

## Medieval Islamic Thought and the “What is X?” Question

by *Thérèse-Anne Druart*

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In his early dialogues Plato presents a Socrates who goes around raising the famous “what is  $x$ ?” question and receiving no satisfactory answer. In the case of Medieval Islamic Thought the raising of the “what is  $x$ ?” question is fraught with further complications. If Socrates’s contemporaries thought they knew the answer, most scholars in Philosophy would cheerfully confess their ignorance but then walk away uninterested. Besides, there is not even an agreement on the  $x$ , of the “what is  $x$ ?” that is, the word or expression one should use to refer to this field. Some scholars call it “Islamic Philosophy” but the term “Islamic,” argue some, may be construed to imply that all such philosophers were Muslim, though several were Christian, Jewish, and even “non-denominational” in the case of the eccentric al-Râzî, the famous physician-philosopher known in the West and to Chaucer as Rhazes. The expression “Arabic Philosophy” does not fare much better: not all the texts were written in Arabic (some texts of Avicenna, for instance, were written in Persian), and most of these philosophers were not ethnically Arab. Besides, those we call Jewish philosophers for the most part also wrote in Arabic, even if they used Hebrew characters. Furthermore, say some, do you include in that branch of philosophy thinkers who would absolutely refuse to be considered “philosophers” in the Greek line, but demonstrated great philosophical acumen and originality, as some “theologians” did?

Putting aside the dispute of how to refer to the field and what to include within, the best way to answer intelligently the “what is  $x$ ?” question is to examine carefully various particulars. This issue of the *ACPQ* offers some to your consideration since many people deem Islamic

or Arabic Philosophy to be of mere historical interest. To be sure most of Greek philosophical texts were translated into Arabic, commented upon, and then this material was transmitted in the late XIIth and XIIIth century to the Latin West where it caused a revival of Aristotle, the flowering of great philosophers, such as Aquinas, heated disputes and ecclesiastical condemnations, and even influenced Italian Renaissance philosophers, and nobody denies that. Yet, the reader may wonder why he should raise that particular “what is  $x$ ?” question since its object is often assumed to be of no great philosophical merit. This special issue of the *ACPQ* invites you to consider raising the question, and tries to provide you with some means to get acquainted with this field.

In selecting the papers for this issue, Professor Michael E. Marmura (University of Toronto), who kindly helped me in this task, and I intended to show the breadth and philosophical sophistication of the Islamic philosophers as well as the liveliness of contemporary scholarly debates on the field. Some papers show the link between Greek, Arabic, and Medieval Latin philosophy but all highlight the originality and intrinsic philosophical worth of Islamic philosophy.

In a learned paper calling on the most recent scholarship, Cristina D’Ancona Costa (University of Padua, Italy) offers a study of one of the earliest Islamic philosophers, al-Kindî, who intertwines in a delicate and subtle fabric elements of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic epistemology. Jon McGinnis (University of Pennsylvania) and R. E. Houser (Center for Thomistic Studies, Houston, Texas) focus on Avicenna and the originality and richness of his way of “commenting” on some Aristotelian position. Houser deals with the manner of treatment applicable to those who deny the basic axioms of thought. McGinnis provides us with a “première,” that is, an English translation of the passage on the “now” from the *Physics* and a commentary which highlights Avicenna’s philosophical acumen. Aristotle’s famous dictum on the identity of knower and known led to interesting developments up to Averroes’s famous position in his *Long Commentary on the De anima*. Deborah Black’s (University of Toronto) meditation on this text underlines Averroes’s philosophical subtlety.

Leaving Greek sources in the background, Roxane Marcotte (McGill University) analyzes how imagination can be used to provide a philosophical explanation of prophecy. She works on Ibn Miskawayh, who, though not very well known in the West, had a wide influence in Islamic intellectual circles. As for David Burrell (University of Notre Dame), he examines the perennial issue of created freedom in one of the

greatest Muslim intellectuals, al-Ghazâlî, whose bitter attack against the philosophers, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, led to Averroes’s careful reply.

One may think that the influence of Islamic philosophy on the West is history, but recently Jean-Luc Marion has claimed that Kant’s transcendental subject constitutes a revival of Averroism. Philipp Rosemann (University of Dallas) puts this claim to the test.

The various scholars who contributed to this issue are excellent witnesses to the diversity of approaches and the richness of the field. Their papers may not be enough to help us to answer the “what is x?” question about Islamic or Arabic philosophy but they can certainly give us a desire to raise that very issue. They have wetted our appetite and we may wonder how to go about learning more about this field and how to be able to use some texts in translation for our classes. What follows will provide some guidelines, using in particular material generally not well-known in philosophical or Medievalist circles and often not mentioned in the usual sources of information.

**Histories of Islamic Philosophy:** Recently Routledge (London and New York) has published a 2 volume *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (1996, 1212 pp.). It encompasses much but as any collective work at times is uneven. Majid Fakhry’s *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) offers a more unified but rather descriptive outlook. The 1999 *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard E. Popkin (New York: Columbia University) includes a section on Arabic philosophers. Interesting entries may be found in the multivolume *Encyclopaedia of Islam* and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Information on Islamic theology is included in the brief but useful *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* by W. Montgomery Watt (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985).

**Bibliographies:** Bibliographical research is difficult since few articles in the field are published in the leading philosophy journals. In 1991 Jules L. Janssens published *An Annotated Bibliography on Ibn Sînâ* (Leuven: University Press) and he is now preparing a follow up. Philipp Rosemann did the same for Averroes in his “Averroes: A Catalogue of Editions and Scholarly Writings from 1821 Onwards,” in *Bulletin de Philosophie médiévale* 30 (1988), 153-221. For more general bibliography in the field one needs to consult the following:

Charles Butterworth, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy Today” and its “Appendix (1983-1987),” in *Arabic Philosophy and the West*, ed. by

Thérèse-Anne Druart (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1988), 55-140.

Thérèse-Anne Druart and Michael E. Marmura who in 1990 began to publish regularly in the *Bulletin de Philosophie médiévale* a “Medieval Islamic Philosophy and Theology Bibliographical Guide”:

for 1986-1989 in vol. 32 (1990), 106-135;

for 1989-1992 in vol. 35 (1993), 181-219;

for 1992-1994 in vol. 37 (1995), 193-232;

for 1994-1996 in vol. 39 (1997), 175-202.

This “Bibliographical Guide” from now on will be published in *MIDEO* (*Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain du Caire*). The installment for 1996-1998 is in preparation for volume 24, 1999. Further installments may be put on the website of the C.N.R.S. in Paris.

The *Newsletter* of Société Internationale d'Histoire des Sciences et de la Philosophie Arabes et Islamiques/International Society for the History of Arabic and Islamic Science and Philosophy, edited three times a year by Gül A. Russell, Department of Humanities in Medicine, 164 Reynolds Medical Building, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-1114, includes some information about recent publications as well as congresses (website: <http://hsc.tamu.edu/humanity/newsletter/index.html>). So does also the *Newsletter* of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy (contact Jim Long at [Long@fair1.fairfield.edu](mailto:Long@fair1.fairfield.edu) or the website: <http://www.fairfield.edu/smrp>)

**Sourcebooks:** For undergraduate classes one can find English translations of selected texts or passages in the following anthologies:

*Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, 203-335 (some texts are rather difficult);

*Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963, 21-186;

*Medieval Philosophy from St. Augustine to Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. John F. Wippel and Allan B. Wolter, New York: The Free Press, 1969, 227-243;

*Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Selected Readings Presenting the Interactive Discourses among the Major Figures*, ed. Richard N. Bosley and Martin Tweedale, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997, *passim*.

Some translations in progress can be obtained from the Translation Clearing House at Oklahoma State University, Department of Philosophy,

226 Hanner Hall, Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078-5064 or at <http://www.okstate.edu/artsci/philosophy>.

**Important recent translations:** For most graduate students the following recent translations are particularly useful:

Averroes:

Averroès, *L'intelligence et la pensée. Grand Commentaire du De anima, Livre III (429 a 10-435 b25)*, translation, introduction and notes by Alain de Libera, Paris: Flammarion, 1998.

Elamrani-Jamal, Abdelali, "Averroès: la doctrine de l'intellect matériel dans le *Commentaire moyen* au *De anima* d'Aristote. Présentation et traduction, suivie d'un lexique-index du chapitre 3, livre III: *De la faculté rationnelle*," in *Langages et Philosophie. Hommage à Jean Jolivet*, ed. A. de Libera, A. Elamrani-Jamal and A. Galonnier. Paris: Vrin, 1997, 281-307.

Averroes's *Questions in Physics from the unpublished "Sefer ha-derusim ha-tib'iyim*, trans. Helen Tunik Goldstein. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.

Averroes, *Epitome del Libro sobre la generación y la corrupción*, ed. and trans. Josep Puig Montada. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992.

"An Unknown Treatise of Averroes Against the Avicennians on the First Cause," ed. and trans. Carlos Steel and Guy Guldentop, *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie médiévales*, 64 (1997), 86-135.

Bauloye, Laurence, *La question de l'essence. Averroès et Thomas d'Aquin, commentateurs d'Aristote. Métaphysique Z1*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters, 1997; includes a translation of this chapter of the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* (pp. 99-120).

Avicenna:

Michot, Jean R., *La Définition de l'âme: Section I de l'Épître des états de l'âme*. Traduction critique et lexique," also in *Langages et Philosophie*, 239-256.

Inati, Shams Constantin, *Ibn Sînâ and Mysticism: Remarks and Admonitions, part 4*, translation and analysis. London: Kegan, 1996.

Al-Fârâbî:

*Obras filosófico-políticas*, ed. and trans. Rafael Ramón Guerrero. Madrid: Debate CSIC, 1992.

al-Ghazâlî:

Al-Ghazâlî, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced, and annotated by Michael E. Marmura.

Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997. The same press should soon publish Marmura's translation of Avicenna's *Metaphysics*.

Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace):

Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace), *El Régimen del Solitario (Tadbîr al-mutawahhid)*, intro., trans. and notes by Joaquín Lomba. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1997; includes a mine of information on Avempace.

Avempace, *Libro de la generación y corrupción*, ed. and trans. Josep Puig Montada. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1995.

"L'épître de Ibn Bâjjah sur la conjonction de l'intellect avec l'esprit humain," intro. and trans. Vincent Lagardère, *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 49 (1981) [in fact 1990], 175-196.

al-Kindî:

*Les oeuvres scientifiques et philosophiques d'al-Kindî*, vol. 2: Métaphysique et Cosmologie, ed. and trans. Roshdi Rashed and Jean Jolivet. Leiden: Brill, 1998, xiv-243 pp.

al-Râzî:

"Al-Râzî: *The Book of the Philosophic Life*," trans. Charles E. Butterworth, *Interpretation*, 20 (1993), 227-236.

***Important Basic Books, Collective Works, Journal Issues, and Recent Studies:***

1. From Greek to Arabic:

Alon, Ilai, *Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature*. Leiden: Brill, 1990, 198 pp.

*The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism. Studies on the Transmission of Greek Philosophy and Sciences Dedicated to H. J. Drossart Lulofs on his Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. Gerhard Endress and Remke Kruk. Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997, xvi -328 pp.

Black, Deborah L., *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill, 1990, xii-290 pp.

D'Ancona Costa, Cristina, *La Casa della Sapienza. La trasmissione della metafisica greca e la formazione della filosofia araba*. Milan: Guerini, 1996, 194 pp.

Gutas, Dimitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbâsid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*. London: Routledge, 1998, xviii-230 pp.

Lameer, Joep, *Al-Fârâbî & Aristotelian Syllogistics. Greek Theory & Islamic Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 1994, xx-352 pp.

Lettinck, Paul, *Aristotle's Physics & Its Reception in the Arabic World. With an Edition of the Unpublished Parts of Ibn Bâjja's Commentary on the Physics*. Leiden: Brill, 1994, xii-703 pp.

2. Islamic Philosophy in General:

*Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, published by Cambridge University Press and with the support of the CNRS in Paris, presents two issues per year. It began in 1991.

Davidson, Herbert A., *Alfarabi, Avicenna, & Averroes, on Intellect. Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, & Theories of Human Intellect*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, x-363 pp.

Davidson, Herbert A., *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, xiv-428 pp.

*Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, vol. 8 (1997), 568 pp., is dedicated to late Ancient and Islamic philosophy (includes several articles in English and French).

*Etudes de Philosophie Arabe*, ed. Dominique Mallet and gathered in *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* (Damascus), 48 (1996), 238 pp.

Fakhry, Majid, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Leiden: Brill, 1994, viii-250 pp.

Frank, Richard M., *Creation and the Cosmic System: al-Ghazâlî & Avicenna*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter-Universitätsverlag, 1992, 89 pp.

*Medioevo. Rivista di Storia della Filosofia Medievale*, vol. 23 (1997), ed. Cristina D'Ancona Costa, 611 pp., is dedicated to Islamic Philosophy and Science (articles in English and French).

*The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, ed. Charles E. Butterworth. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, 406 pp.

*Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaft* is an important multilingual Journal.

Averroes:

Cruz Hernández, Miguel, *Abû-l-Walîd Muhammad Ibn Rushd (Averroes): Vida, Obra, Pensamiento. Influencia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Córdoba: Caja Sur Publicaciones, 1997, 502 pp. A mine of information.

Avicenna:

Gutas, Dimitri, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*. Leiden: Brill, 1988, xiv-342 pp.

al-Fârâbî:

Galston, Miriam, *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, xii-240 pp.

Langhade, Jacques, *Du Coran à la philosophie: La langue arabe et la formation du vocabulaire philosophique de Farabi*. Damascus: Institut François de Damas, 1994, 438 pp.

Parens, Joshua, *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws."* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, xxxviii-195 pp.

al-Ghazâlî:

Frank, Richard M., *Al-Ghazâlî and the Ash'arite School*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994, xii-151 pp.

Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace):

Lomba, Joaquín, *Avempace (h. 1070-1139)*. Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 1995, 94 pp.

Ibn Tufayl:

*The World of Ibn Tufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad. Leiden: Brill, 1996, viii-305 pp.

al-Kindî:

Tornero Poveda, Emilio, *Al-Kindî: La transformación de un pensamiento religioso en un pensamiento racional*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1992, 350 pp.

al-Râzî:

Druart, Thérèse-Anne, "Al-Razi's Conception of the Soul: Psychological Background to his Ethics," and "The Ethics of al-Razi," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 5 (1996) 245-263, and 6 (1997), 47-71.

3. From Arabic to Latin:

*Averroism in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance*, ed. Friedrich Niewöhner & Loris Sturlese. Zurich: Spur Verlag, 1994, 380 pp.

May these far from exhaustive guidelines incite the reader to explore some themes or texts in Medieval Islamic philosophy and, therefore, to have some ground to suggest some way of answering the "what is *Medieval Islamic Philosophy?*" question.

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