

Introduction

Oliver Leaman



The obvious question which arises for anyone looking at these volumes is why the thinkers who are discussed here are classified under the description of Islamic philosophy. Some of these thinkers are not Muslims, and some of them are not philosophers in a straightforward sense. What is Islamic philosophy? This has been a controversial question for a long time, and it is indeed difficult to find a label which is entirely satisfactory for such thinkers and systems of thought. To label such philosophy as Arabic does indeed make appropriate reference to the language in which the Qur'an was originally transmitted, but it is hardly appropriate as a description of the philosophy we have in mind here. Many of our thinkers did not write in Arabic, and many of them were not Arabs. It is true that an important strand in Islamic philosophy developed in the Arabic language, and in Arabic translations of Greek texts, but this is only a strand, however important it may have been. A vast proportion of Islamic philosophy was written in languages other than Arabic, especially Persian, and by non-Arabs, and that continues to be the case today. Whatever is meant by Arabic philosophy cannot hope to be comprehensive enough to encompass the whole of Islamic philosophy.

Islamic philosophy might be thought to be the sort of philosophy produced by Muslims, but this would be too narrow also. A good deal of philosophy which we have included was produced by non-Muslims, and some of it has no direct religious relevance anyway as the term religion is understood in the West today, so that the religious provenance we might seek to apply to it is misleading. Many Christian and Jewish philosophers worked within the style and tradition of Islamic philosophy, and it would be invidious to exclude them merely on account of their religious beliefs. Also, we do include some philosophical work here which has no direct reference to any religious topic at all but which is just philosophy, a formal enquiry into the structure of the most general

concepts available. Work on logic and grammar, for example, has this character. It is possible to derive some religious implications from such work, of course, if one tries very hard, but not usually very fruitfully. So the Islamic credentials of some of this kind of philosophical work seem to be rather slim, and it might appear problematic to include such work in a book on Islamic philosophy.

There are discussions in these volumes which clearly are Islamic, but which are certainly not clearly philosophy. For example, we thought it was important to have an account of different kinds of theology, since theology played such a large part in the development of Islamic philosophy, often as something which that philosophy could react against. It is important to understand the context within which ideas are produced, not just as an essay in the history of ideas but in order to understand those ideas more clearly. Despite the best efforts of some of the philosophers we shall consider, it is not always easy to distinguish philosophy from theology, or even

from law or grammar, the traditional Islamic sciences. Many of the questions which arise within these contexts have direct philosophical relevance, and the shape of that philosophy was powerfully affected by the disciplines which produced the issues. It is important to realize that we have here a dynamic relationship between the Islamic sciences and philosophy, with a constant interplay of arguments and suggestions, so that it is important to include a discussion of those sciences in such a way that one can see how they have both affected and been affected by philosophy.

It would be tempting to argue that what makes Islamic philosophy an appropriate general concept is that it encompasses a feature of that philosophy which is shared by all its instances. For example, if there is an agenda which is implicit or explicit in all such philosophy, then it would be easy to argue that it should all go under the same general name. Many commentators have argued that indeed there is such an agenda. A very influential school of interpretation originating with Leo Strauss is convinced that the basis of all work in Islamic philosophy is the opposition between religion and reason, between faith and philosophy, and between Islam and Greek thought. Sometimes this is phrased as representing the clash between Jerusalem and Athens. Followers of this approach claim that it is possible to interpret any aspect of Islamic philosophy in line with this central problem, since this problem runs through all such writing. If it is not obvious that it does, then there are ways to find appropriate clues beneath the surface of the text which will show that the central problem lurks there somewhere, and in fact represents the deep structure of the argument of the text. A different but not unrelated view has it that the whole of Islamic philosophy represents an attempt to accommodate Islam with rationality,

so that the central issue is to carry out such a reconciliation. This was the leading motive of the philosophers themselves, and when we assess their work we have to bear this in mind if we are to understand what the texts they produced actually mean. Unless we grasp the central idea which is the basis to the philosophical writings, we are in danger of misunderstanding those writings, and the assumption is made that there is just such a common theme to those writings. After all, calling philosophy “Islamic” implies, or might seem to imply, that the religious character of what is discussed is crucial, and, since it is linked with philosophy, the apparent conflict between two different approaches to the same issue might seem to be highlighted.

We should resist this temptation. Although there are many discussions in Islamic philosophy of religion and reason, it is entirely mistaken to see this dichotomy as lying at the heart of that philosophy. It might be that that dichotomy lies at the heart of medieval Jewish and Christian philosophy, or at least of much of it, but there is no reason to import such a dichotomy as a leading principle in Islamic philosophy. The attempt to reduce a vast variety of philosophical endeavour to just one such slogan is simplistic and should be avoided. It runs the danger of trying to fit the whole of Islamic philosophy into a conceptual strait-jacket which will inevitably restrict its scope and interest. The intention has been to present in these volumes as much of the variety of Islamic philosophy as possible, and to represent it as a continuing and living tradition of philosophical work, not a dead and completed doctrine from the Middle Ages. Even the work produced in the Middle Ages is too varied in form and content to be subsumed under a simple concept, and forms

very much of a dialogue which continues to have resonance today.

Is there, then, no philosophical agenda which Islamic philosophy has and which uniquely characterizes it? There is such an agenda, but it is more various than is commonly realized. Quite obviously, a society which is Islamic will produce thinkers who will frame their philosophical questions in terms of that society. Sometimes these are just Islamic versions of entirely universal philosophical issues. For example, the question of how it is possible to know God will take a particular form within an Islamic context, given the emphasis on the unity of God. Knowing God will involve knowing a being from which all anthropomorphic description is removed. Yet this is not a uniquely Islamic issue, since many religious philosophies will have an account of how it is possible to know a God who cannot be described in terms which apply to His creation. What is philosophical about the discussion is its use of very abstract concepts to make sense of the idea of such knowledge. What is Islamic about the discussion is its conception of God and His Qualities. This need not be a uniquely Islamic idea, but it will be framed within the language of Islam and will reflect on the way in which that conception of divinity has been refined and developed within Islam. It is not a huge step from discussing the relationship between God and His properties, which is after all an important aspect of what it is to know God, to wondering what the relationship is between a subject and its properties in general. This latter enquiry has no direct reference to the religious context out of which it originally arose, and yet it is still part of a way of doing philosophy which starts with a religious problem.

What justification is there in calling such a logical problem a part of Islamic philosophy? The problem itself is clearly not only an Islamic problem, nor is it a problem with any direct relevance to religion as such, albeit the way in which it is answered will have an impact upon the way in which one answers questions about God and His properties. It certainly would be mistaken to think that the philosophers whom we are considering would have in the forefront of their minds the religious implications of their work on logic while they were engaged upon such work. They need not have been thinking about those implications, and it would not be far-fetched to suggest that they may not ever have considered those implications. It certainly would be dangerous, then, to refer to an Islamic logic, but not to the inclusion of logic within Islamic philosophy. Such an inclusion makes appropriate reference to the context within which a piece of intellectual work was produced, within the cultural context of Islamic society. We can usefully employ a concept from the Islamic sciences here, that of a chain of transmission. The relevant question is how far the particular philosophical idea or theory can be connected with predominantly Islamic ideas along a chain of transmission or influence. This leaves us with a series of issues and topics which range very widely across traditional philosophical concerns, and that is how it should be. Islamic philosophy is first of all philosophy, and its content is going to resemble the content of philosophy in general. Yet there will remain a connection with ideas or thinkers who worked within the context of Islamic culture at some stage.

Of course, there is a limit to how far one can trace the chain of transmission, and some writers are wildly over-ambitious in claiming to discover a link between aspects of Islamic

philosophy and subsequent developments in Western philosophy. On the other hand, there are interesting links, and these have been to a degree described here, but not as part of the commonplace attitude that such a link would establish the significance of Islamic philosophy. The latter has a significance which is entirely *sui generis*, as readers of these volumes will surely realize, but what makes it significant is the excellence of the philosophy itself, and the wealth of ideas which were produced. It is patronizing to suggest that one has to stress the impact of Islamic philosophy on the West, and beyond, for it to be taken seriously. None the less, that impact has to be acknowledged and assessed. The emphasis here is not on transmission either into or out of Islamic philosophy but is rather on the ideas of that philosophy itself, since it is the ideas which ultimately demand our attention and deserve our respect. It is not always easy for Islamic philosophers to pursue those ideas and hold on to the version of Islam with which they started, and the tension which often exists as a result is a very fruitful feature of the intellectual creativity which results.

So when we talk about Islamic philosophy we have in mind a very general concept of an Islamic culture out of which that philosophy grew, and it is consequently important to understand aspects of that culture if the philosophy is to be properly understood. This does not mean that we should fall into the danger of treating Islamic philosophy as though it were only a part of the history of ideas. The history of ideas is far too limiting to encompass the scope of Islamic philosophy. Yet there has often been an over-concentration on the pursuit of Islamic philosophy as an historical task, which has led to what are really philosophical problems about validity being misrepresented as historical problems about attribution and

context. While these historical questions are no doubt interesting and difficult to answer, so that it is an intriguing intellectual task to resolve them, they are of an entirely different order from philosophical questions. The time has come to put Islamic philosophy within its appropriate context, that of philosophy, so that it can be recognized as a dynamic and living tradition which speaks to philosophers today just as it did in the past.

Although we have stressed here the role of Islamic philosophy as a vibrant and important philosophical activity, it cannot be doubted that much of the discussion of this type of philosophy is carried out in terms of exploring its roots in other areas. That is, commentators will examine how the non-philosophical aspects of Islam affect the development of the philosophy which appeared in the Islamic world, and also how different cultural factors influenced Islamic philosophy. In particular, a whole range of that sort of philosophy was quite clearly influenced by Greek thought, and the peripatetic tradition in Islamic philosophy is obviously based upon an originally non-Islamic source. It is important to emphasize that this is but one type of Islamic philosophy, and a type which has been criticized by some Islamic philosophers for its very distance from religion. They have argued on occasion that what we have here is the mere replication of Greek ideas in Arabic dress, without any real attempt at showing how those ideas link up with specifically Islamic issues. It will be fairly clear to any reader of the sections in this book which look at this sort of philosophy that such a criticism is misplaced. There was a genuine attempt at seeing how the conceptual machinery of Greek thought could be applied to Islamic issues, and in this contact between two cultural

movements a great deal of interesting and perceptive work resulted.

Yet we should be very careful in what we say about such cultural contact. It is all too easy to link discussions in Islamic philosophy with

earlier Greek discussions, and to think as a result that what is going on is quite different from what is really going on. Let us take as an example the sorts of discussions which often went on in Islamic philosophy concerning political thought. We are immediately obliged to confront a difficulty here, a difficulty concerning translation. There was a tendency for Greek terms like *nomos* (law) to be translated not as *ndmus*, the new Arabic term coined to convey the same meaning as the Greek term, but as *Shari'ah*, the term for law in Arabic. Now, the latter is a term with religious connotations, which is absent from the Greek notion of law. What the philosophers like al-Farabi meant by this is that the Arabic term can be used to illustrate the sort of point which the Greek thinkers wished to make, and he tried to show this in terms of the language which would strike a resonance with his Muslim compatriots. After all, he did not only wish to convey the nature of the argument to the Islamic community, he wished also to naturalize the argument, to show that this is an argument which is both relevant and interesting to his contemporaries.

This approach is likely to lead to a difficulty in interpretation, though. Many readers will observe al-Farabi using religious terminology to express a point from Greek philosophy, and they will argue that what he is doing is arguing that the latter form of thought is compatible with Islam. That is, they will see the task of reconciling reason with religion as the leading

theme of Islamic philosophy, whereas all that an Islamic philosopher may be doing is representing an originally Greek argument in a manner which would make sense to his audience, in this case using Islamic language. Of course, it might be said that it would be far more accurate to construct a new term, a term which wears its Greek heart on its sleeve, as it were, to convey the original argument. To do otherwise is to run the risk of misleading one's audience, since it appears to be a matter of representing what was an originally secular argument as in fact a religious argument. Perhaps al-Farabi was deliberately trying to pass off Greek thought as being far more religious, or at least Islamic, than it really was. Perhaps he was using Islamic language to describe Greek arguments in order to take a short cut along the path of reconciling Islam with Greek philosophy. After all, once the key terms of Plato's Republic have been translated into Islamic language, it seems to be an easy matter to argue that Plato's argument is perfectly compatible with Islam itself.

This is not an inevitable conclusion. The *faldsifah* tended to use the language which came most naturally to them, and this obviously meant that they would be using the sort of language which was most familiar with their peers. In any case, they wanted to show that the kinds of issues which arose within the Greek world had interesting and important implications for contemporary problems in the Islamic world, and the best way to present this view is by using the ordinary language of the community for which they were writing. Neologisms were then kept

to a minimum. Those thinkers who were directly concerned with the nature of religion and religious experience did not wish to distinguish precisely between the Greek use of philosophical terminology and its Islamic version, since they

went on to try to show how relevant the conceptual distinctions in question are to the living experience of faith. It has to be acknowledged also that the philosophers were interested in campaigning for not only the acceptability, but also the inevitability of what they were doing. They wanted to show that the Islamic sciences which were part of the traditional canon of doing things and sorting out problems needed to be supplemented by the ancient sciences, and especially by philosophy, and this could only be done if the same sort of language is used in both cases.

If all that the philosophers were doing was to use what were originally Greek ideas and applying them to Islamic problems, one might think that there is not much originality or creativity at issue here. All that was going on would have been highly derivative, and at the most we would be able to observe an interesting arrangement of material which actually was developed elsewhere. In fact, much of the work which goes on in Islamic philosophy is of this nature, it looks for the roots of the discussion elsewhere and implies that the interest of the discussion within the Islamic world is secondary to its original manifestation in the Greek original context. Islamic philosophy then gets relegated to the history of ideas, and is regarded as an interesting aspect of cultural contact, as compared with the systems of philosophy which created the conceptual materials of the debate in the first place. To this situation is added the observation that the Islamic philosophers did not have access to the Greek thinkers in their original language or even in many cases in very accurate translations, and they misidentified some of the authors anyway. Their interpretation of Greek philosophy was highly mediated by Hellenistic and Neoplatonic traditions, and failed to represent clearly what the original debate was.

What this version of Islamic philosophy does not capture adequately is the fact that cultural contact is a far more complicated notion than many understand. It is far too simple to suggest that a term moves from the context of Greek culture to a new Islamic home and then takes up the same form of existence in its new surroundings. The whole semantic structure of the Greek term has not moved into the Islamic world; on the contrary, the new term will incorporate aspects of the original term but will also be very different. We have seen how this applies to terms like *nomos* and *Shari'ah*, but they are far from unique in this respect. That is, it is possible to use the new term to make many of the same points made by the old term, yet this should not conceal from us that the new term is different from the old term. The system of concepts and practices in which the old term was embedded are now absent, or at least different, and the way in which the new term will have to be related to such a system is distinct.

This is very relevant to the accusation that Islamic philosophy is derivative and so not of the first calibre in so far as philosophical thought goes. It is not the case that the Islamic philosophers took Greek (and indeed other) concepts and then used them in their attempts to make sense of the Islamic world. Concepts are not like clothes which one can just pick up and put on. But they are like clothes to the extent that, if they have to go on a different frame, then they will only fit if they are adapted to the new body. It is very difficult to adapt a concept which was appropriate within a particular context to a very different state of affairs, and it is on this that the significance of much Islamic philosophy rests. It was capable of taking some of the key philosophical concepts from earlier cultures and using them to answer problems which arose

within their own culture, and of adapting the concepts so that they could carry out such a task. The combination of abstract philosophical thought on the one hand with problems which arose within Islam on the other is a potent and unstable mixture responsible for the richness and diversity of Islamic philosophy itself.

It might be accepted that Islamic philosophy is interesting, and yet its dependence on a system of thought coming originally from without the Islamic world has led to the development of a tendency to study it from an historical rather than a philosophical perspective. After all, if one is interested primarily in the philosophical issues, one might be tempted to study them within the context of their original Greek expression rather than via the accretions which occurred during their passage through the Islamic world. But the Islamic philosophers should not be seen as being primarily concerned with ersatz philosophical notions derived originally from non-Islamic cultures. These thinkers certainly did use the notions which came to them through the rich intellectual background which was available to them, and they transformed them in the ways in which they used them. This was a matter not just of choice but really of necessity. The philosophical issues which arose in the Greek world could not always be simply replicated in the Islamic world but have to be adapted to make sense, since the terms themselves when moved from one context to another have a different range of meanings.

This is not to suggest that some of the traditional philosophical issues and controversies which arise within every developed culture did not arise within the Islamic world in much the same way as everywhere else. Some problems,

especially the most abstract metaphysical ones, appear to be common to a whole range of cultures. It is just that the nature of a particular culture puts the emphasis upon a different aspect of the problem depending upon the nature of that culture. For example, in discussions of the creation of the world it is important to note that

the Islamic world wanted to mark the fact that according to the Qur'an the world had a beginning and will have an end. This is not to say that Islamic philosophers could therefore abandon Aristotelian accounts of the creation of the world which seem to point to its being eternal because it went against the scriptural truth. Many Islamic philosophers produced modifications of the Aristotelian theory which made it compatible, or apparently compatible, with their understanding of the Qur'an, while others criticized the certainty which philosophers applied to Aristotle's theory. They could not just say that Aristotle was wrong because he seemed to go against scripture – this would be very poor philosophy or indeed theology indeed. They could not just say that Aristotle was right and the Qur'an was wrong, since this would also be to refuse to examine the interesting conceptual links which exist between two apparently distinct and contrary descriptions of creation. It is in the tension between different accounts of the same phenomenon that philosophy really gets to work, presenting a solution which satisfies the need for a rational explanation of the apparent aporia or difficulty. Some of these philosophical expositions are more interesting and well-constructed than others, of course, but the important point to make is that they are all philosophical arguments, and are to be assessed from the perspective of philosophy. How creative were the Islamic philosophers? I think it will be clear to anyone who reads many of the chapters in these volumes that many of them were very

creative. They certainly did not have a tabula rasa on which to write, but, given the concepts and ideas which they had available to them, they used these to their fullest extent. They did not just accept the concepts which were handed down to them, but adapted them and constructed new concepts to make sense of the nature of the problem as they saw it. There is a tendency for us to identify creativity with an entirely new way of tackling an issue, and we live in a period of great artistic creativity in this respect. Artists use a vast variety of often novel forms of expression, some so novel that we are unsure how to assess them. Yet there is good reason to call creative those works by earlier artists which were constructed within the constraints of a particular system of representation, and in some ways it is easier to say that something is creative if we can judge it within the context of an artistic tradition. We can then see precisely how the new contribution to the aesthetic area borrows from what has preceded it and extends the previous understanding of what was possible to do something new. A similar point can be made about Islamic philosophy. We can grasp the context within which it worked, and we can often see how influenced it was by the competing pressures of a variety of cultural traditions, but it does not follow that it cannot be creative because it is dependent upon previously existing intellectual traditions. On the contrary, we can see how on the basis of those traditions it represents a new direction of thought, or, at the very least, is capable of stepping out in a new direction. Much Islamic philosophy, like much philosophy of any kind, is just the accretion of new technical representations of existing issues, but some of it is capable of establishing entirely new ways of going on which in turn establish new traditions of thinking about problems and resolving difficult conceptual issues.

Islamic philosophy is primarily philosophy, and the appropriate techniques to use in order to understand it are going to be philosophical. There is certainly no one philosophical approach present in Islamic philosophy, but a large variety of different techniques which depend upon the particular point of view of the thinkers themselves. The very diversity of approach might lead one to query yet again the notion of philosophy being “Islamic” at all, since we might expect that label to represent a common view or a consensus as to how to do philosophy. If that expectation was justified, then the philosophy which resulted would be of far less interest, since it would be comparatively narrow and represent something of a party line on how to operate. The breadth of Islamic philosophy represents the diversity of cultures in which Islam has featured, and in these volumes we have attempted to celebrate both.