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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (May, 2002), pp. 5-25

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826146>

Accessed: 28/09/2012 18:46

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The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy¹

DIMITRI GUTAS*

Aucun grand moment de la pensée humaine n'a sans doute été—et ne reste—plus injustement traité par les historiens de la pensée que la philosophie islamique.²

Introduction

Philosophy is considered a recalcitrant subject, and Arabic philosophy particularly so, both by historians of philosophy in general and by scholars of Arabic and Islamic studies in particular. Though naturally I disagree with this view, there would appear nevertheless to be good reasons for its prevalence. In the former case, the historian of ancient and medieval philosophy, at home with Greek and Latin, finds nothing in his education to help alleviate the estrangement that he inevitably feels when confronted with what is taken to be the impenetrable barrier of the Arabic language and the perceived otherness of Islamic culture; and when he tries to approach the subject through the mediation of the secondary literature by Arabist historians of philosophy, he finds little there to whet his appetite for more, as I will soon explain. In the case of the scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies, traditional education has taught him that philosophy in Islamic civilization was at best a fringe activity which ceased to exist after the death blow allegedly dealt to it by al-Ghazālī in the eleventh century, was anyway frowned upon by a presumed orthodoxy, and, being therefore largely inconsequential—a feeling further corroborated through casual perusal of the unappetizing specialist secondary literature I just referred to—could be safely disregarded.

In both cases this (mis)perception may be justified, but the fault lies not with Arabic philosophy³ itself but with its students and expositors: Arabist historians of philosophy themselves have not done their job properly and they have failed,

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¹ A lecture delivered on 4 July 2000, at a plenary session of the annual BRISMES Conference held at Cambridge. Apart for some minor revisions and the addition of full references, the text of the lecture has been retained as delivered.

² Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *Introduction à la critique de la raison arabe* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1995), p. 77.

³ I say 'Arabic' and not 'Islamic' philosophy for the reasons discussed later in the section Illuminationist Approach.

by and large, to present the results of their research, first, to historians of philosophy in a systematic and rationalized way that will exploit the common points of reference and contact, and second, to their colleagues in Arabic and Islamic studies in a way that will make manifest the relevance of Arabic philosophy to Islamic intellectual life in general. It is not sufficient, at the turn of this millennium, with the multicultural sensibilities of much Western academic discourse, that the historian of medieval scholastic philosophy and the Islamic expert be prepared to acknowledge the massive and decisive influence exerted by Arabic philosophy on medieval Christendom and Islam respectively simply because of the weight of incontrovertible historical evidence;⁴ the historian of Arabic philosophy is obliged at the same time to present his material in such a way that will convince his audience that the study of Arabic philosophy is indeed worthwhile and potentially beneficial to their own work.

I will now try to present the case of how it is that we, that is, historians of Arabic philosophy, have failed to present the subject to our colleagues, both within and without Islamic studies, in a way that would have gained it acceptance as part of our common discipline long time ago—after all, the study of Arabic philosophy has been more or less constant since Ernest Renan's epoch-making *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, which first appeared a century and a half ago in 1852. For even a cursory look at Fernand van Steenberghen's very useful *Introduction à l'étude de la philosophie médiévale*⁵ will tell us that the scholarly study of Latin and Arabic medieval philosophy has roughly the same age—and yet how vastly unequal the accomplishments of the two fields have been! It is obvious that much more substantive work on the history of Arabic philosophy could have been accomplished in the last century and a half and that consequently the reasons that it has not have to be sought in other factors which have been impeding its progress. I will survey the various types of error, of both commission and omission, which have accompanied its study in the course of the present century. By avoiding these errors in the next, Arabic philosophy will perhaps finally gain the position of eminence it deserves both within Arabic and Islamic studies and, more generally, within the history of Western philosophy.

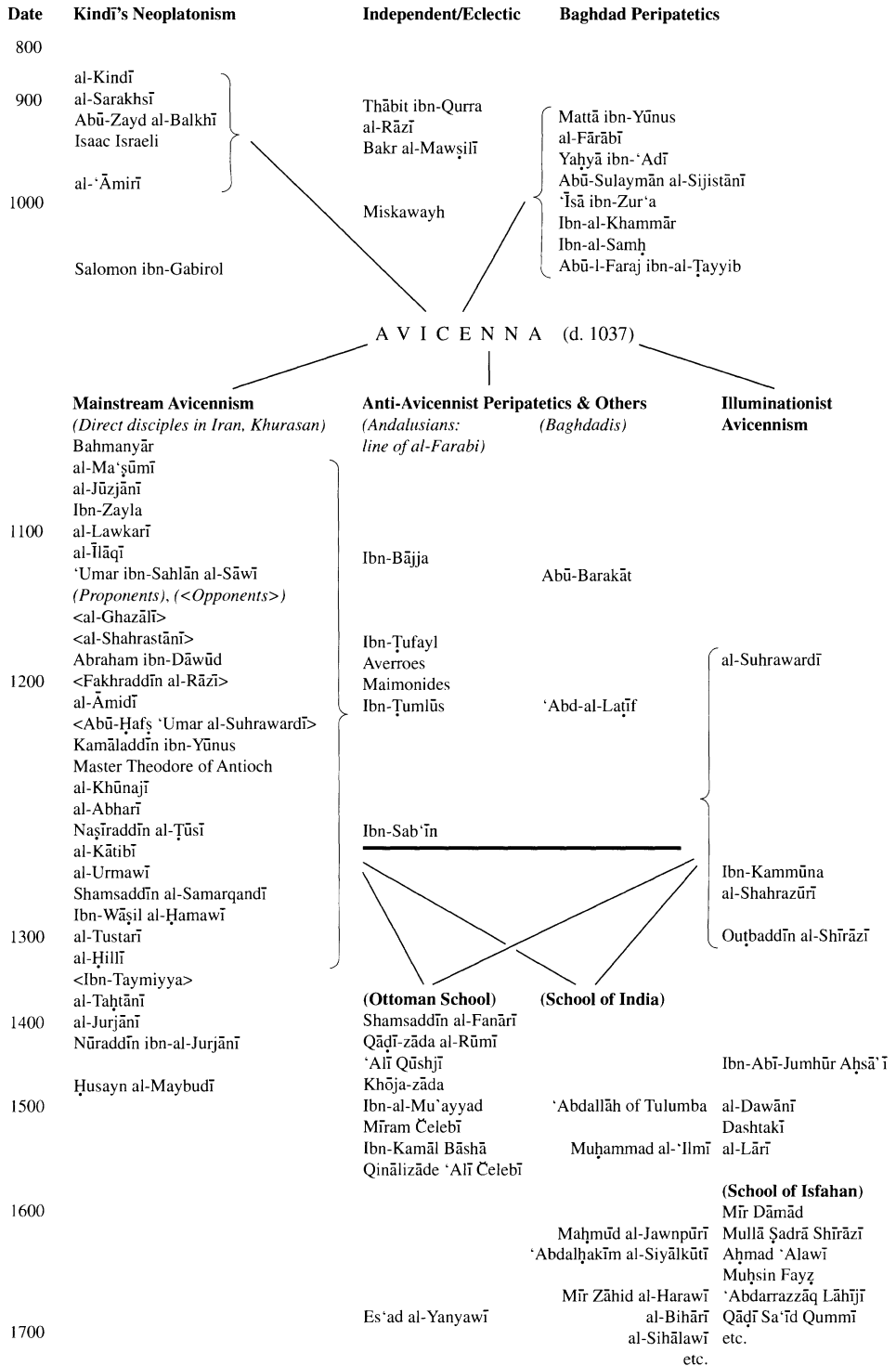
To begin with, let me make a few statements of fact to dispel some of the misconceptions I referred to earlier. Arabic philosophy did not die after al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and it was not a fringe activity frowned upon by a so-called 'orthodoxy'. It was a vigorous and largely autonomous intellectual movement that lasted a good 10 centuries—some would say it is still alive in Iran—and played a crucial role in shaping high culture both before and, especially, after Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), its greatest exponent. The accompanying chart sketches in a necessarily simplified way its progress from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries.

The problem is, briefly put, that Arabic philosophy has been very unevenly investigated, with some periods and personalities receiving the lion's share of

⁴ Such acknowledgement is increasingly the case in general textbooks of medieval Latin philosophy. See, for example, the statements of a leading scholar in the field, K. Flasch: 'Die zivilisatorische und damit auch die philosophische Entwicklung des lateinischen Westens seit dem 13. Jahrhundert ist ohne den Einfluss der Araber nicht zu verstehen', in his *Das philosophische Denken im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 1986), p. 262; a similar sentiment is also to be found in his *Einführung in die Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), p. 95. Admittedly, the actual coverage of Arabic philosophy in such textbooks is perfunctory, but this is precisely for the reasons that form the subject of this talk.

⁵ (Paris/Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1974), pp. 42–43.

OUTLINE OF ARABIC PHILOSOPHY (IX–XVIIIc.)



attention and others none, something which is partly also responsible for the failure of historians of Arabic philosophy to present it adequately to the outside world. It is possible, and relatively easy, to trace the causes of this uneven treatment of Arabic philosophy, and its lack of appreciation and understanding by other specialists of both Islamic studies and philosophy, to three approaches to it which, because of their predominance, have virtually monopolized its study in the twentieth century. These three approaches can be roughly identified as: (1) the orientalist; (2) the mystical/illuminationist; (3) the political. I will now try to present these approaches in greater detail and give some pertinent examples.

The Orientalist Approach

The approach with the longest history and the widest ramifications and, one might say, reincarnations, is the orientalist. Orientalism has become a loaded term in Arabic and Islamic studies that easily excites passions, but I have no wish to go into theoretical or polemical arguments here, either for or against. All I would like to refer to by that term is to a certain nineteenth century picture of the natives of the ‘Orient’—and in our case, of the Semite Arabs—held by Westerners: mystical, sensual, otherworldly, non-rational and intensely interested in religion—for which they, just like their cousins, the Hebrews, allegedly have a great talent—living in despotic societies and immutable ways of life and systems of thought.⁶

This caricature may seem today no more than that, and perhaps no single individual ever held to it in its totality, but it fairly represents what nineteenth century Europeans were *predisposed* to believe about people living in Islamic societies, about ‘orientals’.⁷ This cultural predisposition determined not only what they might believe about orientals, but also the nature of the questions they might ask about them and their society; it determined, in other words, the European research agenda. And this, in my view, is one of the major reasons for the specific paths which Western scholarship about the Islamic world has taken up to the present day. It is also one of the most pernicious effects of orientalism, effects which, for all our contemporary protestations and affectations of multiculturalism, are still very much with us today.

In the study of Arabic philosophy, the perniciousness I mentioned manifested itself in various ways, and I think I have time to talk about four of them. These are, viewing Arabic philosophy as mystical, as only an intermediary between Greek and medieval Latin philosophy, as being concerned only about the relation between religion and philosophy, and as coming to an end with Averroes, when the torch was passed on to the West.

⁶ M. Mahdi presented the evidence for the prevalence of these notions in the works of some orientalists of the first half of the twentieth century in his ‘Orientalism and the Study of Islamic Philosophy’, in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 1 (1990), pp. 79–93.

⁷ An apposite example is offered by the book of Léon Gauthier, a not inconsequential student of Arabic philosophy and editor of texts, entitled, *Introduction à l'étude de la philosophie musulmane. L'esprit sémitique et l'esprit aryen: la philosophie grecque et la religion de l'Islam*, (Paris: 1923).

Viewing Arabic Philosophy as Mystical

The predisposition to view Arabic philosophy as mystical is dramatically illustrated by a publication by A.F. Mehren, an orientalist in Copenhagen who worked quite consistently on Avicenna at the end of the nineteenth century. It is a long story which I have already told, but very instructive and entertaining, and, I think, worth repeating.

In the prologue to his magnum opus, *al-Shifā'*—the *Sufficientia* of the Latins—Avicenna (d. 1037) mentions that he wrote two major books encompassing all of philosophy, the *Shifā'*, which the reader holds in his hands, and one which he calls *The Easterners*, *al-Mashriqiyyūn*. The distinction which Avicenna draws between the two books is stylistic: the *Shifā'*, he says, is expository and analytical, and contains discussions of all the main positions taken by various philosophers in the history of Aristotelianism. *The Easterners*, by contrast, he says, is a dogmatic work: he presents just those philosophical theories which he thinks are true, and spends no time refuting other views. By 'Easterners', finally, Avicenna was referring to the philosophers working in the Mashriq, the traditional Khurāsān, i.e. to himself and to his disciples who he hoped would continue his teachings.

As luck would have it, the second book, *The Easterners*, was partially lost soon after it was written and circulated in extremely limited circles. Even today we possess only about half of the entire work: a part on logic and the physics.⁸ The *Shifā'*, by contrast, survived in full in multiple copies and travelled widely—widely enough to reach Islamic Spain and, as we all know, to be translated partially into Latin. In Spain, it naturally attracted the attention of the mentor of Averroes, Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1186), who referred to it in the prologue to his famous philosophical romance, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*—the so-called Philosophus Autodidactus—which bears the suggestive subtitle, 'On the Secrets of Eastern Philosophy' (*Fī Asrār al-Ḥikma al-Mashriqiyya*). Ibn Ṭufayl, however, for reasons of his own and which do not concern us here, completely misrepresented the stylistic distinction between the *Shifā'* and *The Easterners* which Avicenna drew in his prologue as one of substance, claiming, in fact, that there is a difference in doctrine between the two books: the *Shifā'* he said, contains merely Peripatetic doctrine, while *The Easterners* contains the mystical 'secrets of the Eastern philosophy', secrets which occasioned his own book, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*.⁹

It does not appear that Ibn Ṭufayl was very successful in convincing his contemporaries of the validity and accuracy of his presentation; Averroes (Ibn Rushd), for one, who read the same prologue of the *Shifā'* that Ibn Ṭufayl had, certainly does not share his mentor's understanding of it in the few places that he mentions it. Ibn Ṭufayl's fiction, however, found a ready audience and immense success in modern times among orientalists who were eager and properly predisposed to espouse his connotations of the East—the 'Orient'—as mystical and visionary. And here is where A.F. Mehren comes in. Starting with Ibn Ṭufayl's presentation of Avicenna's 'Eastern' philosophy and taking that to

⁸ See D. Gutas, 'Avicenna's Eastern ("Oriental") Philosophy. Nature, Contents, Transmission', *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 10 (2000), pp. 159–180.

⁹ The reasons for Ibn Ṭufayl's tendentiousness are discussed at length in D. Gutas, 'Ibn Ṭufayl on Ibn Sīnā's Eastern Philosophy', *Oriens*, 34 (1994), pp. 222–241. The objection by A. Elamrani-Jamal to my interpretation and my response to him are given in my article cited in the preceding note, p. 161, note 10.

be the gospel truth, he looked around for texts by Avicenna that would contain that ‘Eastern’ philosophy. He found none, however, for as I already mentioned, Avicenna’s *The Easterners* has survived very poorly and in fragmentary form in a handful of manuscripts of which Mehren was not aware. Lacking documentation, Mehren was predisposed to use his imagination. He found certain brief allegories by Avicenna, which he collected; to these he added the last three chapters of Avicenna’s last major book, *Pointers and Reminders (al-Ishārāt wa’l-Tanbīhāt)*, chapters that deal with philosophical epistemology, that is, the conjunction of the human with the active intellect, using on occasion terminology from Islamic theology and mysticism rather than the standard Peripatetic one. Mehren then edited the whole collection in four fascicles, under two titles, one in Arabic and another in French. The Arabic title he borrowed directly from Ibn Ṭufayl’s subtitle: ‘Treatises by Avicenna on the Secrets of Eastern Philosophy’ (*Rasā’il ... Ibn Sīnā fī Asrār al-Ḥikma al-Mashriqiyya*) despite the fact that none of the treatises actually edited by Mehren in these fascicles not only does not bear such a title, but ‘Eastern philosophy’, either as a term or as a concept, is not even mentioned once in any of them! What is worse, however, is Mehren’s French title for the entire collection, which makes the fateful, if totally unfounded, connection between Avicenna’s Eastern philosophy and mysticism: *Traité mystiques ... d’Avicenne* (Leiden 1889–1999). To be sure, the great Italian Arabist Carlo Alfonso Nallino, one of the very few serious students of Arabic philosophy, objected strenuously to this title, already in 1925: ‘An entirely arbitrary title’, he said, ‘without any basis in the manuscripts, which has subsequently become the cause of errors.’¹⁰ His objections, however, were to no avail; once it gained printed legitimacy through the publication of Mehren’s fascicles, the myth of Avicenna’s mystical Eastern or ‘Oriental’ philosophy has since reappeared in a number of variations that bear no relationship to the extant Eastern texts and are irrelevant to Avicenna’s thought. And it is here, to cite but one example in this category, that Arabists have been misleading Latinists in believing that the ‘oriental’ philosophy of Avicenna is something different from his other philosophy; Ibn Ṭufayl’s fiction reappears in Alain de Libera’s recent compilatory account of medieval philosophy.¹¹

Intermediary Between Greek and Medieval Latin Philosophy

Another attitude which hampered the independent investigation of Arabic philosophy as philosophy—and hence its presentation as such to non-Arabists—was one which considered it as philosophically insignificant in itself but also merely as an intermediary between Greek philosophy and later Latin scholasticism. This attitude is best exemplified by the statements of one of the earliest authors of a general introduction to Arabic philosophy, T.J. De Boer’s *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, a book which first appeared in German in 1901.¹² As it appeared soon afterwards in an English translation, a translation that was reprinted a number of times, it remained, until the publication of Henry Corbin’s

¹⁰ In his ‘Filosofia «Orientale» od «Illuminativa» d’Avicenna?’ *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 10 (1923–1925), p. 443: ‘Titolo affatto arbitrario, senza alcun fondamento nei manoscritti, e che poi è stato causa d’errori’.

¹¹ *La Philosophie Médiévale* (Paris: PUF, 1993, second edition 1995), pp. 115–116.

¹² *Geschichte der Philosophie im Islam* (Stuttgart: F. Frommans Verlag, 1901).

history in 1964, which I will mention later, the single most accessible account of Arabic philosophy. De Boer is quite explicit about the philosophical value of his subject; he says, and I quote from the English translation:

Muslim philosophy has always continued to be an Eclecticism which depended on the stock of works translated from the Greek. The course of its history has been a process of assimilation rather than of generation. It has not distinguished itself, either by propounding new problems or by any peculiarity in its endeavours to solve the old ones. It has therefore no important advances in thought to register.¹³

The only value which De Boer can find to credit Arabic philosophy with is in the social history of ideas. He goes on to say,

Now the history of philosophy in Islam is valuable just because it sets forth the first attempt to appropriate the results of Greek thinking with greater comprehensiveness and freedom than in the early Christian dogmatics. Acquaintance with the conditions which made such an attempt possible will permit us to reach conclusions by way of analogical reasonings ... as to the reception of Graeco-Arabic science in the Christian Middle Ages, and will perhaps teach us a little about the conditions under which philosophy arises in general. (p. 29)

It is impossible to conceive how such statements can have been made by learned people who must have been aware of the immense material in Arabic philosophy which had not yet been studied. Since therefore these generalizing statements were not based on an evaluation of all the relevant evidence, the conclusion is inescapable that such an attitude would appear to have been based on the presumption that even if one were to read all the works of Arabic philosophy one would still not find any original or important advances in thought, a presumption clearly based on the view—we might call it racist today—that the Semites—in this case, the Arabs—are incapable of critical rational thought, in so far as they have a genius for religious and especially mystical thought. That some such, perhaps unconscious, assumptions were operative can be gleaned from consideration of the following.

Simon van den Bergh made a significant contribution to the study of our subject through his well-known translation of the refutation by Averroes of al-Ghazālī's criticism of the philosophers, the famous *Incoherence of the Incoherence* (*Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*). He published the work in two volumes, the first containing the translation proper and the second copious notes elucidating the philosophical points and providing references to Greek philosophy.¹⁴ One would have thought that the preoccupation, during the arduous task of translation and annotation, with al-Ghazālī's arguments and with their relentless and highly technical refutation by Averroes would have convinced him that here, at least, one could see philosophical thinking at its best. And yet, as epigraph for his translation Van den Bergh chose the following two quotations: one, by Epicurus: 'Only Greeks philosophize', with the obvious implication that everything that is contained in his two volumes is nothing else but derivative from Greek

¹³ T.J. De Boer, *The History of Philosophy in Islam*, translated by E.R. Jones, (London: Luzac & Co., 1903, reprint New York, Dover: 1967), p. 29.

¹⁴ *Averroes' Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, (Oxford and London: Luzac & Co., 1954).

philosophy;¹⁵ and second, the statement from Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, where Maimonides says,

One must know that everything the Moslems, Mu'tazilites as well as Ash'arites, have professed concerning these subjects [i.e. theological matters] has been borrowed from the Greeks and Syrians who applied themselves to the criticism of the philosophers.¹⁶

Thus, if Arabists present Arabic philosophy as derivative and philosophically insignificant, it is easy to see how other historians of philosophy, and especially medievalists, would be justified in adopting the same view.

Relation of Philosophy to Religion

My third item is closely related to the first two, and that is the view that the greatest contribution of Arabic philosophy to world thought is its analysis of the relation of philosophy to religion. The origins of such a view are both easy and difficult to discern. On the one hand, there is certainly the nineteenth century view that the Semites were religious geniuses, so it is natural to expect them to make a contribution on this issue when it came to philosophy. However, what is more important is the fact that Western scholars themselves were intensely interested in the issue precisely because of the medieval Latin controversy on the subject and in particular of the ps.-Averroist double truth theory. From Ernest Renan's original *Averroès et l'Averroïsme* which appeared in 1852, to the book by the same title by Alain de Libera and Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, published in 1991, there is a long list of books purporting to present a history of Arabic philosophy which do little more than discuss the various aspects of this question.¹⁷ Most obviously guilty in this regard is Oliver Leaman, who published in 1985 a book with the title *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*.¹⁸ Apart from the sixth and last chapter in the book, which treats the methodological question of 'How to read Islamic philosophy',¹⁹ the first three chapters contain an analysis of the three points on the basis of which al-Ghazālī accused the philosophers of heresy, together with Averroes' rejoinders, the fourth discusses ethics from the conflicting viewpoints of religion and philosophy, and the fifth presents yet another review of al-Fārābī's and Averroes' so-called political philosophy, which itself is discussed in terms of religion versus philosophy. The impression generated by the whole book is precisely that medieval Arabic philosophy was in fact nothing else but a continuous squabble through and across the centuries about the relative truth values of religion and

¹⁵ See the review of Van den Bergh's book by Franz Rosenthal who rightly brings up this point: The general tenor of this volume, Rosenthal says, 'is indicated in two statements by Van den Bergh himself. One is the motto derived from Epicurus and placed at the beginning of the volume: "Only Greeks philosophize". Notwithstanding the eminence of its author, it can hardly be denied that this is a particularly unfortunate expression of cultural chauvinism, eliminating as it does not only al-Ghazzālī and Averroes but also van den Bergh and philosophy itself', in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 15 (1956), p. 198.

¹⁶ Both quotations appear on the first page of the second volume of Van den Bergh's book. A more literal translation of the passage by Maimonides is given by S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, (Chicago II: UCP, 1963), vol. I, p. 177.

¹⁷ De Libera and Hayoun's *Averroès et l'Averroïsme* (Paris: PUF) appeared in the series 'Que sais-je?'. On pp. 3–8 they present a summary of the discussions with a list of the more notable publications.

¹⁸ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); cf. my review in *Der Islam*, 65 (1988), pp. 339–342.

¹⁹ This chapter is actually a reprint of an earlier article by Leaman that appeared under the title, 'Does the Interpretation of Islamic Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 (1980), pp. 525–538.

philosophy, a misconception of which Leaman himself, in his last chapter, accuses those who adopt a political view in interpreting Arabic philosophy (the followers of Leo Strauss, about whom more later). As Leaman states in the original article, the origins of this misconception partly lie in the fact that the edition and translation of Arabic philosophical works by Westerners have often concentrated on such subjects. This, however, is no more than the projection of Western preoccupation with this subject onto medieval Islamic culture, and it would accordingly be a mistake to conclude from this preoccupation of the Westerners 'that such a theme was the major problem of interest for [Islamic] thinkers. Rather, the religion-vs. philosophy works are selected for attention [by Westerners] because they are thought to be central, which leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy'.²⁰

This vicious circle in orientalist approaches to Arabic philosophy is indeed what perhaps characterizes most acutely such interpretations. It seems that one always starts with a certain preconception of what Arabic philosophy should be saying, and then concentrates only on those passages which seem to be supporting such a bias, thereby appearing to corroborate the preconception on the basis of the texts themselves. Were one, however, truly to investigate Arabic philosophy dispassionately and objectively, it would be immediately clear to him that religion versus philosophy is but a very minor subject of concern, and only at certain times and in certain places. Islamic Spain at the time of Averroes may have been such a place, but this is very far from characterizing the entire Islamic world during the 10 centuries of Arabic philosophy that I talked about at the outset. One is not allowed to generalize from one instance to the whole, especially in the face of contrary evidence, which in this case is overwhelming: al-Ghazālī died in 1111 at Tūs (north-east Iran), but, despite his refutation of philosophy, his charges of unbelief (*kufr*) against philosophers, and the institutional support given to his theses by his colleagues and successors in the various Nizāmiyya colleges, philosophy continued to flourish in the East with renewed vigour throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²¹

Furthermore, it is completely misleading, in the context of medieval Islamic civilization, to pose the problem as if the question actually being discussed were whether religion or philosophy is true; all Arabic philosophers, with the possible exception of al-Rāzī (Rhazes), did believe that religion—*some* religion, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, or even paganism, in the case of the Sabians—was true and their concern was not to deny its validity. The way that the question of religion was framed by those philosophers who did discuss it was in terms of prophetology, and they localized its discussion in two areas, in epistemology and in the logic of propositions. In the case of epistemology, the question that was asked was, how the prophet, given that he has no philosophical

²⁰ Leaman, 'Does the Interpretation ...', p. 529.

²¹ H. Corbin already made this point when he noted that Abū 'l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī 'continued to write long after al-Ghazālī died. This fact in itself is sufficient evidence that it would be more than exaggeration to believe that al-Ghazālī's critique spelled ruin for the destiny of philosophy in Islam': *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964); here cited from the English translation by L. and P. Sherrard, *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York: Kegan Paul, 1993), p. 179. For the attitude of the Nizāmiyya professors to philosophy in the twelfth century see now F. Griffel, *Apostasie und Toleranz* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 350–358. For the efflorescence of philosophy in the East in the period after Avicenna see D. Gutas, 'The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy, 1000–c.1350', in the proceedings of the Leuven Conference on the heritage of Avicenna, September 1999, to be edited by J. Janssens and D. De Smet. In the West, in al-Andalus, philosophy of course declined after Averroes (d. 1198) and Ibn Ṭūmlūs (d. 1223) not because of al-Ghazālī's attacks but because of the *reconquista* and the rapid deterioration of the conditions of Arab society in the peninsula.

upbringing, knows the intelligibilia, the eternal realities in the intellects of the heavenly spheres and ultimately of the Necessarily Existent; the answer in this case invariably rested on an analysis of the human soul and its intellectual and imaginative faculties—in other words in the context of the *problématique* of Aristotle's *De Anima*.²² In the case of the logic of the propositions, the question that was asked was how and to whom the prophet communicates the knowledge of the intelligibilia; in other words, whether he uses demonstrative, dialectical, sophistical, rhetorical, or poetical propositions, and the answer was then naturally discussed in the context of Aristotle's *Organon*, especially the *Topics* and the *Rhetoric*, with imagination being considered the attendant faculty for the process.²³

Seen in this light, it is an unfortunate distortion with grave consequences to state that the issue of religion versus philosophy was central in Arabic philosophy. As a matter of fact, those responsible for this distortion did not even read properly their Averroes, the one author around whom the Western discussion has centred. As is well known, Averroes wrote an essay in which he discussed this particular question, *The Decisive Treatise Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy* (*Faṣl al-Maqāl wa Taqrīr mā bayna 'l-Sharī'a wa 'l-Ḥikma min al-Ittiṣāl*). This essay has been published, translated, and studied by numerous scholars ever since its original edition, at the very beginning of the study of Arabic philosophy in the West, by M.J. Müller in 1859 in his book entitled *Philosophie und Theologie von Averroes* (Munich)—a fact that in itself demonstrates that the religion versus philosophy issue is completely a Western concern and has nothing to do with Arabic philosophy *per se*. Averroes begins his essay as follows:

The purpose of this treatise is to examine, *from the standpoint of the study of the Law*, whether the study of philosophy and logic is allowed by the Law, or prohibited, or commanded either by way of recommendation or as obligatory.²⁴

It is thus obvious from Averroes's own words which I emphasize here that this is a legal text, in answer essentially to another legal text by al-Ghazālī, not the *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, to which the philosophical response is Averroes' *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*. This discussion, along with a very few other legal responses on the question of the permissibility of the study of logic and philosophy in Islam, belong, from the point of view of the nature of their contents, to Islamic law and not to Arabic philosophy; one must not forget that both al-Ghazālī and Averroes were primarily legal scholars and known—and widely respected—as such in their respective communities. There is accordingly a double misunderstanding here in Western studies of Arabic philosophy; not only is what was in reality a legal debate mistaken for a philosophical controversy—with the unfortunate consequence of debasing the very contents of Arabic philosophy by viewing the dogmatic and sophistical thought characteristic of legal argumentation as representative of philosophical analysis and cogitation—but also the subject of that

²² Cf. D. Gutas, 'Avicenna: *De anima* (V 6). Über die Seele, über Intuition und Prophetie', in K. Flasch (ed.) *Hauptwerke der Philosophie. Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998), pp. 90–107.

²³ This approach was initiated by al-Fārābī and continued by subsequent philosophers. See the pioneering article by R. Walzer, 'Al-Fārābī's Theory of Prophecy and Divination', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), pp. 142–148, reprint in his *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford: Cassirer, 1962), pp. 206–219.

²⁴ George F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London: Luzac & Co., 1961), p. 44.

legal debate is taken to be representative of *all* Arabic philosophy and its central concern.

Arabic Philosophy ends with Averroes

The fourth obstacle, finally, which the orientalist biases that I have just described generated has been the widespread notion until relatively recently that Arabic philosophy ends with Averroes; this is the natural result if one views Arabic philosophy merely as an intermediary between late Greek and high medieval scholasticism, and if one views it from a Eurocentric perspective in which Averroism was indeed the last major theory from the Islamic world to have influenced medieval Western thought. Long before today, and to his undying credit, the French orientalist Henry Corbin demonstrated the falsity of this view in his by now classic *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (1964), a book which was also translated into English (1993). In numerous passages he makes the case in this regard very aptly:

We have ... lamented the fact that it has been repeated over and over again that Averroes was the greatest name and the most eminent representative of what has been called 'Arab philosophy', and that with him this philosophy attained its apogee and its goal. In this way we have lost sight of what was happening in the East, where in fact the work of Averroes passed as it were unnoticed. Neither Naṣīr Tūsī, nor Mīr Dāmād, nor Mullā Ṣadrā, nor Hādī Sabzavārī had any inkling of the role and the significance attributed by our textbooks to the Averroes–Ghazālī polemic. If it had been explained to them they would have been amazed, as their successors today are amazed.²⁵

And yet, after more than 30 years from the original appearance of Corbin's work, the fact remains that more than 90% of all the Western publications, books and articles on Arabic philosophy treat only or primarily the period from al-Kindī to Averroes, despite the fact that there is basic and original work to be done on all the philosophers after Averroes.

Let me give you a brief idea of how basic and how original with two examples. Although the preeminence of Avicenna is now universally acknowledged, we know next to nothing about his immediate school and successors who were, after all, responsible in large measure for the propagation and study of his works in the second half of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. There are no studies on any aspect of the subject, from the transmission of the text of Avicenna's works among his students, to the interpretation by them of his philosophy.²⁶

Second, there is the example of Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī, a philosopher from Mosul in northern Iraq who died in 1264. He wrote a handbook of logic, a summary treatment of all parts of the Aristotelian Organon, to which he even gave the Greek name of *Īsāghūjī*, i.e. *Eisagoge*, introduction to logic. The title is consciously borrowed from Porphyry—from the Greek, no less—but the subject matter is the entire Organon, not merely Porphyry's *quinque voces*. This

²⁵ Corbin, *History*, p. 242.

²⁶ A pioneering study in this regard is D.C. Reisman's *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) which traces the manuscript transmission of Avicenna's work and its diffusion among his immediate disciples. See also Griffel, *Apostasie*, pp. 341–349 for a discussion of the works of al-Lawkarī, a third generation student of Avicenna.

book gained astounding popularity in subsequent Arabic philosophy, was commented upon by dozens of scholars throughout the centuries, and was still studied in Islamic traditional schools in the Ottoman Empire earlier this century. To a large degree it supplanted even Avicenna's smaller productions on logic. Al-Abharī wrote also another very widely read *summa philosophiae*, *Philosophical Guidance (Hidāyat al-Ḥikma)*, in which he treated logic, physics, and metaphysics, following the pattern set once and for all by Avicenna. This book also was the object of very many commentaries and supercommentaries. But we know very little about both of these extremely influential works; neither their precise contents, nor an analysis of them, nor their relation to Avicenna's philosophy, nor, finally, the developments made in the commentaries on them.

The same attitude about philosophy after Averroes is still prevalent even in Majid Fakhry's *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, which appeared in 1970.²⁷ For Arabic philosophy after Averroes, Fakhry merely has a brief section (pp. 293–311) on the illuminationist tradition and its Safavid developments, following Corbin, but nothing about the seven centuries long tradition of Avicennism in the Arab lands and in the Ottoman Empire. The same unfortunately holds largely true also of the recent but very disappointing two-volume *History of Islamic Philosophy* edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman.²⁸

These four aspects of the orientalist approach to the study of Arabic philosophy have coloured its interpretation for the last century and a half, and it is little wonder that when non-Arabist historians of philosophy read such distorted perceptions of Arabic philosophy they are not impressed, much less incited to take up its study by learning Arabic. The sway of the orientalist approach has weakened considerably in recent decades, though it certainly has not ended yet. However, what is even more disturbing than the misperceptions created by the orientalist approach is that it gave rise to two alternative ways of studying Arabic philosophy which are currently rather strong and influential. One is the illuminationist interpretation of Henry Corbin and the other the political esoteric interpretation of Leo Strauss.

Illuminationist Approach

I stated above that the orientalist view that Arabic philosophy came to an end with Averroes caused subsequent authors to be neglected. This, of course, is true, but there are deeper causes for this neglect. Most of them have to do, ironically, also with Henry Corbin who, as I mentioned, championed the cause of the continuity of philosophy in Islam after Averroes. Corbin, an influential scholar of Iran and, one must decidedly add, contemporary mystic—the word he would have liked to have been used would be 'theosophist'—had an obsession with what he perceived to be Iranian spirituality.²⁹ His early work on the late-twelfth century philosopher Suhrawardī appears to have coloured his understanding not only of later Arabic philosophy but of Islamic civilization in

²⁷ (New York: Columbia, second edition 1984).

²⁸ (London: Routledge, 1996). Of the 1200 pages the two volumes contain, apart from the justifiably full treatment of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (pp. 527–584), only 12 pages (pp. 584–596) are devoted to the Avicennist tradition!

²⁹ See the obituary of Corbin by Charles-Henri de Fouchécour, *Journal Asiatique*, 267 (1979), pp. 231–237. An account of 'his work and influence' along hagiographic lines is provided by Pierre Lory in the Routledge *History of Islamic Philosophy*, II, pp. 1149–1155, with further bibliography.

general. Suhrawardī, who, apparently for completely unrelated reasons, was put to death in Aleppo in 1191 by the son of the great Saladin of Crusader fame (and apparently upon orders by Saladin), was the founder of the Illuminationist school, a Platonic version of Avicennism in which the Platonic ideas were given ontological status in what he called the ‘world of the archetypes’ (*‘ālam al-mithāl*), located between the sublunary world and the intelligible world of the spheres. Epistemologically, the world of the archetypes is accessible through the Aristotelian/Avicennan faculty of imagination, just as the intelligible world is accessible through the intellect. Following the lead of Avicenna, Suhrawardī also expressed his universe in poetic terms, using as his *leitmotiv* the ancient Zoroastrian concept of light, and interpreting the Platonic archetypes as well as the intelligible beings in terms of Zoroastrian angelology. It is in this context that access to the world of the archetypes and the intelligible world beyond is seen as illumination. Corbin chose to concentrate on the allegorical presentation of Suhrawardī’s system and see it as a fusion of philosophy and Islamic mysticism, and eventually arrived at the position of considering this new amalgam as representing the true image of all Islam. By so doing Corbin thus took the older orientalist position that Arabic philosophy is mystical to its logical conclusion and elevated it to the sole hermeneutical principle of his approach. He said, in effect, ‘al-Suhrawardī and, after him, the whole school of *ishrāqiyyūn* (Illuminationists) directed their efforts to uniting philosophical enquiry with personal spiritual realization. In Islam above all, the history of philosophy and the history of spirituality are inseparable’.³⁰ He thus spoke of ‘Islamic philosophy as of a philosophy whose development, and whose modalities, are essentially linked to the religious and spiritual fact of Islam’ (p. xiv). It is in this context that he spoke of and justified Arabic philosophy as ‘Islamic philosophy’ (pp. xii–xiv).

There are serious problems with this approach. In the first place, I speak of Arabic philosophy as Arabic not because of ethnic considerations, as Corbin suggests in his discussion, but for two major reasons. First, Arabic was the language of Islamic civilization and the vehicle in which the identity and self-consciousness of that culture was cultivated and transmitted to all citizens in the Islamic world, regardless of their religion. The philosophers who wrote philosophy as philosophy (and not as theology or mysticism, as Corbin would have it) were not only Muslims but Christians, Jews and pagans (the Ḥarrānians). They all participated in the same enterprise, and even more importantly, they saw and *identified* themselves as engaging in the same discipline with each other, beyond religious differences. In my chart I include, among others, Isaac Israeli and Maimonides, who were Jews, as well as Abū-Bishr Mattā, the founder of the Peripatetic school in Baghdad, and all his immediate followers except al-Fārābī, who were Christians. Thābit ibn Qurra was a pagan (Sabian), and al-Rāzī, for all practical purposes, was an atheist. It would thus be just as absurd to call them ‘Islamic philosophers’ in the religious sense that Corbin proposes as it would be to call Porphyry and Plotinus, for example, Syrian and Egyptian, respectively, or, for that matter, Roman philosophers. Secondly, and what is presupposed by my first point, is that through the efforts of the translators of Greek philosophical works, Arabic was made into a philosophical language which eventually won its autonomy and became a

³⁰ Corbin, *History*, p. xvi.

determining element in the expression of philosophical thought. Even in the cases where some late philosophical works were written in Persian, the terminology was still completely Arabic as was the way of thinking that underlay the expression.

More significantly, calling Arabic philosophy 'Islamic' and consequently seeing it as 'essentially linked to the religious and spiritual fact of Islam' injects an overpowering religious dimension to it which was not there. The distinction between philosophy and theology is well known to any student of medieval Latin philosophy and the two should not be confused: Arabic philosophy is not Islamic theology, either in the period before Avicenna or after him. Islamic theology may have borrowed concepts and positions from Arabic philosophy (mainly in dialectics and epistemology), just as Arabic philosophy paid attention to some of the subjects at the centre of Islamic theology (like the nature of the prophet's knowledge and of the attributes of the supreme being), but they remained distinct in so far as philosophy argued on the basis of philosophical data about philosophical subjects in demonstrative terms, while theology argued on the basis of revelational data about a largely different set of subjects in dialectical or rhetorical terms. By blurring this distinction in the name of what Corbin thinks is the higher reality of divine illumination, he makes of Arabic philosophy nothing more than Islamic mysticism and theology, he mistakenly directs attention only to 'prophecy and the prophetic Revelation' as the core elements of this philosophy (p. xv), and he ignores the hundreds of volumes written on logic (including rhetoric and poetics), on all parts of the traditional subjects dealt with under physics, as well as on metaphysics in the Aristotelian sense of the study of being *qua* being. In the end, it is small wonder that Corbin's volume on the history of Arabic philosophy, pioneering though it was in going beyond Averroes, did not excite scholars interested in Arabic philosophy; if all that Arabic philosophy after Averroes was, was some adolescent talk about mysticism and self realization, then philosophically minded researchers had certainly better things to do.

The inhibiting effect which Corbin's approach had on the study of later Arabic philosophy even extended to Avicenna. Following in the footsteps of Mehren who saw Avicenna's 'eastern' or 'Oriental' philosophy as mystical, as I discussed, Corbin went one step beyond and found in Avicenna the precursor and real founder of Suhrawardī's illuminationism, despite the fact that Suhrawardī himself accused Avicenna of being a thorough going Peripatetic with no understanding of this doctrine! As a result, the serious studies on Avicenna in the West after Corbin's book *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Tehran and Paris, 1954), translated into English in 1960 as *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, have been few and far between. Again, philosophers would not bother to look if all they could expect to find was confessional esotericism. And by the same token, just as Corbin's approach alienated philosophers from the study of Avicenna and all post-Avicennan Arabic philosophy, it attracted scholars who were interested precisely in confessional esotericism as a means to promote their personal or ethnic or religious chauvinistic agenda. This is a far cry from studying Arabic philosophy as philosophy in its historical context, much less making it accessible to historians of philosophy and scholars of Islam!

An outgrowth of this approach, which has become increasingly popular in the last 20 years (as it follows the rise of religious fundamentalism in both the

Islamic world and the West), is the view that Islamic philosophy, theology, and mysticism are closely related and that their common inspiration and origins are to be found in the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth. This approach, which can be called Islamic apologetics, is taken by a number of Muslim scholars, foremost among whom is Seyyed Hossein Nasr.³¹ In this case, confessionalism has completely replaced scholarship.

Political Approach

Finally, I will now briefly turn to the third major cause for the erroneous approaches to Arabic philosophy in the twentieth century. This may be known to most of you; it concerns the hermeneutical methods of Leo Strauss as applied to the interpretation of Arabic philosophy. Just as Corbin's tendency to interpret all Arabic philosophy as illuminationism is an offshoot of the older orientalist view of it as mystical and non-rational, so also Strauss's approach is an offshoot of the older orientalist conception of Arabic philosophy as being invariably about the conflict between religion and philosophy. And just as Corbin allowed his own idiosyncratic interpretation of Suhrawardī to colour his understanding of all Arabic philosophy, so also did Strauss start with Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* and applied what he understood from it as valid for all Arabic philosophy.³² In that introduction, Maimonides lists the various causes which 'account for the contradictory or contrary statements to be found in any book or compilation', and offers suggestions about how they are to be read in order to eliminate all seeming inconsistencies and contradictions.³³ There is nothing novel in this approach of Maimonides; allegorical interpretation of religious texts is as old as at least the Stoics and had been in constant use throughout the centuries in all religious traditions in the Middle East until the time of Maimonides; as for philosophical texts, their obscurity, and especially the obscurity of Aristotle's works, had become in late antiquity a doctrinal *topos* among the Aristotelians of Alexandria. Al-Fārābī adopted wholesale the Alexandrian teaching on this issue—as in many others—and repeated the reasons for Aristotle's obscurity as follows:

Aristotle used an obscure way of expression for three reasons: first, to test the nature of the student in order to find out whether he is suitable to be educated or not; second, to avoid lavishing philosophy on all people, but only on those who are worthy of it; and third, to train the mind [of the student] through the exertion of research.³⁴

³¹ See, for example, his article on 'The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth as Source and Inspiration of Islamic Philosophy' in the Routledge *History of Islamic Philosophy*, I, pp. 27–39. Numerous other articles in the same publication consistently blur the distinctions among these three disciplines. For a discussion of S.H. Nasr's ideological background, theoretical orientation, and place in modern Iranian intellectual history see M. Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), pp. 120–130.

³² For a clear account of the relationship of the development of Strauss's thoughts on method to his reading of Maimonides see Rémi Brague, 'Leo Strauss et Maïmonide', in S. Pines and Y. Yovel (eds) *Maimonides and Philosophy* (Dordrecht and Boston, MA: M. Nijhoff, 1986), pp. 246–268; English translation as 'Leo Strauss and Maimonides', in A. Udoff (ed.) *Leo Strauss's Thought* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner, 1991), pp. 93–114. Literature on both Strauss and Maimonides has grown out of bounds. The particular influence of Arabic philosophy on Strauss's thought is analysed by G. Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne. Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). An interesting analysis of the ideological background of Strauss's historical/philosophical hermeneutics and its relationship to right wing politics is provided by G. Paraboschi, *Leo Strauss e la destra americana* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1993), especially pp. 70–78.

³³ See S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 17.

³⁴ Al-Fārābī, *Mā yanbaghī an Yuqaddama Qabla Ta'allum Falsafat Aristū* (Cairo: 1910), p. 14, translated by D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), p. 227.

Maimonides, as is well known, was a faithful follower of al-Fārābī. In the introduction to his *Guide*, he largely adopts the arguments about how to read a philosophical text from al-Fārābī's works, and especially from the latter's *Agreement between Plato and Aristotle* (*Al-Jam' bayna Ra'yay al-Ḥakīmayn*). By Maimonides' time, these arguments had already become in themselves a *topos* in Arabic philosophy through their wide use and dissemination by Avicenna.³⁵

Strauss, who, for all his accomplishments, did not know Arabic well enough to read Arabic philosophy and hence did not know Arabic philosophy, failed to see the historical context and philosophical pedigree of Maimonides' introduction, and already influenced by his work on Socrates and his execution by the Athenians, misinterpreted the introduction to mean that philosophers never say explicitly what they mean out of fear of persecution and lest they suffer the same fate as Socrates. He then generalized this position, allegedly held by Maimonides, to all Muslim philosophers, if one is to judge by his analysis of al-Fārābī's works. Al-Fārābī, incidentally, is a particularly inappropriate philosopher if one wishes to document Strauss's thesis because, first, he is explicitly critical of theology as a science, relegating it to a status little more than the verbal counterpart of street fighting, and second, with religion in general, he is equally explicit in assigning to it a purely functional role in society, namely to maintain the social order among the unlettered masses.

Strauss's interpretation of Arabic philosophy is based on two assumptions: first, it is assumed that philosophers writing in Arabic worked in a hostile environment and were obliged to represent their views as being in conformity with Islamic religion; and second, that they had to present their real philosophical views in disguise. 'What is required [therefore, in order to understand their text,] is a *key* to understanding the peculiar way in which the text has been composed, and that key is to be found by paying attention to the conflict between 'religion and philosophy'.³⁶ And this brings us back to the origin of Strauss's hermeneutics, the orientalist notion that all of Arabic philosophy is about the conflict between religion and philosophy; for how else could one hold Strauss's view and claim that philosophers never say what they mean when they write about logic, all subjects of physics (other than the eternity of the world), etc. which are patently not threatening to the presumed orthodoxy of the religious authorities?

Now not only is this position untenable in the case of Muslim Arabic philosophers because it is contradicted by historical facts—there is not a single such philosopher who was ever persecuted, let alone executed, for his *philosophical* views³⁷—but it is wrong even in the case of Maimonides; he and his family were persecuted by the Almohads and had to leave Spain in 1149 not because Moses was a philosopher—in any case, he was barely in his teens at the time—but because they were Jews. Furthermore, it is patently absurd to claim

³⁵ See the discussion of this subject, with regard to Avicenna and his predecessors, in Gutas, *Avicenna*, pp. 225–234.

³⁶ Cited from O. Leaman, 'Does the Interpretation ...', p. 525.

³⁷ Suhrawardī (d. 1192), who is usually cited as an example in this connection (most recently by Griffel, *Apostasie*, p. 358), was executed because he had usurped, though an outsider to Aleppo, the position of the local 'ulamā' as confidant and manipulator of the prince, al-Malik al-Zāhir, Saladin's son. The execution of Abū 'l-Ma'ālī al-Mayānājī (d. 1131; also cited by Griffel) took place not because of his philosophical beliefs but, as even al-Bayhaqī reports, 'on account of an enmity between him and the vizier Abū 'l-Qāsim al-Anasābādhi', see M. Meyerhof, 'Alī al-Bayhaqī's Tatimmat Šiwān al-Ḥikma', *Osiris*, 8 (1948), p. 175.

that philosophy was in a hostile environment in Islamic societies when it was practised in various times and places throughout Islamic history for well over 10 centuries (again, a look at the chart is instructive). And yet, one finds statements such as the following and representing assumptions, as if they were hard facts, upon which the entire edifice of Straussian interpretation rests:

Islamic political philosophy has *always* been pursued in a setting where great care had to be taken to avoid violating the revelations and traditions accepted by the Islamic community, since these offer guide-lines for the secular conduct of that community, as well as injunctions about the manner in which its religious life should be conducted.³⁸

This sweeping statement is offered as a given; there is not a single reference to any source, primary or secondary, that would support it; since this setting is supposed to have been so ‘always’, it should have been easy to find even a single instance to substantiate it. But the interest of such authors is not in history; starting from the biased orientalist attitude that philosophy could not thrive in ‘Islam’ because of the intrinsically anti-rationalist nature of the latter, they proceed to add to it misinterpretations culled, in this case, from the presumed hermeneutics of a medieval Jewish scholar. The notion that ‘Islam’ is inimical to rational philosophical thought, upon which such claims rest, is itself an orientalist notion, based partly on anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic prejudice and partly on ignorance of social realities in Islamic societies throughout history.³⁹

Nevertheless, Strauss’s theory gained adherents among students of Arabic philosophy. It had two major negative consequences, both naturally following from the two fundamental assumptions of their position I just mentioned. To begin with, it created a hermeneutical libertarianism, or arbitrariness, among its proponents when they read Arabic philosophical texts. That is to say, if one assumes a philosopher not to have meant what he said and always to have concealed his true meaning, how is one to understand his text? In other words, how is one to find the ‘key’ with which to unlock his allegedly secret meaning? Straussians, of course, always claim to have the right key and to be able to read correctly between the lines, but their claim by itself cannot hide the arbitrariness of their enterprise nor the fact that if there are no rules to the game then anybody’s interpretation of a philosophical text would be equally valid.⁴⁰ The result of this hermeneutical libertarianism has been that a number of Straussian scholars felt completely at liberty to disregard even the most elementary rules of philological and historical research. These scholars, in comparing Arabic philosophical texts with those of Plato and Aristotle, conduct their discussion as if the Arabic philosophers had recourse to the same Greek texts of Aristotle and Plato as ours, and as if they had the same understanding of ancient Greek society and institutions as ours. Thus all historical and philological factors which conditioned the Arabic philosophers’ understanding of the Greek philosophical

³⁸ C.E. Butterworth, ‘Rhetoric and Islamic Political Philosophy’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3 (1972), p. 187; emphasis added.

³⁹ The orientalist basis of the Straussian approach is discussed by O. Leaman, ‘Orientalism and Islamic Philosophy’, in the Routledge *History of Islamic Philosophy*, II, pp. 1145–1146.

⁴⁰ The literary pathology of overinterpretation, where interpretation has no uniform criteria, is analysed by Umberto Eco (in the essays in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with R. Rorty, J. Culler, and C. Brooke-Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), who brings out its paranoiacal and obsessive nature (see, e.g. p. 48). Though Eco makes no reference to Strauss, his analyses are significant for placing the Straussian enterprise both within a historically recognizable tradition and an ideological framework.

tradition are eliminated: factors such as translators' misunderstandings, scribal errors, extrapolations, exegetical additions and elaborations that accumulated over the 12 centuries and more that separate classical Greek philosophy and the beginning of Arabic, and the semantic and connotative range of Arabic terms and expressions that were current at the time of each Arabic philosopher.⁴¹ Needless to say, the result of such analysis is closer to *belles-lettres* than to historical scholarship.

The same assumption, that philosophers hide their true meaning, leads to another absurd result, equally untenable. If philosophers can hide their meaning in a text so well that only other philosophers can understand it, this assumes that throughout the history of Islamic societies for over 10 centuries there have been only a few dozen or so supremely intelligent individuals—the philosophers—who could accomplish this, and that all the other thousands of 'religious' scholars, from whom the philosophers were successful in concealing their true meaning, were absolute idiots, unable to read between the lines! And by further consequence, that the contemporary Straussian scholar, who has no trouble unlocking the 'concealed' meaning of the philosophers, is intellectually the superior of these thousands of religious scholars.⁴²

The second negative consequence of the Straussian position has been the assumption that the key to understanding the allegedly secret meaning of the philosophers is politics. Since Arabic philosophy is assumed to be about religion and philosophy, and since—it is stressed—in Islam (as in Judaism and in contrast with medieval Catholicism) there was no separation of canon and civil law and hence if 'philosophy was to reflect upon any law it had to be *the Law*', that is the Islamic religious Law,⁴³ then the reason why Arabic philosophers allegedly had to disguise their real opinions was because they wrote about politics and that what they were doing was, in essence, political philosophy. Thus all Arabic philosophy until Averroes is seen as having a political framework. Let me quote the main proponent of the Straussian position among students of Arabic philosophy, Muhsin Mahdi:

Throughout its long history in Islam, philosophy was understood by those who practiced it as the science of the sciences that included the investigation and interpretation of

⁴¹ For examples see the reviews (a) of Ch. E. Butterworth's *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) by J.N. Mattock in the *Classical Review*, 37 (1989), pp. 332–333, and by D. Gutas in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 110 (1990), pp. 92–101; and (b) of J. Paredis's *Metaphysics as Rhetoric* (Albany: SUNY, 1995) by D. Gutas in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 4 (1998), pp. 405–411. Butterworth's response to my review, apart from failing to answer a single specific charge made, is indicative of the political framework of overinterpretation—mentioned in the preceding note—indulged in by Straussians; see his 'Translation and Philosophy: the Case of Averroes' Commentaries', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 26 (1994), pp. 19–35, and cf. his 'De la traduction philosophique', *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, 48 (1996), pp. 77–85.

⁴² A very pertinent example, which I quote from Gutas 'Ibn Ṭufayl on Ibn Sīnā', p. 223 note 2, is offered in the article by M. Mahdi on Arabic 'Philosophical Literature' (in *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period* [The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature], edited by M.J.L. Young *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 76–105. Mahdi claims that Ibn Ṭufayl understands Ibn Sīnā's reference to Eastern philosophy in the Prologue to the *Shifā'* 'to mean that one needs to engage in a "careful" reading of the *Shifā'* and Aristotle's writings'. Ibn Ṭufayl, Mahdi continues, thus distinguishes between the 'surface' and the 'deep sense' of these books and then employs this distinction for three purposes: 'to avoid having to deal explicitly with any of the issues raised by al-Ghazālī in his *Tahāfut*', 'to hint that ... al-Ghazālī dealt with the surface sense of Ibn Sīnā's *Shifā'*', and 'to protect philosophic writings against the prying eyes of a man like al-Ghazālī' (p. 101). This analysis assumes that Ibn Ṭufayl thought Islamic scholars of the calibre of al-Ghazālī stupid enough to be duped by his alleged verbal and compositional acrobatics, something which is far from being the case.

⁴³ For a statement of this position see the Introduction by R. Lerner and M. Mahdi in *Medieval Political Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), p. 14.

religion (revelation, prophecy, and the divine law) as a *philosophic* problem ... In the classical period of Islamic philosophy, religion (including theology and jurisprudence) were investigated within the framework provided by political philosophy ... This political framework was largely abandoned in the post-classical period ... and replaced by a new framework provided by Islamic mysticism.⁴⁴

These assertions are made on very flimsy evidence; in fact, the only Arabic philosopher of the 'classical' period, i.e. of the period before Averroes, who has been repeatedly studied for his so-called 'political' philosophy has been al-Fārābī. Other than him, there is no other philosopher who with any stretch of the imagination can be said to have been a 'political philosopher'. A good case in point is the reader/textbook on *Medieval Political Philosophy* put together by Muhsin Mahdi and Ralph Lerner, both Sraussians and thus to be counted on to unearth any piece of writing that could be considered as political, however remotely. Other than al-Fārābī, this anthology includes Avicenna, one brief essay by Avempace, selections from Ibn Ṭufayl, and Averroes' *Decisive Treatise*. This last one, as we discussed earlier, is not on political philosophy, but on Islamic law. Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical romance is about the *philosophus autodidactus*, an epistemological tale, while Avempace's essay, *Conduct of the Self-exile* (*Tadbīr al-Mutawahhid*) is an ambiguous piece on how to achieve salvation when one is not ruled by a virtuous ruler, as defined by al-Fārābī. As for Avicenna, the pieces selected have nothing to do with political philosophy but only with the allegorical interpretation of texts revealed by prophets, as we discussed earlier in the case of Maimonides. It is also very significant that of the 10 allegedly 'political' texts collected in this anthology by Lerner and Mahdi, only two are cited in their entirety, and of these the one is the legal essay by Averroes; the rest are cited in fragments that refer to social questions or prophetology. These fragmentary passages, plucked as they are out of their context in the fuller works that have nothing to do with political philosophy, generate the false impression that there are significant texts in Arabic on political philosophy.

The truth of the matter is that there is no political philosophy as such in Arabic, as the term is normally understood, before Ibn Khaldūn; there is, in other words, no independent field of study within Arabic philosophy which investigates political agents, constituencies, and institutions as autonomous elements that operate according to their own dynamic within the structure of the society.⁴⁵ The discussion on the perfect or virtuous ruler that we do find in al-Fārābī is centred on emanationist metaphysics and the theory of the intellect (noetics) of Alexander of Aphrodisias as developed by al-Fārābī himself. I will cite here a very brief passage by al-Fārābī:

As it is stated in Aristotle's *De Anima*, union with the Active Intellect [for man] results from possessing the acquired intellect ... The power that enables man to understand how to define things and actions and how to direct them toward happiness, emanates from the

⁴⁴ Muhsin Mahdi with M.W. Wartofsky in the Editors' Note in *The Philosophical Forum*, 4 (1973), p. 4. Mahdi later expanded on this position in *The Political Orientation of Islamic Philosophy*, Occasional Papers Series (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1982).

⁴⁵ Even the scholars most predisposed to find such political philosophy in Islam had serious difficulties documenting it and thus discussed what they termed the political 'aspects' of Arabic philosophy; see the articles edited by C.E. Butterworth, *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy* [Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi], (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Active Intellect to the passive intellect. This emanation that proceeds from the Active Intellect to the passive through the mediation of the acquired intellect, is revelation. Now because the Active Intellect emanates from the being of the First Cause, it can for this reason be said that it is the First Cause that brings about revelation to man through the mediation of the Active Intellect. The rule of this man is the supreme rule; all other human rulerships are inferior to it and derived from it ... The men who are governed by the rule of this ruler are the virtuous, good, and happy men. If they form a nation, then that is the virtuous nation; if they are associated in a single [city], then the [city] that brings together all those subject to such a rule is the virtuous city.⁴⁶

The noetic basis of al-Fārābī's so-called 'political philosophy' was well understood by the real political philosopher in Islam, Ibn Khaldūn, who said the following about the subject:

By 'government of the city' (*al-siyāsa al-madaniyya*), the philosophers mean simply *the disposition of soul and character* which each member of a social organization must have if, eventually, people are completely to have no need of rulers. They call the social organization that fulfills these requirements the 'virtuous city' (*al-madīna al-fāḍila*). The norms observed in this connection are called 'government of the city.' *They do not mean the kind of government that the members of a social organization are led to adopt through laws for the common interest. That is something different.* The 'virtuous city' of the philosophers is something whose realization (*wuqū'*) is rare and remote. They discuss it only as a hypothesis.⁴⁷

The passages I emphasize in Ibn Khaldūn's formulation make it abundantly clear that he also denied the philosophers any contribution to political philosophy proper: 'that is something different', something which Ibn Khaldūn himself treats. One may have reservations about a number of things in Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima*, but in terms of general knowledge of and insight into Islamic civilization, as well as on the particular issue under discussion here, historians of Arabic philosophy would have been (and would be) well advised to follow him rather than Strauss. Nevertheless, the prevalence of the Straussian interpretation of al-Fārābī has had a chilling effect on mainstream studies of this very significant philosopher, just as the prevalence of Corbin's illuminationist interpretation of Avicenna for a long time inhibited mainstream research on Avicenna. Furthermore, as can be seen from Mahdi's statement I quoted earlier, it appears that these two approaches have monopolized between themselves the study of the entire Arabic philosophy; the Straussians claim the classical period as their own while ceding to the illuminationists the post-classical period. The wide dissemination of studies that were and are the result of the old orientalist approach with its many shortcomings, and the currently reigning two offspring of that approach, the Straussian and Illuminationist, account for most of the misrepresentations of Arabic philosophy.

Investigated under these conditions, it is small wonder that Arabic philosophy has not yet gained the respect of historians of philosophy and other scholars of Arabic and Islam; we, the students of Arabic philosophy have simply failed them and also failed the field itself. There is therefore much work to be done, and one

⁴⁶ *The Political Regime, or The Principles of Beings*, as cited in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy*, pp. 36–37.

⁴⁷ Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddima*, ed. M. Quatremère (Paris: B. Duprat, 1858), II, p. 127; translation adapted from F. Rosenthal, *Ibn Khaldūn, The Muqaddimah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, second edition, 1967), II, p. 138.

hopes that in the twenty-first century, the efforts of scholars will concentrate on the edition, translation, and study of the literally hundreds of important texts of Arabic philosophy that span the 10 centuries of its existence. This will generate the indispensable material on the basis of which we will be in a position to write, in the twenty-second century, a serious history of Arabic philosophy.

Postscript

This lecture presents a preliminary and synoptic approach to the study of the historiography of the history of Arabic philosophy. Though the subject has not been treated before to any appreciable degree, to the extent that students of Arabic philosophy, of whatever background, had their formation in the Western intellectual tradition, it is part and parcel of the wider field of the historiography of the history of philosophy, to which numerous significant and sophisticated studies have been devoted. See, for example, some seminal articles in the following collections: *The Historiography of the History of Philosophy, History and Theory*, Beiheft 5 ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1965); J. Rée, M. Ayers and A. Westoby, *Philosophy and Its Past* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978); R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner, *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and G. Boss, *La philosophie et son histoire* (Zurich: Éditions du Grand Midi, 1996), which also contains a bibliography of all the relevant twentieth century literature (pp. 327–349). To gain a perspective on the accomplishments (or lack thereof, as I have tried to argue in this lecture) of the historiography of Arabic philosophy, it is necessary that it be subjected to the same kind of detailed scrutiny. We have an invaluable resource and a starting point in that direction. The resource is Hans Daiber's excellent *Bibliography of Islamic Philosophy*, 2 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1999) (cf. my review in the *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 11 (2000), pp. 368–372); the starting point is Daiber's article in the same work on 'What is the Meaning of and to What End Do We Study the History of Islamic Philosophy? The History of a Neglected Discipline', (pp. xi–xxxiii), which presents an almost complete and annotated bibliography of histories of Arabic philosophy from the Middle Ages to the present. I hope that the present essay will serve to start the discussion; some of the references in the notes raise questions or point to issues that could not have been adequately addressed within the format of a public lecture.