Diversifying Our Syllabi: Islamic Philosophy

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What is "Islamic philosophy"?

Not: the philosophy of Islam, or the philosophy of the Islamic religion
- That's not even a coherent notion, given the difficulty of defining "orthodoxy" in an Islamic context.

Rather: philosophy as practiced in Islamic civilization (cf. "Islamic art").

But doesn't Islam shape and influence the philosophical positions and arguments? Yes, but not always, and sometimes in unexpected ways.
- Note also that some contributors to the tradition were Christian and Jewish.

Some modern interpreters prefer to label it "classical Arabic philosophy," but some philosophers in this era occasionally wrote in Persian.

Is it Western or non-Western?

It is part and parcel of the Western tradition, having been influenced by Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and having had a significant but neglected impact on medieval and early modern European philosophy.
- But: it has also been edited out of the canon, so it cannot be taught and studied now without some effort and without making an active attempt to rehabilitate it.

How did it emerge? (How) did it die out?

Rise of philosophy in Islamic world can be traced to two factors:
1. Spread of Islam through Hellenistic world and influence of translations of Greek philosophy, which were underway in late C8 and early C9 C.E.
2. Pre-existing interest in philosophical issues arising out of monotheistic religion and theological discussions in early C9 C.E.
   - Sometimes 2 is ignored in favor of 1, but Greek philosophy wouldn't have been translated if there hadn't *already* been an interest in philosophy.

Some claim that philosophy died out after C12 C.E., while others maintain that it continues to this day. But a style of reasoning did decline.

What do I need to know about Islamic civilization?

The most significant aspects of Islamic religion for philosophy are shared with Judaism and Christianity (monotheism, divine omnipotence, afterlife, etc.). It may be worth familiarizing oneself with some of the main features of Islam and Islamic civilization, but no need for in-depth knowledge of history or religion in order to teach these texts. Many reference works and other resources can supply some relevant background (e.g. entries on: *Qur'an*, *Hadith*, *Kalam*, *Fiqh*).

Anthologies

Khalidi, M. A. (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge 2005).

McGinnis, J. & Reisman, D. C. (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy* (Hackett 2007).

Reference Works

El-Rouayheb, K. & Schmidtke, S. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford 2016).

Taylor, R. C. & López-Farjeat, L. X. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy* (Routledge 2015).

Nasr, S. H. & Leaman, O. (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy* (Routledge 1996).

Fakhry, M., *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (Columbia, 1983).

Online Resources

Entries in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on individual philosophers, as well as specific topics under the heading of "Arabic and Islamic philosophy"

Website and podcast on "History of Philosophy without any gaps": https://www.historyofphilosophy.net/

Suggestions for texts and topics

Razi (Rhazes, d. 925 C.E.), *The Philosophical Life*

A notorious free-thinker, who has been called an "Islamic epicurean", tries to square a moral theory based on minimizing pain with religious principles. In doing so, he attempts to justify his philosophical way of life, even though he acknowledges that he falls short of the example of his leader (*imam*) Socrates. (A good complement to the *Apology* or to Epicurus.)

Farabi (d.951), *The Political Regime* **(excerpts)**

Towards the end of this work, Farabi outlines a typology of imperfect cities reminiscent of Plato's discussion in the *Republic*, but he paints a decidedly more positive picture of the democratic city.

Farabi (d.951), *The Book of Letters*

In this text, Farabi gives an account of the origin of language and the various disciplines or arts, culminating in philosophy. He also explains how religious discourse expresses philosophical truths in figurative language and outlines a hierarchy of different forms of discourse: rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d.1037), "On the Soul" (from *The Book of the Healing***)**

Ibn Sina developed a sophisticated dualist position, with novel arguments for why the intellect (= rational soul) is completely immaterial and does not depend on a bodily instrument for its function. He also posited the "estimative" faculty of the soul, one of the five "internal senses," which associates a negative or positive valence with perceptions and abstracts them from matter. This has been considered the origin of the concept of *intentionality*. (See also Ibn Sina's "floating man" argument and his proofs for the existence of God as necessary existent.)

Ghazali (d.1111), *The Rescuer from Error*

In this work, Ghazali explains how he came to doubt all his beliefs, including his sensory and rational beliefs, in a manner that foreshadows Descartes in the *Meditations*. He then outlines how he came to reconstruct his former beliefs, in part thanks to mysticism.

Ibn Tufayl (d.1185), *Hayy bin Yaqzan (Alive the son of Awake)*

This philosophical fable tells the story of a man growing up in isolation on an uninhabited island. He manages to reconstruct the totality of scientific and philosophical knowledge by means of his senses and reason, and Ibn Tufayl details the steps that he goes through, from biology to metaphysics. He also has a mystical revelation that provides him with rules for living. Finally, he tries to share his knowledge with people on the nearby mainland, with disappointing results.

Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d.1198), *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*

This book consists entirely of a response to a work by Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Ibn Rushd quotes Ghazali's text almost in its entirety and responds to it point by point. Particularly interesting is their discussion of causation, wherein Ghazali denies that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect and Ibn Rushd responds by saying that denying natural necessity effectively negates the possibility of knowledge. (An interesting anticipation of Hume's discussion of causation.)

Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d.1198), *The Decisive Treatise*

Ibn Rushd sets out to prove that studying philosophy (including science) is obligatory for religious believers. He also defends the practice of allegorical interpretation of scripture when it conflicts with the findings of philosophy, for example when it comes to bodily resurrection in the afterlife (which he considers to be a purely spiritual state). This attempt to reconcile religion and philosophy (including science) was erroneously interpreted as promoting an account of "double truth" in medieval Europe.