse (56:78) that makes mention of a “hidden book.” What could this book be, reasoned Dārā, if not the oldest of the revelations?

To press home his point, Dārā Shikūh attempted to illustrate the agreement of the Islamic and Indian traditions in his Confluence of the Oceans. The title is taken from another verse of the Koran (18:60), and symbolizes the meeting-place between the two great religions. When an English translation of Dārā’s treatise was published in Calcutta in 1929, one reviewer dismissed it rather high-handedly, writing, “this little treatise is not … a work of deep insight or great spirituality … The subject-matter is entirely matter-of-fact and consists of nothing but wooden terminological comparisons. It lacks both eloquence and inspiration.” I find this amazing, because the Confluence of the Oceans is a truly remarkable document, and would be so even if it hadn’t been written by a Mughal prince. It surveys the key ideas of the Hindu teaching as Dārā Shikūh understands it. He shows that the core ideas and vocabulary of this teaching correspond to Arabic concepts and terminology used by Muslim intellectuals, especially philosophical Sufis. Thus, the Sanskrit term maya is connected to the passionate love, or ‘ishq, of the Sufis (§1), and the Koranic names of God are matched to Sanskrit equivalents (§11). Both the Islamic and Hindu
traditions, explains Dārā Shikūh, have more or less the same cosmological theories and similar ideas about the soul. Even Avicenna's theory of the five internal senses can be found in the Sanskrit sources (§2).

He touches also on more controversial points. After sketching the Indian theory that world-cycles repeat over and over in an infinite loop of time, Dārā says that this notion too can be shown to agree with the Koran. In proof he cites verses on resurrection (Koran 14:48, 21:104, 39:68, cited at §§19, 21). To those Muslims who complain that, on this theory, Muḥammad will no longer be the last of the prophets, Dārā responds that it will be the very same Prophet Muhammad that returns in the next cycle. He will end the line of prophets in each and every iteration of the endlessly repeated history of the world. Dārā also likes to defend contentious ideas within Islam by referring to other religious traditions. One frequent point of dispute among Muslim theologians had been whether God is ever actually visible. Can He manifest Himself so that we can actually see Him? Of course, most philosophers would dismiss the idea out of hand. But Dārā thinks it is possible, and claims as allies the many religious sages who have claimed to behold God. Dārā says he is happy to find himself in agreement with them, whether they believe in "the Koran, the Vedas, the Book of David or the Olé and the New Testament" (§10).

For Dārā Shikūh, the extensive agreement between the different religious and philosophical traditions known to him showed that no one people has a monopoly on wisdom or truth. But I'll tell you who did have a monopoly: the East India Company. The first half of the eighteenth century saw the collapse of both the Safavid and the Mughal empires, in the latter case paving the way for the era of British colonialism. Their fall was in part the result of British conquest and, famously, of exploitation at the hands of the East India Company. There is more to the story than that, though. To some extent the empire succumbed to internal problems before the colonial depredation began.12 This isn't the place to chart the demise of these two mighty powers, but it is the place to consider the fate of philosophy in the eighteenth century and beyond. In the closing chapters of this book, we'll be seeing how the ideas of figures like Avicenna or Mullā Ṣadrā remained influential right down to the twentieth century, and discovering how ideas from Europe were received among Muslims. But before we do that, there is a third empire to deal with. As you read on you might want to put your feet up, perhaps on some sort of upholstered footstool, because we're about to turn to the Ottomans.
TURKISH DELIGHTS
PHILOSOPHY UNDER THE OTTOMANS

Here's an old joke I can't help liking. "Q: What's the difference between mathematicians and philosophers? A: Mathematicians need only a pencil and an eraser. Philosophers likewise, except they don't need the eraser." And it's true, philosophy doesn't require much in the way of equipment. To write this book I only needed a computer, a well-stocked library, and above all, coffee. The latter requirement is something else philosophers share with mathematicians, who have been called "machines for turning coffee into theorems." And the same need was felt by the seventeenth-century Ottoman scholar Kâtib Çelebî. He supposedly died while drinking coffee (not a bad way to go), and he put his arguments where his mouth was. Kâtib Çelebî was an impressive scholar, who produced much-admired works including a bibliographical dictionary and a treatise on geography. But his last work, titled The Balance of Truth,¹ is among other things a plea for flexibility and tolerance with respect to social and religious practices that were controversial in Kâtib Çelebî's day. Among those controversial practices was the drinking of coffee (60–2).

I can't entirely side with him, since Çelebî also speaks up in favor of allowing people to smoke tobacco (47–9), whereas I am one of those people who cough ostentatiously if anyone lights up nearby. Still, I have to admire his policy of pragmatism. With his moderate and open-minded approach to Islam, Çelebî was signaling his opposition to a popular movement of his day, the Kâdîzâdelis. Named after the charismatic preacher Mehmed Kâdîzâde (d. 1635), the Kâdîzâdelis opposed not only the fragrant activities of coffee-drinking and tobacco-smoking, but anything that smelled of innovation in religion. They were even upset by such apparently innocuous novelties as shaking the hands of one's fellow worshippers in the mosque. The Kâdîzâdelis' great opponents were the Sufi orders, which were influential and massively popular in the Ottoman empire. They also became rivals to the scholars who formed both the intelligentsia and the legal class in the Ottoman state: the ulema (Arabic 'ulamā),²