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

by Thérèse-Anne Druart

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 

Copyright 1999, American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. LXXIII, No. 1
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 XIllth and XIllth 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-Kindi, 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*, 2nd 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 Sinâ* (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:

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;

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 Arabe et Islamique/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](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@fairf.fairfield.edu or the website: [http://www.fairfield.edu/smrp](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, 2nd ed., Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, 203-335 (some texts are rather difficult);

Some translations in progress can be obtained from the Translation Clearing House at Oklahoma State University, Department of Philosophy,
Important recent translations: For most graduate students the following recent translations are particularly useful:

Averroes:


Avicenna:

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


Al-Fârâbî:


al-Ghazâlî:


Ibn Bâjjah (Avempace):


al-Kindi:


al-Râzî:


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

1. From Greek to Arabic:


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.


*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).


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

Averroes:


Avicenna:

al-Fārābī:


al-Ghazālī:


Ibn Bājjah (Avempace):


Ibn Tufayl:


al-Kindī:


al-Rāzī:


3. From Arabic to Latin:


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.

The Catholic University of America
Washington, DC