An Introduction to Arabic Philosophy

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Course Description

In this introductory survey of Arabic philosophy, we will focus on the philosophical works of al-Kindi, al-Razi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) produced during the “Islamic Golden Age,” traditionally dated from the 9th to the 12th century CE.

Through a combination of primary and (to a lesser extent) secondary sources, we will explore topics relevant to several branches of philosophy. Within metaphysics, we will discuss time, eternity, causation, modality (e.g., the distinction between necessity and possibility), and the existence of God. Within the philosophy of mind, we will consider the problem of how in thought—as opposed to in perception—we can grasp an object without coming into direct contact with it and whether a creature receiving no sensory inputs can be self-conscious. Within epistemology, we will discuss the conditions for absolute certainty and whether philosophical knowledge is compatible with religious knowledge. Finally, we will discuss the important issue of whether one should, as al-Razi puts it, confine oneself to “eating dry herbage, wrapping himself in a threadbare robe, and taking shelter in a barrel in the wilderness.” In other words, we will discuss ethical issues surrounding asceticism, on one extreme, and excess indulgence, on the other.

This course has no prerequisites. In addition to providing an introduction to Arabic philosophy, this course will give students ample opportunity to reconstruct and critically assess arguments extracted from dense pieces of text.

Required Texts


All other readings will be posted electronically.
Course Schedule

Week 1

A brief historical overview of Islam, kalam, and falsafa
Reading: pp. 1-30 in Adamson; xvii-xxxi in McGinnis & Reisman

Week 2

al-Kindi on cosmology and the finitude of the world
Reading: On Divine Unity and the Finitude of the World’s Body in McGinnis & Reisman
al-Kindi’s development of the Aristotelean intellect
Reading: Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Book III, Chapters 4-5; On the Intellect in McGinnis & Reisman
(1st essay due)

Week 3

al-Razi’s approach to ethics

al-Farabi on certainty
Reading: Selections from *Book on Demonstration* in McGinnis & Reisman; Black (2006) “Knowledge (‘ilm) and Certitude (yaqīn) in al-Fārābī’s Epistemology”; Adamson pp. 36-41

Week 4

Avicenna’s account of modality
Reading: *The Salvation*, “Metaphysics” in McGinnis & Reisman (pp. 211-214); Bäck (1992) “Avicenna’s ‘Conception of the Modalities’,” sections I-VI and IX-XII

Avicenna on that which exists necessarily through itself (aka God)
Reading: *The Salvation*, “Metaphysics” in McGinnis & Reisman (pp. 215-219); Bäck (1992) “Avicenna's ‘Conception of the Modalities’,” section XIII; Adamson pp. 51-57
(2nd essay due)
Week 5
Avicenna’s “Flying Man” thought experiment
al-Ghazali’s critique of falsafa and the eternity of the world

Week 6
Averroes’s defense of falsafa and harmony between religion and philosophy

Review session
(3rd Essay Due)