

Arabic and Islamic Philosophy and Sciences: Method and Truth

Hany Moubarez

Ain Shams University
Abbasia sq., Al-Khalifah Al-Maamoun Street
11566 Cairo, Egypt

e-mail: hany.moubarez@art.asu.edu.eg

Abstract: What are Arabic and Islamic philosophy and sciences? How and where did they come about? I am trying in this preface to provide a short and brief answer to those two questions. Having done this, I sketch the contents of five papers trying to study Arabic and Islamic philosophy and sciences from its perspective to method and truth.

Keywords: Arabic philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Arabic science, Islamic science, method, truth, logic, alchemy.

What we call Arabic and Islamic philosophy and sciences commenced nearly around the late of the ninth century of our era. This genesis had many factors, but the most important ones are; a) the translations from Greek, Sanskrit, Syrian and Persian into Arabic, b) the contention with other religions and disciplines. As it is well known, philosophy does not emerge suddenly from Athena's head, some intellectual activities should precede it. This was the emergence of the Qur'an amongst Arabs. This, with previous unwritten poems and religious prose, made an appearance of what we could call an Arabic-spoken culture which continues to the present day. But this culture is not pure Arabian as any culture should note.

The Qur'an itself is an outcome of many influences including Jewish, Syriac texts and practices. The religious prose is an extension to the semantic practices of prophecy and the like.

Arabs, around the eighth century, conquered many territories, including Persian and some of the Byzantine empires, and let many of the conquered peoples enter into Islam, thus we find what may be called formation of the spoken Arabic world or Arabic culture, whose members were often the believers in Islam (whether Arabs or not) or serving the Islamic empire. The non-Arab peoples transmitted to the new culture the components of the previous cultures which Islam conquered, such as Greek, Syriac, Jewish, Persian, Sanskrit, Assyrian, or Armenian, in addition those cultures you could put your finger on in the regions that the Arabs conquered.

However, the most influential cultures were Greek, Persian and Semitic. In the end of the eighth century, the new spoken Arabic nation (behold again, this new nation is not racial but cultural) had a great and respectable quantity of a mixed culture consisting of explanations of holy books, theories about the nature of the world, methods of interpretation, texts from Greek and Persian and Syriac, etc. All these resulted in the emergence of pseudosciences, sciences and philosophy before the beginning of the ninth century. The first such pseudoscientist known to us is Gābir Ibn Ḥāyān (d.813), who is an heir to Greek and Hermetic alchemy, the first such scientist and philosopher known to us is al-Kindī (d.873), who is an heir to the Hellenistic system of knowledge which incorporates philosophy with science. As you see, philosophy and science and even pseudoscience were all interwoven, because all of them took the Greek form and paradigm of

knowledge, i.e. the Hellenistic one: Man strives for knowledge (of God) to liberate himself from this mortal world. Most of cognition is unitary in its substance, even the contrary doctrines such as Aristotle's and Plato's. Why not! The translators attributed a neoplatonic text (a mélange of Plotinus and Proclus) to Aristotle, known as the theology of Aristotle, so that Aristotle became neo/Platonic par excellence in Arabic culture. This Hellenistic schema stamped nearly all Arabic Philosophy, thus al-Fārābī (d.950) wrote a book about "The combine between the opinions of the two wisdoms". The striving into unity and to Monism is a universal attitude in Arabic thought, philosophy, mysticism, even in pseudoscience. From Hellenistic thought Arabs got also their view of the universe; it is a Ptolemaic universe. At the end Arabs had a Ptolemaic-neo-Platonic worldview and universe with ten spheres inside each other, and each has nous and soul emanates from each other, and all emanates from the unnamable or God.

Accordingly, when we say Arabic science and philosophy, we should not understand from this term only one culture but many. In fact, it was not written only in Arabic but in other languages too such as Syriac, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, etc. And its momentum did not stop since it was raised. There is a mythology that it stopped with Ibn Rušd (d.1198); this is not true. Writing and practicing what we have called Arabic philosophy continued after Ibn Rušd's death up to our days but mainly in other languages especially Persian.

Having presented a general conception of Arabic philosophy and science, I give in the following a very brief temporal sketch of the development of Arabic philosophy and sciences in seven stages:

- (1) Around the beginnings of the ninth century Arabic as a tool for culture and sciences arrived at its maximal formation; it had many translations from many foreign sources of pseudoscientific, logical, medical and astronomical summaries; also sciences, especially law and linguistics had great developments.
- (2) But in the middle of that century Arabic had more translations (even a house of translation was established by al-Mā'mūn (d.833)) for a great amount of the Greek writings on philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy and astrology, pseudoscience, magic, etc. This made an intellectual revolution which produced the first Arabic philosophical school known as al-Kindī's school. This school was the foundation of Arabic and Islamic rationality versus the religious schools.
- (3) This school continued up to the tenth century when there appeared beside it what is known as the Baghdad school of philosophy which goes back to the Syrian philosopher Matta Ibn Yunūs (d.940) and his disciple al-Fārābī who is the first of the systems builders in Arabic and Muslim philosophy. In this century were also founded many scientific Arabic paradigms in law (disciplinary schools in law such as al-Šāfi'īya), linguistics (Ibn al-Sarrāg's Kitāb al-'Uṣūl), physics, mathematics (Ibn Sīnā (d.964) and others), astronomy (the Aristotelian-Archimedean paradigm), etc.
- (4) By the thirteenth century, there were in the philosophical circles a spread of works of another great systematizer philosopher of the eleventh century, i.e. Ibn Sīnā (d.1037) who developed al-Fārābī's studies in logic and philosophy on the one hand, and medicine and sciences on the other hand. But the price of this spread was more penetration of neo-platonic thought which Ibn Sīnā was influenced by too much. al-Ġazālī (d.1111), in the twelfth century, developed Ibn Sīnā's thoughts to serve his own theological, legal and mystical purposes. In the farthest west of the Islamic world, appeared Ibn Rušd who tried to disarm Ibn Sīnā's influence by providing a literal interpretation of Aristotle by which though he restored the original Aristotle, he cancelled the Arabic advancement in sciences in favor of Aristotelian science. In fact, this was a regressive move in Arabic science resulting in its delay.
- (5) Around the end of the fourteenth century, after the Islamic caliphate had fallen in Baghdad to the Moghuls, Ibn Ḥaldūn (d. 1406) tried to theorize the movement of history and societies especially Islamic ones; he tried to establish scientific humanities.
- (6) in the sixteenth century and beyond, the Islamic world was divided into the far east Islamic kingdoms of India and the middle of Asia on the one hand and the near east ones: the Safavids in

Persia, Turks in the middle east and east of Europe. The philosophy of Ibn Sīnā spread in India and Persia and had great development in modal logic and metaphysics. In the Middle East legal science and mysticism overwhelmed over other sciences and philosophies.

(7) But at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of European colonialism there occurred two intellectual movements, especially in India and Egypt; one for the revival of the past, the other for incorporating the advancements of knowledge and the global, especially western, societies. However, in the twentieth century philosophy written in Arabic was revived again alongside the continuing tradition of Ibn Sīnā in Iran and beyond.

The papers which this volume contains deal with the methods and logic of Arabic and Islamic philosophy and sciences, on the one hand, and the nature of truth in it, on the other hand.

Thus, in his paper *Three Notes on the Method of Analysis and Synthesis in its Ancient and (Arabic) Medieval Contexts*, Moubarez tries to prove that there were in ancient Greek philosophy and mathematics two traditions that interpreted the analysis and synthesis method so that this interpretation was reflected in Arabic mathematics and philosophy. In addition, Moubarez points out that the whole systematic structure of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy can be grasped if we look at it as constructed according to the analysis and synthesis method. From this point of view, he finds resemblance between both Ibn Sīnā and Kant (we could add even Hegel) in the mechanism of system building. This new and bold perspective to Ibn Sīnā's philosophy needs more evidence and studies.

Concerning the logic of Arabic and Islamic philosophy and sciences, it is well known that it is a result of the Greek through Syriacs and Hebrews (some argue against the latter). However, both Yagoubi and Fatahine try to prove, in their two papers in this volume, i.e. *The Status of Conditional Syllogism in Syllogistics*, and *Theory of Syllogisms with Categorical, Conditional and Disjunctive Connectives Developed by Arabian Logicians*, that Arabs and Muslims added new syllogism(s) to the Greek logical traditions. The second sketches the figures and forms of this new syllogism(s) while the first is trying to prove the novelty of this syllogism. Thus, the second depends on the first, so let's talk about this last only. If Moubarez tried to join Ibn Sīnā with Kant, Yagoubi and Fatahine try to confirm the originality of Ibn Sīnā's logical thinking and the logical tradition which he created (al-Sinūsī and Ibn 'Arafā) as an expression of Arabic and Islamic originality. Yagoubi and Fatahine, as I understand them, have two claims: (1) that Ibn Sīnā was the first to discover the hypothetical syllogism, (2) that was because of the advancement of Islamic law (formulations). Yagoubi and Fatahine are not the only ones to claim (1); a well-known historian such as Khaled El-Rouayheb did that too before. But (1) is clearly not true, Boethius specified hypothetical syllogism about four centuries before Ibn Sīnā. Even, as it is very known for the students of the history of logic, as we could specify Theophrastus as the first one to know it. And this solves the problem of how Ibn Sīnā got that syllogism without needing to reference Islamic law. This brings us to (2); it is not probable that Ibn Sīnā got hypothetical syllogism from the Islamic law reasonings, but he more probably got it from the translations of Theophrastus' writings, as Arabs knew the latter and his writings very well. In fact, Ibn Sīnā did not have legal writings or interests in law except to the extent he could expose with it his whole system of philosophy. The field of his actual scientific practices was in medicine, and we know how conditions are the essence of practicing and theorizing in medicine. Therefore, if we denied Theophrastus' influence, medicine would be the best candidate.

All that can be accepted from Yagoubi and Fatahine's argument is that Muslim (not Arabian) logicians reinforced but did not discover the hypothetical syllogism. This makes some sense to El-Rouayheb's project.

Yagoubi and Fatahine tried to support their position by a quotation from Piaget about hypothetical syllogism that "Such reasoning largely ignored in this general form by classical logic," but I think Yagoubi and Fatahine missed the point. Piaget was talking about hypothetical syllogism as a metalanguage notion not as an object language law like the one on which Theophrastus and Boethius worked, thus he uses "→" and "imply" as metalingual signs; that is why Piaget said "ignored ... by classical logic;" he means ignored as a rule.

We come now to Arabs and truth. Mlika in his paper *Perspectives on the Notion of Truth in the Arabic Philosophy* tries to perform mainly twofold tasks: 1) to refute Paul Jorion's claim in his book *Comment la vérité et la réalité sont inventées*; that "truth was born in 4th century BC Greece, and "reality" (objective) in 16th century Europe." Under this refutation he is questioning the idea that Arabic philosophy and sciences were just images of the Greek, an idea which Moubarez insisted on, 2) and to understand the kind of truth which Arabic philosophers claim. Concerning the first point, Mlika points out that the notion of truth was prevalent in Arabic systems of knowledge; we find even trivalence suggestions in some of these systems (Rhetoric for example). To understand the notion of truth in Arabic philosophers, Mlika studies it in four eminent Arabic philosophers: al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rušd. From this study one realizes how Arabian philosophers were realistic and objective concerning truth; truth is transcultural (al-Kindī), its core is logic (al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā) and one and unique (Ibn Rušd). From this Mlika claims that the Arab philosophers' notion of truth is a good tool for supporting rationality against religious fundamentalism. But I see that history falsifies what Mlika seeks, the failure of Arab philosophers themselves is the greatest evidence against Mlika's project, this project is a repetition of a failure. I notice, in passing, that Mlika did not answer the question of whether Arabic philosophy and sciences is an image of the Greek or not.

If Moubarez tried to join Ibn Sīnā with Kant, Professor Forster tried to join Islamic alchemy and Max Weber. Forster in her paper *Reaching the Goal of Alchemy – or: What Happens When You Finally Have Created the Philosophers' Stone?*, tries to discover the real goal of Islamic alchemy, especially of Ibn Arfa' Ra's, which is different from the western one. She tries to prove that this goal is not to get gold by the transformation of metals but to become divine through knowledge and grasping the all truth. Gold appears as a by-product in this process; hence it is gifted to the poor. Collecting gold is not a goal in itself. Do we find here seeds of capitalism *a la* Weber? Forster did not say that directly, but I think the reader would feel it after reading her prominent paper. However, Professor Forster's analysis is not external, i.e. it is not socially trying to discover the sociological factors in Islamic thought and culture, on the contrary it is internal, i.e. trying to grasp the intellectual essence of Arabic and Islamic *al-chemy*, i.e. truth.