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*In the Age of al-Fārābī: Arabic Philosophy in the Fourth/Tenth Century* edited by Peter Adamson

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As Peter Adamson writes in his preface, this book includes the proceedings of a conference held at the Warburg Institute in 2006. It is the second publication of a series that aims to explore topics and currents in the philosophy of the Arabic-Islamic world.

The 17 articles in this volume cast light on some of the most relevant figures, trends, and themes of Arab-Islamic thought in and around the 10 century (the fourth century of the Islamic calendar); and they offer analysis of different intellectual traditions and comparative investigations of particular topics and arguments. They draw a structured picture of this complex and vivid period, which was surely formative in shaping the subjects and the doctrinal contents of philosophy in the Islamic world.

Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (870–*ca* 950), the ‘second master’, is probably the most significant thinker of this period, whose writings have been published and translated by modern scholars. His influence on later so-called Aristotelian philosophers has been documented not only within the Islamic tradition (e.g., ibn Bājjā and Averroes), but also in the Jewish one. Maimonides, for example, wrote that in order to learn logic al-Fārābī’s logical treatises should be studied and that all that he wrote is full of wisdom. As a particularly representative figure of 10th-century thought, al-Fārābī’s views and arguments are referred to, directly or indirectly, as a term of comparison in a number of the articles in this book that seek to point out influences, differences, or parallels between different authors and tendencies.

The vast movement of translation of scientific and philosophical works from Greek into Syriac and thence into Arabic, as well as

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directly from Greek into Arabic, cannot be separated from the rise and the development of Arabic-Islamic philosophy. This translation movement began in the first decades of the ninth century under the Abbasid caliphate—the first evidence of translation activity actually goes back to the end of the eighth century—and continued through different phases until the first half of the 10th century. In nearly 150 years, there came into existence a corpus of writing in Arabic which was based essentially on texts of the philosophical curriculum of Neoplatonic schools in late antiquity and, in particular, on the Alexandrian model. These translated texts became the starting point for the specific system of thought that was *falsafa*, with its different traditions and the variety of its developments.

The last phase of this process of acquiring Greek learning is connected to the ‘Aristotelian school of Baghdad’ and related to the revival of Aristotelian studies in the capital of the Abbasid Empire in the 10th century. The school of Baghdad is characterized, among other things, by philosophical education, the interpretation of Aristotle, and the continued translation of further works by Aristotle and his Alexandrian commentators or the renewed translations of works that had already been translated (notably by Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus, d. 940, and some of his disciples). In this context, one paper in the volume (by E. Giannakis) is devoted to the study of the views of the philosopher Anaxagoras (fifth century BC) as they are reported in the Arabic commentaries of Aristotle’s *Physics*, which are based on Alexandrian commentaries.

The two most representative figures of this circle are al-Fārābī and the Christian Jacobite translator, theologian, and philosopher Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974). C. Ehrig-Eggert considers the question of the existence of general notions (universals) according to ibn ʿAdī. This leads to an examination of the central theological problems of divine knowledge and the knowledge of particulars, which will be crucial also in later *kalām* and philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Ehrig-Eggert also analyzes the positions of ibn ʿAdī’s contemporary (and teacher), al-Fārābī, on these matters and points out the two authors’ common sources in order to identify specific Christian elements and goals in ibn ʿAdī’s argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Recall, for example, al-Ghazālī’s criticism of the philosophical positions on these points.

The related question of the nature and the possibility of knowledge, and consequently of the use of Greek sources on that matter, is the subject of one contribution (by D. L. Black) dealing with Meno's paradox in al-Fārābī's writings.

Another group of papers deals with thinkers whose education and philosophical arguments can be ascribed to a second intellectual tradition that characterizes philosophy in the Arabic-Islamic world, Neoplatonism.

The group of translators who were gathered around Abū Yūsuf Ya'aqūb ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. ca 870) and known as the 'circle of al-Kindī' produced Arabic translations of fundamental Neoplatonic texts,<sup>2</sup> whose importance would be crucial for the development of *falsafa*. Kindī exerted influence *via* his teaching, his disciples' teaching, and their written transmission of his works. In the West (North Africa and Andalusia), al-Kindī's teachings became direct sources for such Neoplatonic Jewish thinkers as Isaac Israeli (ca 850–950), whose writings in Arabic show the author's familiarity with al-Kindī's treatises. In the oriental part of the Empire, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Āmirī (d. 992) was one of the major disciples of al-Kindī: his teacher, ibn Balḥī, was al-Kindī's immediate disciple. Only a few of al-Āmirī's works are still extant, but he was probably well known in his time and his teaching influenced two other 'Kindian' thinkers of the late 10th-century in Baghdad's intellectual circles. As E. Wakelnig notes, there are quotations and non-literal references to al-Āmirī in the works of al-Tawḥīdī (d. 1023) and Miskawayh (940–1030) as well as in anonymous sources, citations from which Wakelnig derives information about al-Āmirī's biography, aspects of his philosophical thought, and a lost work. The encyclopedist ibn Farīghūn (second half of the 10th century) was ibn Balḥī's disciple too. H. H. Biesterfeldt's paper presents ibn Farīghūn's unique work on the classification of sciences, its structure, and its doctrinal and literary contexts. D. C. Reisman's paper on Abū Ḥāmid Aḥmad ibn Abī Isḥāq al-Isfīzārī (first or second half of the 10th century) discusses a very little known thinker. This contribution gives an accurate account of his biography, his known

<sup>2</sup> Notably, Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, the *Theology of Aristotle*—a paraphrase of the Arabic translation of Plotinus' *Enneads* 4–6—and the *Book of Aristotle's Explanation of the Pure Good* known as *Liber de causis*.

and extant works, some aspects of his doctrine, his intellectual tradition and, especially, the variety of his classical and Alexandrian philosophical sources.

This Neoplatonic tradition, which was transmitted by the circle of al-Kindī, is a crucial source also of Ismāʿīlī thought, even if this doctrine is primarily a religious theme within Shiʿa. Two contributions (by A. Straface and D. De Smet) consider aspects of this intellectual tradition. The first gives a detailed account of Neoplatonic elements and concepts related to esoteric and symbolic Ismāʿīlī thought; the second analyzes the influence of al-Fārābī on al-Kirmānī's through a comparative study of their doctrine of Intellects.

The review of the intellectual developments in this period would not be complete without discussing the Iḥwān al-Ṣafā' (Brethren of Purity), authors of the earliest encyclopedia of sciences of the Islamic world, whose compilation has been chronologically placed between 961 and 980 [see [Marquet 2010](#)]. The questions of the religious affiliation of the authors and their intellectual orientation, as well as the classification of their *Epistles* from a doctrinal point of view, have been the subject of many studies. The Shiite, and specifically Ismāʿīlī, theological background, the variety of philosophical sources (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Galen, for instance), and the diversity of themes treated by them are discussed in three articles in the book. The first by (C. Baffioni) deals with aspects of the Brethren's cosmology and epistemology; the second (by G. de Callataÿ) addresses their teachings on science; and the third (by P. L. Heck), their positions in political theory, epistemology, and ethics.

Although the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic traditions are two of the major trends of thought in the Islamic world (of course, boundaries between them are not geometrically rigorous), the role of Qurʾanic sciences and, in particular, of theology (*kalām*) and theological problems must be taken into account for a comprehensive overview of this period. It should be remembered that even for theologians and thinkers who rejected philosophy, the Greek scientific and philosophical heritage provided methodological bases and concepts for their reflection. By the same token, the development of philosophy cannot be separated from that of theology.

An analysis of al-Fārābī's *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* (by U. Rudolph) takes into account the

connection and interaction between different trends within Arabic-Islamic thought (in particular, between theology and philosophy) by analyzing some elements of the title of this treatise, its structure, and some of the themes discussed in it. The article seeks to determine the purpose of the book with reference to its historical context, and to show how its structure and arguments relate to theology and to challenges that faced theological treatises of the same period.

M. Rashed's paper offers a clear and detailed reconstruction of a dispute on the specific theological topic of the inimitability of the Qur'ān: this dispute involved a number of figures directly and indirectly; and Islamic-Christian controversy, polemical Islamic texts and Mu'tazilite discourse form the historical and theoretical context in which it took place.

The variety of trends, matters, influences, and developments that characterize Islamic thought of the 10th-century extends also to the status of medicine in the hierarchy of sciences and its link with philosophical speculation. This is the subject of L. Richter-Bernburg's contribution. It offers a comparative analysis of the attitude towards medicine as a discipline in the writings of al-Fārābī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (864–925), a renowned physician and a controversial philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Some aspects of al-Rāzī's medical thought are taken into account also by P. E. Portman, whose article deals with the methodology of medicine and its practice. The philosophical thought of al-Rāzī is taken into account by P. Adamson, who examines his ethical ideas, in particular, those concerning pleasures: Adamson analyzes the statements expressed in al-Rāzī's Greek sources, his use of them, and his position relative to them and to some contemporary arguments. D. Urvoy, finally, explores eventual intellectual and historical links between al-Rāzī and Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī: taking his cue from an obscure note of the historian al-Masʿūdī (ca 896–956) which puts these two thinkers together, Urvoy aims to explain the purpose of al-Masʿūdī's statement through a meticulous historical and doctrinal analysis.

Some of the investigations in this volume draw on manuscripts and other unpublished sources, of which unfortunately no index is

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<sup>3</sup> Because of his 'unorthodox' philosophical and theological positions, Urvoy [1996] and Stroumsa [1999] count him among the 'free thinkers' of Islam.

provided. This is notably the case with the research on the biography and philosophical teaching of Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī [Wakelnig, 215 ff.], and on the obscure and very little known philosophers Abū Ḥamid Aḥmad ibn Abī Ishāq al-Isfizārī [Reisman, 239ff.] and ibn Farīghūn [Biesterfeldt, 265 ff.]. I, therefore, thought it useful to list those unpublished sources here. The list below follows the order of the table of contents and indicates the pages of the book where the manuscripts are mentioned.

Article 3: Manuscripts containing a 10th-century philosophical correspondence dealing with Anaxagoras' theory of homeomerics and the so-called 'Baghdad Physics' respectively

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Article 14: Quotations and fragments of al-ʿĀmirī's philosophical writings

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Article 16: Extant manuscripts of ibn Farīghūn's work

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Istanbul, Topkapi Saray, Ahmet III: 2675,	266

Article 17: Manuscripts attesting a passage of an epistle of Qustā ibn Lūqā and two sources of *kalām* authors

London, British Library, Or. 8613:	280, 282
Leiden, Or. 2949:	280
Ṣan'ā, ʿilm al-kalām 189:	284

See contents and updated bibliography in [Adamson and Thaylor 2005](#), [D'Ancona Costa 2005 and 2007](#), and [Nasr and Leaman 1996](#).

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