

## Greek Philosophy in The Schools of Baghdad: Muslim Philosophers' Apologia for its Enquiry

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to make a brief survey of the development of philosophical studies in medieval Islamic Baghdad and also to inquire into the question of why foreign sciences such as Greek thought was studied by the Muslims. Medieval Islamic Baghdad appears to us, to be comparable with this modern world of ours. In the one, the non-Muslims from various part of the world came to Baghdad to pursue their academic interests and specialities, as with the other, the Muslims of today came to the West for very much the same purposes. Thus this paper seeks to represent an example of the creative interaction – we may say “dialogue” - between western and Islamic thought.*

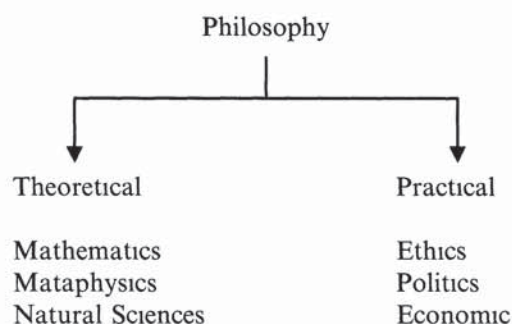
### 1. INTRODUCTION: PHILOSOPHY AND ITS SCOPE

Greek philosophy had been studied in the East for many Centuries before the advent of Islam mostly by the Christians. Jundi Shapur in Persia, Harran in Mesopotamia and Alexandria in Egypt were among the most eminent centres on this side of the world which were noted for Hellenistic culture. It was in the these places that Greek thought passed to the medieval Muslim philosophers. (See Ibn al-Nadīm 1971–72, 238–265; D L. O’Leary 1949, 19–175; and Max Meyerhof 1930, 6–42).

Let us first see what philosophy means to the Arabs, particularly to the Muslims. To mention but a few examples, al-Kindī (1974, 55), the first Muslim philosopher defines philosophy as the “Knowledge of the reality of things within man’s possibility, because the philosopher’s end in his theoretical knowledge is to gain truth and in his practical knowledge to behave in accordance with truth” Al-Kindī’s immediate successors, al-Rāzī (d. 925) and al-Fārābī (d. 950), accepted this view in principle, though adding their own opinions: al-Rāzī (1950, 14), view philosophy as a striving to resemble God in so far as possible; whereas al-Fārābī (1983, 88; and 1985, 73–77) regarded philosophy as having the scientific state of mind in the quest and the love for the highest wisdom. As with regard to the goal of philosophy, al-Fārābī, like his predecessor al-Kindī, holds that the end towards which the philosopher should tend in acquiring

philosophy is the knowledge of God, and hence the actions he should perform are nothing but the good or the imitation of God. Ikhwān al-Safā (a group of 10th/11th century philosophers), on the other hand, seem to have summarised all the previous and current definitions of philosophy as follows: “The beginning of philosophy is the love of the sciences; its middle is knowledge of the reality of things to the extent to which man is capable; and its end is speech and action in conformity with this knowledge” (S. Hossein Nasr 1973, 65).

To sum up, philosophy was commonly defined by the Muslim philosophers in two-fold complementary divisions: one as a knowledge of the reality of all that exists, divine and human; and the other, as the doing of good and fulfilling one’s functions within the measure of one’s knowledge and capacity. They called the former speculative or theoretical philosophy, while the latter, practical philosophy.



Al-Tūsī (1964, 26, 27–29), for instance, like other scholars, lists three major subjects: metaphysics, mathematics and natural sciences under theoretical philosophy; while ethics, economics and politics come under practical philosophy. He further subdivides these headings into much smaller branches and accordingly affirms: “In whomsoever these concepts are realised, such is a perfect philosopher and a man of excellence, his rank being the highest among human kind” Miskawayh (d. 1030) whom al-Tūsī (1964, 25) refers to as the perfect philosopher, likewise stresses previously that there is no short cut to become a *real philosopher*, since one has to be familiar with all sciences. One should first acquire discipline under speculative philosophy comprising logic, natural philosophy and divine philosophy and proceed with ethics, economics and politics. The last three subjects, says Miskawayh (1900, 67–68), are the subdivisions of practical philosophy. Here are his very words: “That fortunate person, who has attained proficiency in both speculative and



practical wisdom, is entitled to the honourable appellation of “sage” or “philosopher” (Miskawayh 1900, 68). Otherwise, Miskawayh continues:

A man is only entitled to be called according to the science he serves. For instance, the one who knows the exact sciences will be called a mathematician, the one who knows the world of the stars an astronomer, another will be a physician, another a logician, another a grammarian, etc. None of these can be called a philosopher. But he who gradually acquires all the sciences and reaches the ultimate and final stage can be called by the honourable title of *philosopher* (Miskawayh 1900, 13; 1945, 1947, 98).

Thus, the expression “*philosophy*” (*ḥikma* or *falsafah*) among the Muslim philosophers, at the very least, refers to almost all the available scholarly and scientific disciplines within the purview of Aristotelian literature (Franz Rosenthal 1975, 52). To many of them *philosophy* is a part, or perhaps one of the most crucial parts of human sciences (*al-‘ulūm*), but very much inferior when compared to the Islamic religious sciences (Miskawayh 1951, 268–269; al-‘Āmirī 1988, 101–103). Though in the more usual practice the Muslims divide sciences into: (1) “*Religious*” (*dīniyya*, *illāhiyya*, *milliyya*) or “*tradisional*” (*naqliyya*): the knowledge that has to do with Islamic *Sharī‘a*, i.e., jurisprudence (*fiqh*), traditions (hadīth) and their like; and (2) “*Philosophical*” (*falsafiyya*, *hikmiyya*) or “*rational*” (*‘aqliyya*): that has a definite link with Greek learning in general, mathematics, ethics, natural sciences and so on; likewise, they called those who were skilled in the former ‘*ulamā*’ (scholars), while the latter *falāsifa* or *hukamā*’ (philosophers) (See al-Khwārazmī 1984, 13–15). But it seems that it was also prevalent predominantly among the Baghdad philosophers to attribute the title “*philosopher*” to those who master both fields of knowledge, i.e., traditional and rational or religious and philosophical together.

As a result, it was a well known phenomenon in the Arabic mediaeval ages that philosophers were at the same time dubbed with the title ‘*ulamā*’ or with one particular subject matter of “*traditional*” sciences like *fuqahā*’ (jurists), *mufasssīrūn* (*Qur’ānic* commentators) and *mutakallimūn* (theologians), as with respect to that of the “*philosophical*” sciences like “*logicians*”, “*physicians*” and so on. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), for instance, was very famous in both the East and the West as a philosopher (*ḥakīm*), but it was Ibn Rushd also who was similarly noted as a jurist (*faqīh*) and worked as a judge (*qādī*) as well as a physician (*ṭabīb*).

A philosopher (*ḥakīm* or *faylasūf*), that being so, is at once a religious scholar, scientist, politician and their like, but not every scholar or scientist is a philosopher. These blended skills and qualities will enable him to reach the ultimate aim of his existence which is happiness in the

present life as well as in the next. This highest summit is, then, scarcely open to any but the supreme philosophers. He should be, as idealized by Ikhwān al-Safā' (1928, II 316; T.J. De Boer 1970, 95):

Of East-Persian derivation, Arabic in faith, of Iraq, i.e., Babylonian, education, a Hebrew in astuteness, a disciple of Christ in conduct, as pious as a Syrian Monk, a Greek in the individual sciences, an Indian in the interpretation of all mysteries, but lastly and especially, a *sufī* in his whole spiritual life.

## 2. PHILOSOPHY IN THE SCHOOLS OF BAGHDAD

In the East, Greek science was studied as early as the fourth century, not however, by the Arab Muslims but by the Arab Syrian Christians. Numerous Greek treatises on theology, philosophy and logic were definitely part of their syllabus of learning (R. Walzer 1962, 4). However, borrowing the words of Prof. T. J. De Boer (1970, 17) "The Syrians, it is true, produced nothing original; but their activity as translators was of advantage to Arab-Persian science" It was Syrians who brought wine, silk and other precious items to the West. But it was Syrians also who cultivated Greek sciences for more than five centuries before they eventually transmitted them to a relatively small group of mediaeval Muslim scholars, i.e., philosophers. This transmission took place extensively after the first half of the 9th century and extended until about early 11th century (D.L. O'Leary 1949, 155–175). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that without the assiduous works of the translators, Islamic philosophy would not have come into existence, as some writers including R. Walzer (1962, 7–8), has claimed. For the Muslims had already produced the first renowned philosopher, al-Kindī (d. 873), before hardly and single philosophical translation of Greek works apparently had been made. Further, the fact that philosophical distinctions arose earlier in Islamic theology (*Kalām*) and by now were fairly well established, although there was no clear link with Greek philosophy, is another interesting and significant fact in this context (Oliver Leaman 1985, 5–6).

Following the establishment of the School of Baghdad, *Bayt al-Hikma* (The House of Wisdom), an official institute for translation and research, by the 'Abbāsīd Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 883) in 830 A. D., and other philosophical schools like those of al-Fārābī (d. 950) and al-Sijistānī (d. 1001); the Muslim philosophers began to apply themselves directly to the original Greek sources in addition to the works of the translators and commentators, particularly those of the Neo-Platonists at their disposal (See Ibn al-Nadīm 1971–72, 238–303). With these varied views belonging to different cultures and schools of thought, not to



mention the Persian and Indian elements (Ṣā'īd al-Andalusī 1967, 10-116), in addition to their own ability to revise, assimilate and improve them, the Muslim philosophers formulated a philosophy full of peculiar characteristics and originality. It is not surprising, therefore, that Islamic intellectual culture was then transported back to mediaeval Christian Europe roughly from the 9th century until it began to decline in the 16th century A. D. Without the Arabs, argued Prof. Montgomery Watt (1982, 43): "European science and philosophy would not have developed when they did"

Nevertheless, it was Muslim and Jewish scholars who played a vital role in this later cultural transmission, in contrast to the former, i.e., from classical Greek to Islamic mediaeval Baghdad, which was carried out mainly by Christian translators such men as Hunayn Ibn Ishāq (d. 874), Ishāq Ibn Ḥunayn (d. 911), Ibn Zur'a (d. 1008) and others. But, yet again, it would be wrong to assume that none of the translators, in either case, was a Muslim, as R. Walzer (1962, 60), seems to have maintained. The great Muslim philosophers, such as al-Kindī (d. 873), Ibn al-Khammār also called Hasan bin Suwar (d. 1017), 'Isā bin 'Alī (d. 1001), and Abū 'Uthmān al-Dīmashqī (died after 914), to mention but a few, were also themselves leading translators. Thus, many Muslim philosophers were also able to read the Greek philosophers in their own language. Moreover, the role of the Caliphs and other patrons of learning including Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 833), and Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861), who, in turn, generously supported and spent a considerable sum of money on employing translators including the famous Christian Hunayn Ibn Ishāq (d. 874) and others, should not be ignored in having made this cultural interaction possible.

As a result, by the 11th century Baghdad, most of Aristotle's major works on logic: *Categories*, *De Interpretatione*, *Analytica Priora*, *Analytica Posteriora*, *Topica*, *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, *Rhetorica*, and *Poetica*; on natural science: *Physica Auscultation*, *De Coelo*, *Meteorologica*, and *Book of Animals*; on psychology: *De Anima*; and on ethics: perhaps *Magna Moralia* and *Ethica Nicomachea* had been translated, on some occasions in full, into Arabic. However, only a very small portion of Aristotle's *Politics* and *Metaphysics* had been translated, but their places appeared to have been taken by Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*. Plato's *Timaeus* and probably some of his dialogues were also accessible to the mediaeval Arabic philosophers. Besides, they also knew Greek authors of late antiquity and Neo-Platonic writers such as Galen (d. 199), Plotinus (d. 269), Porphyry (d. 310), Proclus (d. 485), Plutarch (d. 481) and others and some of their important writings such as Galen's *Ethics* (*Kitāb al-Akhlāq*); the last three sections of Plotinus's *Enneads* (*Uthūljīya Aristātālīs*), Porphyry's and Themistius's commentaries on

Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*, and Nicolaus of Damascus's (1st century A.D.) summary on the same work of Aristotle was also available. (See Ibn al-Nadīm 1971–72, 245–255; Miskawayh 1917, 63–80).

### 3. GREEK PHILOSOPHY THE PHILOSOPHERS' APOLOGIA FOR ITS ENQUIRY

We can now appreciate how important philosophy was to the Arabs. Philosophy was not only viewed as a combination of both intellectual and legal reasoning, but also as a way of life. This perception has ultimately led the philosophers towards the acceptance of Greek thought and also towards the need for an apologetic on behalf of philosophical study and on the relation between philosophy and the divine revelation. Some essential features of such an apologia can be simply classified as under:

1. There is a widespread agreement among the philosophers of various background that there could be no conflict between religion and philosophy; rather, religion must in some way embody the fundamental aspects of philosophical reasoning. Philosophy and religion or reason and revelation are essentially compatible, as are the exoteric and esoteric. Reason or philosophy confirms the doctrine of religion just as the latter brings the result of the former to perfection.

Philosophy is the friend and family of the divine law. They both supply knowledge about the truth, i.e., God and all existence, and both seek to secure the ultimate end for the sake of which man is made, that is happiness (al-Fārābī 1983, 90). Nevertheless, in so doing, religion guides the masses as a whole; while philosophy, in contrast, leads only a chosen few, i.e., the philosophers (Ibn Rushd 1954, II: 360). Hence, religion is general, philosophy is special. Religion is the medicine of the sick and the means to cure their sickness; whereas philosophy is the medicine of the healthy and the way to preserve their health.

On the distinction between religion and philosophy, Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindī (d. 873), al-ʿĀmirī (d. 992), and al-Sijistānī (d. 1001), all agree in principle that religion and philosophy are both truth and are essentially compatible. To them, the custodian of religion is the prophet, while that of philosophy is the philosopher. Religion is then based on the divine revelation, while philosophy on human reason. Religion originates from God, philosophy from reasoning or philosophising. One requires faith in God and His prophets, the other concerns understanding and interpreting God's revelation. It is not surprising, therefore, that while the philosophers were accepting and improving Greek scientific views, they, in contrast, discarded their religious



opinions, for they think that they are the products of reasoning. Yet the philosophers still consider some sections of the ancient sciences such as magic, conjuring, amulets and their like, as reprehensible and unacceptable. (See al-ʿĀmirī 1988, 80-81, and al-Tawhīdī 1953, II: 18–19).

2. There are some who go as far as to establish the proposition that the divine law demands philosophy. Revelation in general incites and stimulates the use of reason in order to understand God's creations and thereby God himself. Such an intellectual understanding, according to the philosophers, is philosophy (Ibn Rushd 1986, 22-29). Hence, revelation recommends philosophical enquiry.

Another view posited by Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), in this context, is also very interesting. In his works, particularly *Fasl al-Maqāl* (1986, 22) he does not limit his attempt to reconcile religion and philosophy any more, but above all he also tries to prove that the Islamic law (*Sharīʿa*) recommends and even obliges its followers to undertake philosophical studies. For instance, he argues: "If the activity of philosophy is nothing more than the study of existing beings and reflection on them", and, "if the law has recommended and urged reflection on beings, then it is clear that this name signifies what is either obligatory or recommended by the law" Therefore, he adds, "a man who prevents a qualified person from studying books of philosophy, because some of the most vicious people may be thought to have gone astray through their study of them, is like a man who prevents a thirsty person from drinking cool, fresh water until he dies of thirst, because some people have choked to death on it. For death from water by choking is an accidental matter, but death from thirst is essential and necessary" (Ibn Rushd 1986, 28–29; 1963, 168).

In the same book, Ibn Rushd (1963, 169-185), also tries to show that perhaps only philosophers, whom he refers to as the people of certain interpretation (*ahl al-taʿwīl al-yaqīnī*) or of demonstrative class (*al-burhāniyyūn*) can properly illuminate the inner meanings of the revealed law. However, he does not entirely deny the importance of other scholars in this respect but suggests that they should rather confine themselves within the boundary of their specialities. That is why, he claims, God, the Exalted says: "Invite (all) to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious" (al-Qurʾān, 16: 125). God thus taught that some people are summoned by wisdom or philosophy; others by preaching and admonition; while still others by argument or dialectic. The first method is intended for the philosophers; the second is for the preachers; whereas the third is meant for the dialecticians or *mutakallimūn* such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and others.

3. The Muslim philosophers commonly hold the view that complete knowledge belongs to God alone, the Absolute Wise Man (*al-Hakīm*), while the man of knowledge is only called a “philosopher”, that is the lover of wisdom, and by extension, the lover of God. To them philosophy, as we have already learned above, is the noblest of all human sciences that God has ever given to the elect few. Hence, philosophy is not the property of any nation, the Greeks were no exception, but the property of God (al-Qur’ān, 2: 269), though they openly admit that the individual Greek philosophers were the greatest scholars for they showed a genuine interest in almost every branch of wisdom (Sā’id al-Andalusī 1967, 28). Yet, their contribution to knowledge as a whole, is basically seen as that of scholars who systematised and put together the dispersed parts of philosophy belonging to many previous civilisation (Miskawayh 1917, 58). Al-Fārābī (1983, 88), on this particular point, reports:

It is said that this science existed anciently among the Chaldeans, who are the people of al-‘Irāq, subsequently reaching the people of Egypt, from there transmitted to the Greeks, where it remained until it was transmitted to the Syrians and then to the Arabs. Everything comprised by this science was expounded in the Greek language, later in Syriac, and finally in Arabic.

In addition, the Arabs also believe that the Greek philosophers likewise derived their wisdom from the teachings of the earlier prophets and also from the oriental communities (al-Mubashshir B. Fātik 1958, 2–29). Thales, for instance, is said to have studied mathematics and physical science in Egypt. Empedocles lived at the time of the prophet David and acquired philosophy from Luqman in Syria; while pythagoras studied physics and metaphysics with the companions of Solomon, son of David and gained geometry from the Egyptians. Plato is also reported to have been studied in Egypt as did Galen and others. Accordingly, the study of ancient Greek thought was viewed by the Muslims both as a renovation and as an innovation. To that degree, the task of the Arabic philosophers, as al-Kindī (1974, 58), saw it, was: “To restate accurately what Plato, Aristotle and other Greek sages had laboured to elucidate, and thereafter, to complete what the ancients have not fully expressed, according to the usage of our language and the custom of our times, so far as we are able”

4. Though the Muslims were very well-aware that the Greeks were generally Sabians, that is, the worshippers of the stars and idolaters, this does not, however, prevent them from studying Greek sciences, for they think that they are universal. Ibn Rushd (1986, 26; 1963, 167), in this case affirms: We ought to lay hands on their (i.e., ancient Greeks) books in



order to study what they said about that subject (i.e., philosophy); and if it is all correct we should accept it from them, while if there is anything incorrect in it, we should draw attention to that.

### CONCLUSION

But the question is by what criteria did the Arabs of various backgrounds evaluate the ideas of the Greeks prior to deciding whether to reject or to assimilate them. The answer of course appears to have been by their own personal systems of belief in addition to the respective levels of their intellectual accomplishment. This leads us to two general conclusions.

1. The Muslim philosophers, appear to accept only the scientific and philosophical views expressed by the Greeks but not their religious outlook. Al-Ghazālī (1980, 79; 1962, 46–245), to cite as an example, in his enthusiasm to defend Islamic faith, accused the philosopher who adheres to the several views attributed to Aristotle such as that there is no bodily resurrection, as being infidel. But others, like Ibn Rushd (1986, 51), saw it as a matter of opinion and different interpretation concerning the superficial details of the religious tenets, i.e., life after death, which cannot be condemned as such provided that this does not cause one to deny its existence. In this matter, argues Ibn Rushd, only the negation of its existence is unbelief, for it concerns the principle of law

2. Greek philosophy could not have become part and parcel of Islamic thought unless the Muslims were ready to receive it. They themselves must have had possessed certain levels of understanding before they could have revised and corrected Greek ideas and eventually moved on to new discoveries, as they actually did. Likewise, Greek sciences must also have been in keeping with their views and temperament otherwise this process of assimilation could not have been possible.

That is why the Muslims never confined themselves to the study of any particular Greek individual or school but all systems of Greek thought; accepting and modifying some that suited them; besides rejecting others in a rational way Al-Fārābī (d. 950), for instance, like other Muslim philosophers, rejected a view of Aristotle of the eternity of the world; yet never failed to put forward his own opinion derived from the *Qur'ān* that the universe has both a beginning and an end. The Arabs, as claimed by Khuda Bakhsh (S.M: Nadvi 1965, 121), “were never servile imitators of foreign models. They possessed a will, a mind, a marked capacity of their own, which impressed its individual stamp on all they received or borrowed from without”, Prof. Montgomery Watt (1982, 43),

takes almost the same view and concludes: "The Arabs were no mere transmitters of Greek thought, but genuine bearers, who both kept alive the disciplines they had been taught and extended their range"

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