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*The Cambridge Companion to*  
**MIEVEAL  
JEWISH  
PHILOSOPHY**

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 **CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# 1 Introduction to the study of medieval Jewish philosophy

Philosophers sometimes argue that there are particular expressions that are so frequently fought over that they are best characterized as "essentially contested concepts." The concept of Jewish philosophy is just such a concept. There has always been a lot of controversy about what it is, and whether it is anything at all. This is not a problem for Jewish philosophy alone, of course, but affects all philosophies that are described in religious and ethnic terms, and familiar issues of definition then enter the discussion. Is Jewish philosophy philosophy by Jews? That is not such a simple question either, since the whole issue of who is a Jew is complex, and although at the time of the Third Reich the Nazis thought they had a neat definition of the Jewish race, we would probably hesitate to call Catholic priests Jewish thinkers merely on the basis of the fact that they had one Jewish grandparent. On the other hand, it would be wrong to define as a Jewish philosopher only those Jews who had a commitment to Judaism itself, since we know that many people feel themselves to be Jewish and are ethnically Jewish without sharing any religious beliefs at all with their more observant coreligionists. Yet they may have interesting views on religion and philosophy and it seems wrong to disqualify their work as potentially being Jewish philosophy. On the other hand, perfectly observant Jews may write on topics in philosophy that have nothing to do with Judaism, and it would be strange to classify what they do as Jewish philosophy. We seem to be getting back to the idea of Jewish science, a doctrine popular with racists but without much to be said for it otherwise. There is also a good deal of Jewish thought that is close to philosophy (theology, law, discussions of ritual) which is not philosophy, although it is capable of philosophical interest. One would not want to draw the boundaries

of Jewish philosophy too restrictively, yet a wide definition that allowed in all sorts of linked but distinct disciplines is not likely to be productive.

In fact, when we look at the different traditions of philosophical activity that have been called Jewish philosophy, we see much debate over the nature of Jewish philosophy, but not much disagreement about who the Jewish philosophers were. The main characters form a distinct group ranging from Philo right up to contemporary figures such as Levinas. What makes them all Jewish philosophers? One explanation is the nature of the issues they considered, issues that are both philosophical and that treat seriously the view of the world that can be extracted from the Jewish texts. (Actually, on such an account we can justify calling the early work of Levinas philosophy, and his later work Jewish philosophy.) This is reasonable as a starting position, and avoids the suggestion that Jewish philosophy has to accept what might be taken to be the principles of Judaism itself.

What is wrong with this presupposition? There are at least two problems with it. One is the issue as to whether there are principles of Judaism at all, something that has been very controversial in Jewish history. Some thinkers do argue for a set of basic principles, although there is then much discussion about what this set actually contains, but others argue that there is no such set at all, that Judaism is quite open when it comes to basic principles. This is not the more important problem, though. That is the difficulty of combining the universality of philosophy with the particularity of a religious faith. If it is the case that a philosopher was restricted in her work due to the imposition of a religious straitjacket, as it were, then we should hardly call what she did philosophy. Much of the scholarship that has taken place in the field suggests that this is in fact the precise model we should accept of Jewish philosophy. Individual thinkers are committed both to general philosophical principles of one kind or another (depending on where they live, what is in fashion at the time) and also to Judaism, and then they have to reconcile what might seem to be inconsistencies between these two sorts of commitment.

The medieval period is one in which the debate between philosophy and religion is regarded as having dominated the cultural atmosphere of the times. The main arena of intellectual life was the

Iberian peninsula, and especially al-Andalus, the Islamic territories on the peninsula, with its large and well-integrated Jewish community. This is often referred to as a Golden Period in which the three religions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism flourished and regarded each other with mutual toleration, but this is a wide exaggeration of the reality. In fact the Middle Ages in the Iberian peninsula were marked by constant strife and interreligious conflict, with occasional periods of relative peace, and intellectual life was difficult even within each religious community, let alone between the different communities. For example, one of the main problems for Jews was the internecine conflicts within the Islamic world, and the changes of regime in al-Andalus had an impact on the lives of the other communities, even the *kitabi* (monotheistic) ones. The conflict between the Christians and the Muslims led to the Jews sometimes being courted as useful allies, but sometimes being persecuted by both sides as dubious elements in the state. One also assumes that then as now large numbers of Jews were converted to other religions, and assimilated thoroughly into the larger and more powerful communities that surrounded them, and in fact it is the debate between the religions that was much more important for Jews in the medieval period rather than the debate within Jewish philosophy. After all, Jewish philosophy was only available to a relatively small part of the community, those who were both sufficiently educated to participate in intellectual debates and who were interested in the particular sort of issues that arise in philosophy as compared with the other theoretical pursuits of Jews, such as the Bible, Talmud, and so on. On the other hand, from the fact that so many translations were made into Hebrew from Arabic and Judeo-Arabic during the medieval period, and well after into the Renaissance, we have to conclude that there was a fairly wide interest in philosophy within a Jewish context, and many individuals within the wider Jewish community must have felt the need to be aware of the sorts of debates that went on in the philosophical world.

One danger we should not fall into is that of treating medieval Jewish philosophy as though it was regarded at the time as just like a subdivision of philosophy itself. It was not, because at the time the concept of philosophy as a discrete academic discipline did not exist. In Arabic the word *hikma* was used far more for philosophy than the specific term *falsafa*, and similarly in Jewish philosophy

the subject was more identified with "wisdom" in its widest sense than with something more specialized. While the educated individual might have wished to know something about philosophy, he would also have wanted to know about science (the first book of Aristotle to be translated into Hebrew is his *Meteorology*) and about a range of other secular types of knowledge. He would have been interested in ideas, the sort of ideas he did not find explicitly mentioned in Jewish works like the Bible and Talmud, and he would have wished to show his sophistication by displaying this interest and a degree of competence at operating with these ideas. It is within this cultural context that Jewish philosophy features in the medieval period.

What are the chief contributions of medieval Jewish philosophy to philosophy itself? Historically there are two important contributions that should be mentioned here. One is that Jewish philosophy played the role of intermediary between Islamic philosophy, and the Greek philosophy it incorporated, and the Christian world. The Jews were the intellectual intermediaries, and often the translators, who made the cultural transmission that played such an important role in the creation of the Renaissance and eventually the Enlightenment possible. Ethnic groups that are international often play this role, since they have the linguistic skills and the transnational links that make it feasible.

The other contribution is not to philosophy as a whole, but to Jewish thought. Due to the influence of Maimonides (d. 1204) philosophy really did enter the Jewish intellectual world in a firm manner, and although many Jews determinedly turned their back on this cuckoo in the nest, the status of Maimonides as a legal thinker imported philosophical ideas into Judaism, albeit rather surreptitiously, through the form of his legal ideas. And although the Jewish community throughout the world has never been large, it has had a large effect on the development of culture in general, through the overrepresentation (in relation to absolute population numbers) of Jews in public and intellectual life, so medieval Jewish philosophy has been significant in the history of ideas.

From a philosophical point of view medieval Jewish philosophy is based on two main principles. Neither principle is original to it, but became definitive. The first principle is that one should pay a lot of attention to the different ways of speaking and of expressing

truth. That is, the rules of theology are different from the rules of political speech, and the rules of prophecy are different from the rules of philosophy. The implication of this thesis is that the idea of truth is far more complex than might appear superficially. This is not an original discovery of Jewish philosophy but comes from al-Farabi, and he developed this thesis after thinking about Aristotle. Yet it is an idea that was turned into a major theme by Maimonides and by many other Jewish thinkers.

The other main point shared by most medieval Jewish philosophers is the issue of theological realism, an issue they felt had to be addressed, and in the case of Maimonides quite decisively so. Maimonides argued against realism, interpreting (some would say reinterpreting) Scripture so that it would fit in with his naturalistic understanding of the character of the universe and its creator. It is often said that we should distinguish between Maimonides the philosopher and Maimonides the Jewish thinker, but nothing could be further from the truth. His philosophical attention is directed almost exclusively on the texts of Judaism, and his religious works are replete with his philosophical views. The challenge of medieval Jewish philosophy is whether a role can be found for God that makes a real difference or whether the name "God" is merely a way of referring to a range of natural events and their organization that has no place for the autonomy of a particular individual.

Linked to this issue, and often less directly addressed, is the significance of being a member of a particular religion, in this case the Jewish religion. Does being Jewish make a real difference, or is it as Christians and Muslims claim stubbornly resisting later revelations that incorporate Judaism and make Judaism redundant? This is a related topic since it might be argued that if there were no real difference between the Jewish understanding of the facts that underlie reality and the interpretation of other faiths, since realism in theology is ruled out, then the point of adhering to a particular faith is difficult to grasp. After all, it is not as though that faith represents the facts accurately, as compared with other competing faiths. On the contrary, we are told that the facts themselves are not important, what is important is what is made of them. This was taken up enthusiastically by Maimonides' opponents, who suggested that, if Maimonides were right in his interpretation of the Bible, then one might as well change from being Jewish when this became inconvenient. After all,

being Jewish is just seeing the world from a particular point of view, and if that point of view is not solidly based on fact, more solidly based than other points of view, then one might as well abandon Judaism if being Jewish is no longer propitious. As we know, many Jews then and indeed today follow the logic of this to abandon their religion, although they find it much harder to change their ethnicity. This argument for conversion is certainly not one Maimonides himself adopted; on the contrary he argued for the preservation of one's faith regardless of the political and personal consequences. But it is an implication of much of his metaphysical system that this is at the very least a question that demands to be asked. What distinguishes being Jewish from adhering to a different religion is the character of Judaism, its many excellences, and its important role in the history of the world, but not for Maimonides a particularly close connection with the truth. This rather subtle argument for a faith, based on its internal rather than external features, did not find universal favor in the Jewish intellectual community, but again it set an agenda, and the question of the grounds of faith had to be discussed and defended in one way or another.

Perhaps a more minor offshoot of this theme was the discussion as to whether there are principles of Judaism, something that came to be energetically argued since the Middle Ages. Given his orientation towards the coherence of Judaism it is hardly surprising that Maimonides stressed the significance of what he took to be the central principles of the faith (and indeed these have entered the liturgy of the synagogue through the hymn "Yigdal elohim hai"). Although this issue is certainly mentioned in earlier rabbinic literature, it was possibly the frenetic marketplace in conversions that led to the need to define the bases of Judaism, so that potential waverers would know what the principles of their faith were and thus how they could defend the faith more efficiently.

This brings out a feature of philosophy of which we should remain constantly aware, and that is how different its pursuit was in the Middle Ages than is the case today. Philosophy was not an academic discipline alongside other disciplines to be chosen or not by a variety of students. It was a set of doctrines, and most importantly techniques, that were intimately tied in with natural science, theology, law, medicine, and intellectual life in general. Thinkers could reject philosophy, but to reject it they had to use it to show why it

should be set aside, something with which we are familiar in Islamic philosophy in the cases of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya. Philosophy was part and parcel of the increasingly desperate attempts of Islam and Christianity to overwhelm and incorporate the Jewish remnant into their ranks, and became a part of the resistance also. After all, philosophy represents at its purest the rules of argument, and these were vital in the conversion process. (One might be cynical and suggest that most conversions had nothing to do with argument, but were either due to compulsion or to the perceived self-interest of the target group itself. On the other hand, from historical reports it seems that great attention was paid to producing strong arguments for one faith and against others, so one must assume that argument played more than just a cosmetic part in the process.) Argument remains significant for any individual who is aware of a variety of possible interpretations of the facts and the texts that represent those facts, and the increasing sophistication of the Jewish community led to its inevitable involvement in the study of the principles of interpretation themselves. There is a lot of evidence that, even in the rabbinic literature of the Talmud and Mishnah, Greek philosophy plays a role. It is hardly surprising in the Middle Ages, when philosophy came to take on such a large role in intellectual life as a whole, that Greek-inspired thought should come to have an important place again in the Jewish community.

Let us now consider some of the strategies that were employed in dealing with these key issues, and the implications of those strategies.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TECHNIQUE

When philosophy first entered the Islamic world in the ninth century, a debate arose about the respective merits of Greek-inspired thought versus the local Arabic disciplines of grammar, law, theology, and the other Islamic sciences. This debate would have been familiar to Plato, who saw himself as part of a struggle against the sophists in the Greek world. The sophists also thought that they had available to themselves a range of techniques that were appropriate for settling any theoretical and indeed practical issues that might arise. And the advantage of these techniques, of course, is that they were local, they were part and parcel of the local culture



and so embodied the view of that culture on any problems that arose. Now, there is a great temptation within any culture to come to such a view, and the temptation certainly arose within Jewish culture, which also had an extensive and rich tradition of religious sciences and techniques to resolve any and every problem as it arose. In fact, when one looks at the Talmud one sees discussions of problems that reflect issues of relevance when the Temple was operating! So the idea that the local theological sources of understanding how to behave and act, and generally how to understand the world around us, are insufficient for the tasks at hand seemed wrong to many Jews, as it had to many Muslims, and no doubt to many Greeks also.

To naturalize philosophy a number of approaches may be adopted. One is to claim that philosophy is in fact the descendant of religion, and there were stories to that effect, although it is difficult to know how seriously they were expected to be taken. The more plausible approach is to show how valuable philosophy is when applied to religious and other issues, since philosophy is capable of distinguishing clearly between different ways of looking at an issue and adjudicating between those ways. Now, when one looks at religious texts this is far from the case. When one looks at the Talmud, for instance, it is often very difficult to tell what view is the view one should accept or that has the greater plausibility. That is one of the delights of Talmud, that one may construct a wildly unlikely argument out of the sources available in the text, and other sources one may argue are linked to the text, and construct a thesis that at the same time looks as though it should be accepted while obviously being unacceptable. It is just this sort of approach that philosophy will attack, since it will link texts to each other not in terms of weak connectors such as allusion, analogy, and propinquity between passages, but between the logical relationships between terms. It was this conceptual strength of philosophy that made it so significant in various cultures despite its apparent foreignness and the potential danger of allowing rationality to peer into areas that might be better left in the dark, in the view of many. Like Pandora's box, once the ideas are out in the open, it is difficult if not impossible to put them back again, and this happened with philosophy. Once the ideas are out, the only way of getting them back is to use other ideas to carry out the operation, which defeats the whole purpose of the exercise.

The realization that there are many different kinds of writing, and so different techniques need to be applied to assess them, is of major importance. It implies that there is a range of ways of expressing the truth, and that it is only if one understands the range that one will grasp the nature of the different forms of expression. This point was emphasized by Aristotle, and taken up with alacrity in Islamic philosophy by al-Farabi, whose works were much admired by Jewish philosophers, and especially by Maimonides. When the latter goes through the terms in the Torah that he finds problematic and then analyzes them in accordance with his theory of naturalism, he has to explain why the Torah uses words that imply that God is a person and that he is literally an agent. He suggests that these different forms of expression are there to represent truths vividly to an audience that on the whole is not able to recognize those truths unless they are represented imaginatively and figuratively. There is nothing wrong with presenting the truths in this way; on the contrary, this is the right way to present them to a general audience. It follows that the language in the prayer book, and by commentators in the rabbinic literature, replicates this sort of language, although often with greater sophistication, and the more one studies it the more one appreciates the variety one finds within it. This enables the intelligent reader to ask questions about what is not said as well as about what is said. For example, Maimonides thinks it is significant that in the book of Job, Job himself is never called "wise," which Maimonides argues is a signal to readers that he is not taken to be wise, and so his early complaints are to be seen as a reflection of his lack of wisdom. The question then arises: If Job is to be seen as not wise, why did not the text make this clear? Perhaps because his words are not to be seen as so obviously foolish that they are not worth considering. Indeed, they are worth thinking about like everything else in the Bible, but the more alert reader will understand that the intelligence of Job's critique of divine justice masks the underlying shallowness of his presupposition, that God's justice must replicate our notion of justice. This approach to the text, whatever one thinks about its credibility in this particular instance, has radical implications for how to look at texts as a whole. It was not present in any definite way before Maimonides, but it became a firm part of the agenda of Jewish philosophy ever since his works became well known and influential.

## THE SCOPE OF THEOLOGICAL REALISM

Maimonides also played a decisive role in placing the topic of theological realism firmly on the philosophical and rabbinic agenda. This is because he was the first Jewish philosopher to grasp completely the implication of philosophy as part of an understanding of religion. The idea that religion is true because it represents the truth is not acceptable in that form once it is analyzed philosophically, although of course it may be accepted once it is examined by the appropriate philosophical conceptual machinery. The point is that the appropriate understanding of such claims is not one that can be ignored or regarded as unproblematic, but as one that must be investigated and resolved in some way. Yet the Torah itself does not display much doubt about the truth of the claim of realism. On the contrary, it constantly reiterates the literal truth of what it describes. It is first of all the rabbinic commentaries and then the philosophers who start to investigate what these claims actually mean, who point to apparent inconsistencies and who ask for explanations of the precise formulation of the religious texts. This is obviously linked to the first item on the philosophical agenda, the discussion of different kinds of literary expression in the Torah, but the realism issue was much discussed even before Maimonides took such control of the discipline. One tends to link the issue with him because it was only his *Guide* and other related works that provided Jewish philosophy with the technical resources to deal with the issue in a decisive sort of way. Maimonides did set off the debate in a new and far more nuanced manner, and it has remained ever since firmly part of the Jewish intellectual curriculum. (One might even say that it is not mere chance that such a large proportion of the protagonists of post-modernism and deconstructionism are Jewish!)

## THE "WHY BE JEWISH?" DEBATE

This was the issue that really resonated with the lives of all Jews during the Middle Ages. They were under sustained pressure to convert, by both Muslims and Christians, and even in Spain this was hardly a Golden Age. Even after conversion their loyalty to their new faith remained suspect for some time in Christian Europe. Most Jews probably made their decision on what to do on purely prudential reasons

(if they converted) or in order to remain within the faith with which they were familiar (if they did not). Argument played little part in the decision, but argument was undoubtedly important for the intellectual elite in the community who were troubled not only by the strength of competing faiths, but also by the apparent conceptual difficulties of traditional religion when it comes into apparent conflict with modernity, with science, and philosophy. (This was a pressure that of course was also felt by Christians and Muslims, but in most cases without the additional pressure to convert.) The attack on realism by Maimonides makes the conversion question harder to resist, in some ways, given that the only things to be said in favor of one religion are internal features, which might be thought to be a rather unrobust response to the enemies of one's faith.

HOW NOT TO ARGUE FOR THE DISTINCTIVENESS  
OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

A good example of the sort of argument in support of the distinctiveness of medieval Jewish philosophy is the discussion of the popularity in Jewish philosophy of Plato's *Republic*, as compared with Aristotle's *Politics*. Despite the (late) encroachment of Scholastic philosophy into the Jewish world, there seems to have been little enthusiasm for works on political philosophy that made a sharp demarcation between the theological and the political, as characterized in the Christian tradition by the enthusiasm for Aristotle's *Politics* and by works such as Dante's *On Monarchy*, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and Machiavelli's *Prince*. It is sometimes argued that the difference between Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism and Islam on the other, is that the former made a separation between law and religion, between the state and God, while the other religions did not. However, Christianity also sees the state as an appropriate site for religious influence, and in that sense is not less holistic than Judaism and Islam. It is certainly true, though, that the concept of political revelation, so important in the latter pair, is largely absent in Christianity, which accordingly developed a rather secular notion of the state. Christian thinkers went on to present accounts of the state that are discussions and descriptions of actual states divorced from any particular theological background, while Judaism and Islam saw political philosophy as very much part of jurisprudence, as part and

parcel of the explanation of why and how religious law structures the everyday lives of its participants. One effect of this distinction is that the Christian world got on very well without the *Republic* until the early Renaissance, while the Jewish and Islamic world ignored Aristotle's *Politics*. By contrast, the *Nicomachean Ethics* found a ready home in the Jewish and Islamic world, which often saw it as the prelude to the *Republic*, standing in as it did for the missing *Politics*. Christianity, it is argued, saw the temporal state as merely a prelude to the next life, and so the arrangements in this world are of no great salvific significance. For Judaism and Islam, though, the actual state is the site of God's influence in the world, and it is incumbent on the believer to work within that state and try to bring it close to divine law. As there are no priests in (post-Temple) Judaism to embody spiritual purity, such purity becomes part of the community and part of the task of the community. In this way political and religious life form a seamless web, and there is nothing in principle to prevent the spiritual leader from being the political leader, and in fact it is highly desirable that he is! The emphasis on practice in Judaism meant that God could not be worshiped merely as an idea or concept abstracted from everyday life. There has to be some route to understanding him if we are to imitate him, and that route comes through political life.

One impact of the *Republic* in early Jewish philosophy could be the construction of the persona of the "king" as both the intellectual and political head of the state, a concept we find in both Saadya Gaon (d. 942) and Halevi (d. 1141). The latter argues that such a king would choose Judaism as the best religion since it combines most acceptably the theoretical and the political, and contrasts markedly with other religions such as Christianity that only address themselves to a limited part of our lives as human beings. This is very much taken up by Maimonides himself who compared *nomos* (custom) and Shari'a/Torah (religious law) by claiming that the former is directed exclusively to our physical being, while the latter is directed both at this and at our spiritual being. One might contrast this with theories that would regard the spiritual as the only important part of us. One of the reasons why this law can do both is because of the way it has been devised, namely, to appeal both to our everyday interests and to guide and extend them until we are well on the route to self-perfection. The ruler has a vital role as educator here, something that

of course is part of the *Republic*, and one of the leading reasons for the ruler's ability to move people emotionally and physically is his capacity to understand how to talk to them, how to inspire them, and make them feel that, although they only understand part of the whole, there is a whole that their actions are working to establish and that is ultimately in their best interests, even though they may not understand why or how. Yet we should observe that the arguments for Judaism here as elsewhere are not based on its truth, but on its internal characteristics, and it could be argued that this orientation of medieval Jewish philosophy came to characterize much Jewish philosophy that followed, and indeed had a wider influence in philosophy and theology also.



## 2 The biblical and rabbinic background to medieval Jewish philosophy\*

Medieval Jewish philosophy is in large measure an interpretation in philosophical terms of beliefs, concepts, and texts bequeathed to medieval Jews by the Bible and by rabbinic literature. Thus, much of the agenda of medieval Jewish philosophy is set by ideas featured in the Bible, Talmud, and midrash: God, creation, prophecy, providence, miracles, commandments, and more. For this reason, although there is a need here to present the biblical and rabbinic background to medieval Jewish philosophy, the discussion will largely be an exposition of one aspect of medieval Jewish philosophy itself: namely, its ambition to provide an exegesis of biblical and rabbinic texts, along with explications of their concepts, that would demonstrate the value of philosophy in earlier Judaism and would unearth rigorous philosophical propositions contained in the ancient works.

Examples abound. Saadya Gaon (882–942), head of the academy in Babylonia and the father of medieval Jewish philosophy, and Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides) (1288–1344), an eminent philosopher, logician, and scientist, authored biblical commentaries – Gersonides' cover a very substantial part of the Bible – that are controlled by a view of the book as shot through with philosophical truth and as standing in agreement with the conclusions of human reason. While the less illustrious rationalist Joseph ibn Kaspi (1279–1340) authored a commentary on the Bible that is controlled not by the assumption of an underlying philosophical truth, but instead by a historicist view, he is an exception among medieval rationalists.<sup>1</sup> Exegesis, furthermore, is found not only in formal commentaries

\* I thank David Berger, Shalom Carmy, and Warren Zev Harvey for commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter.

but also in works that aim to develop philosophical positions. Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), the greatest of the medieval Jewish thinkers, describes the aim of his *Guide of the Perplexed* as the interpretation of problematic biblical terms and parables, and he supplies in the book's first part a philosophical lexicon of biblical terms. He also informs us in the work's introduction that he considered authoring a commentary on problematic rabbinic texts. Likewise, works by the Neoplatonist Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Daud, Abraham bar Hiyya, Bahya ibn Paquda, and Joseph Albo weave together exegesis and philosophy; and commentators like David Kimhi, Moses Nahmanides, and Isaac Abravanel incorporate elements of philosophy (reflecting in particular knowledge of the Maimonidean matrix), even while refusing to accord it supremacy as a method for acquiring true knowledge. Medieval Jewish philosophers also adduce and interpret a substantial number of rabbinic texts.

In brief, had there been no Bible and rabbinic literature to supply core concepts and to serve as a focus for exegetical activity, medieval Jewish philosophy would either not have existed at all or would have been dramatically different in character from what it actually was. Notwithstanding this dependency, a frequently noted feature of medieval Jewish philosophy is its *prima facie* lack of continuity with biblical and rabbinic Judaism; its closest analogues, it seems, are works produced by Jews in Hellenistic cultures of the first and second centuries. The medieval philosophers, as mentioned, understood both the Bible and the rabbinic corpus as a repository of philosophical and scientific truths. But the philosophical views advocated by the medieval philosophers entered Judaism via contact between Jews and other cultures: from the early tenth through late twelfth centuries, contact with Islamic civilization in Spain; from the late twelfth through early sixteenth centuries, contact with Christian culture by Jews in Christian Spain, Provence, and Italy. After their extended conquests beginning with the seventh century, the Muslims translated works of Greek philosophy, composed commentaries on them, and developed their own philosophical-theological systems with categories and principles that originated with the Greeks. (Some works of Plotinus were mistakenly attributed to Aristotle, leading to a hybrid known as Neoplatonized Aristotelianism.) Jews familiar with Islamic thought admired and appropriated many of these

categories and principles. The resultant views, however, do not seem to be characteristic of either biblical or rabbinic thought.

First and foremost among the ostensible differences is the presence of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language in biblical and rabbinic texts. The texts ascribe bodily characteristics, emotions, and personality to God; he has physical form, affect, and personality.<sup>2</sup> Yet philosophers held that God cannot have a body and that having emotions would be inconsistent with his changeless and self-sufficient nature. Next, traditional Judaism taught that the world was created *ex nihilo*; the Greeks denied that: Aristotle held the world was eternal, Plato that it was made by the demiurge from preexistent matter. Again, in the Bible and rabbinic literature divine intervention in the world is frequent, but philosophers believed in a mostly or totally naturalistic system. Prophecy in the Bible would seem to be a direct communication from God to a human being; philosophers thought that prophecy is a natural result of perfecting the intellect and imagination. The human ideal in the traditional texts would seem to be a life of right action, as in Jeremiah 9:22–23; for the philosophers, the *summum bonum* is intellectual contemplation of scientific and metaphysical truths, and Jeremiah 9:22–23 is invoked to support this claim.<sup>3</sup> Rabbinic Judaism puts forth a doctrine of bodily resurrection; philosophers, owing to their devaluation of the body and their reluctance to posit miracles, endorse the immortality of the soul, while often remaining ambiguous at best about resurrection of the body. The philosopher's emphasis on critical rational inquiry, finally, reflects a method of acquiring truth that is quite different from an appeal to revelation and authority. Given these conflicts, medieval attempts at harmony seem strained.

Notwithstanding this ostensible absence of continuity, medieval Jewish philosophers vigorously affirmed its existence. They explained that the original philosophical content of Torah was lost through centuries of persecution. Maimonides maintains that the tradition's having been passed down only orally made it vulnerable to such loss, and this seems to propel him to write the truth down – just as the Talmud relates that Rabbi Judah the Prince (in 200 CE) compiled the body of teaching known as the Mishnah because in his time the oral legal tradition was in danger of being forgotten (*Guide* 1:71, 2:11). Some Jews, such as Shem Tov ibn Falaquera (*Book of Degrees*, introduction), went so far as to say that the non-Jewish

world learned or even stole philosophy from the Jews, necessitating now Jewish reliance upon non-Jewish philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Invoking an ancient tradition was a means of legitimating philosophical study. Even Judah Halevi (d. 1141), whose *Kuzari* is an extended polemic against grounding a Jewish religious outlook in Greek philosophy rather than tradition, states that the Greeks received philosophy from the Persians, who took it from the Chaldeans (*Kuzari* 1:63). Viewing them as authentic components of Jewish belief, he endorses numerous of the claims and assumptions of the philosophers' metaphysical schemes. In short, the medieval Jewish philosophers present themselves as champions, continuators, or one might even say resurrecters of the true biblical and rabbinic traditions.

Such claims of continuity have seemed implausible to modern scholars, so much so that, in contrast to medieval interpreters, some even doubt Maimonides' sincerity in putting them forth.<sup>5</sup> Arguably these modern scholars have underestimated the degree to which Maimonides and, even more evidently, Saadya and Gersonides pursued their projects out of a conviction of Torah's truth. Scholars have not doubted the sincerity of the latter two, which implies that it was possible for an interpreter not to be conscious of a gap. Medieval philosophers could not help appreciating the general richness of Islamic culture, and because they regarded the philosophers' systems as true, they understandably wanted to see their religion embrace these truths.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely their fidelity to the truth of Torah, not their disloyalty, that propelled the medievals' project, inducing them to interpret Torah in a way that would make its claims always emerge as true, an extreme illustration of what analytic philosophers such as W. V. O. Quine and Donald Davidson today call the Principle of Interpretive Charity.<sup>7</sup> Modern writers tend to share Spinoza's view in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (ch. 2) that the prophets were neither scientists nor philosophers, and they impute that view anachronistically to Spinoza's predecessors. We can appreciate the gap whose existence propels the charge of insincerity, but ultimately the assumptions of earlier interpreters cannot be judged by the premises of readers a millennium later. In fact, ours is an age that is more conscious and more approving than any other of the role that background beliefs play in the hermeneutical enterprise, and to that extent the cited criticism itself is out of tenor with today's times.

Perhaps more critically, the notion of *sitrei Torah* (hidden aspects of Torah that should not be publicized) was promulgated by the rabbis themselves (Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1); and they comment on the value of riddles and parables (for example, "Great is the power of the prophets because they compare a created thing to its creator," i.e. they describe God in anthropomorphic terms [*Genesis Rabbah* 26, cited by Maimonides, *Guide*, 1:46]). Finally, it should be noted that a philosophically laden reading of a text may well have its roots in rabbinic midrashim, and Maimonides not infrequently cites such a source.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I shall elaborate on the general approach to biblical and rabbinic literature on the part of the medievals, note some attitudes toward the continuity problem, and give a sampling, hopefully not random, of how they interpreted key texts of the tradition. Due to limitations of space I shall deal exclusively with medieval rationalism, leaving aside, save for brief references, exegetical approaches of Neoplatonists like Gabirol as well as of kabbalists like Nahmanides who, for example, interpret the creation narrative in Genesis 1 in accordance with their own metaphysical opinions. Insofar as Maimonides bestrides the medieval world like a colossus, his approach to interpretation is the one to which I will refer most often.

#### PHILOSOPHIC EXEGESIS OF THE BIBLE

The key to the medieval philosophical approach to biblical and rabbinic texts is the notion of a two-layered text: one outer, exoteric, geared to the multitude; the other inner, hidden, esoteric, aimed at the philosopher. The task of the philosophical exegete is to pierce through the exoteric layer, whose truth is either unacceptable or inferior, and get at the rich esoteric truth. So, while resisting total allegorization of the stories and laws in the Bible, medieval Jewish philosophers understand the vision of the wheels, angels, and chariots in Ezekiel 1 and 10 to present an Aristotelian-cum-Neoplatonic cosmology. Similarly, Maimonides and Gersonides find the characters in Job to be espousing positions held by the great philosophical schools like those of Epicurus and Aristotle. The love between a man and a woman depicted in Song of Songs, construed by the sages and, in more systematic fashion, Rashi and Ibn Ezra, as a *mashal* (parable) for the mutual love between God (anthropopathically depicted) and

Israel, becomes for Maimonides a model for the individual's intellectual love of God (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10:6), and for Gersonides a dialogue between the passive and active intellects. "God created man in His image [*tzelem*]" (Genesis 1:27) becomes a way of saying that the form or essence of the human being is, like God's essence, intellect; the elements described in Genesis 1:2 are none other than the four elements of Greek cosmology; King Solomon's proverbs about a seductress become a depiction of the harm matter wreaks upon the intellect, while Proverbs 31 is taken to express how rare it is for a person to find the "woman of valor" – matter that will not corrupt him. Adam's sinning at Eve's suggestion represents form's being brought down by the seductive attractions of matter; Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder and God speaking to him represents the prophets and the separate intellects (*Guide* 1:15). Gersonides read into the *Aqedah* (the binding of Isaac, Genesis 22) his controversial denial that God knows future contingents. Figures like Abraham and Moses are represented by medieval philosophical exegetes as philosopher-scientists. "You shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and "You should know this day and commit to your heart that the Lord is God..." (Deuteronomy 4:39) are construed as calls to study philosophy and science.

The simplicity of the idea of a two-layered text is seductive and masks significant ambiguities. Does the exoteric layer have value, and if so, in what does that value consist? Why does the exoteric layer exist at all? Our formulation also conceals the fact that almost side by side with the notion of a two-layered text we find the thesis that in some cases there is but one layer, whose only true meaning in the context is philosophical. I proceed to elaborate on these issues, beginning with the question of why the exoteric layer exists at all – why the Bible does not state philosophic truth directly and explicitly.

#### "The Torah Speaks in the Language of Humans"

Beginning with the geonim, Babylonian authorities of eighth–tenth-century Babylonia, medieval Jewish philosophers are wont to cite the talmudic dictum, "the Torah speaks in the language of *benei adam*, human beings" (*Sifre*, Numbers 112; Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 71a). They maintain that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic

verses are used because the masses need concrete, visual images to think about theology (*Guide* 1:26, 48). Picturesque language makes for good pedagogy. Further, the stories of God's providence and the ascription to him of emotions like anger and love are politically useful: they will induce the simpleminded masses to be obedient and will promote social order (*Guide* 3:28). Finally, were the masses taught the truth they would think it undermines Scripture and might reject Scripture as a source of truth (Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah, Hagigah* 2:1). Maimonides adopts a more precise understanding of "the Torah speaks in the language of man" when he declares that the term "adam" (man or human), in one of its meanings, refers to the multitude, the philosophically ignorant (*Guide* 1:14). The Torah, the great teacher, is addressed to the community and must serve even its lowest intellectual rung.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, the rationalists' use of the phrase "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" to guide philosophic reinterpretation of Scripture, is itself an example of their highly creative deployment of texts. In the original talmudic context of "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings," Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael (second century CE) are debating a point about legal contexts in the Bible. At issue is whether in such contexts the Bible's repetition of a term – a doubling of a verb, for example – should be used to derive a new legal conclusion that is not explicit in the biblical text. Whereas Rabbi Akiva regularly derives laws in this way, Rabbi Ishmael, following his teacher Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, states, "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings" – meaning (roughly), do not make such inferences, for the Torah merely uses the device of repetition for stylistic emphasis or ornamentation. When medieval rationalists apply Rabbi Ishmael's phrase to theological expressions rather than legal ones, or perhaps more accurately, in addition to them, and to features of verses other than repetition, they are extending it beyond its original scope. Notice, moreover, that Rabbi Ishmael is prescribing a conservative approach to exegesis, limiting our right to derive ideas that are not explicit in the text; in the hands of Saadya Gaon or Maimonides the phrase becomes the opposite (albeit without an implication this was the original meaning): a license for creating new interpretations of the Bible's anthropomorphic and anthropathic descriptions.<sup>10</sup> Interpretations that deviate from the plain meanings of verses are common among the rabbis of

the Talmud, and it is interesting that medieval Jewish philosophers saw their own method of reinterpretation as duplicating the sages', even as the latter's use of figurative language emulates the Bible's. Notably, some philosophers regarded at least some of the sages' *midreshei halakhah*, interpretations that carry legal consequences, as ornamental props or supports rather than actual meanings, but their philosophical readings of the Bible were not qualified in this way.

The Bible's communicative strategy as seen by the rationalists should be understood in terms of a theory of prophecy formulated by the Islamic philosopher al-Farabi (d. 950), an important influence on Maimonides.<sup>11</sup> Al-Farabi maintained that philosophy precedes religion temporally. The prophet is someone who has passed through the stage of philosophy and now exercises his faculty of imagination – the faculty that receives visual images and creates mental pictures and symbols – in order to translate these truths from abstract to concrete terms, from philosophical propositions to metaphors and parables. Prophecy is thus the apprehension and imaginative translation of philosophical truth, and the formulations of the prophets in the Bible express the scientific and philosophic truths the latter have attained. Maimonides appropriated al-Farabi's views on prophecy, and it is this concept of prophecy that guides his understanding of biblical texts. (Some interpreters believe that the symbols are needed not only for communication to the masses but for the prophet's own apprehension.)

By appraising the exoteric layer as a sop to the masses, the "language of humans" model gives little credit to that exoteric layer as a source of truth, except to the extent that it implies general ideas like the existence of God and the operation of providence. There is, however, another model of the multiple layers to consider, one featured in Maimonides' introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*: "apples of gold in filigrees of silver is a word fitly spoken" (Proverbs 25:11). Maimonides has in mind parables, of the kind King Solomon presents in the biblical book of Proverbs. A saying uttered with two meanings – an exoteric and an esoteric – is like an apple of gold overlaid with small holes, as in filigree work, through which one can glimpse the inner deeper meaning. In this imagery the external meaning of a figure of speech or parable is valuable like silver, and is not a mere concession to the multitude, devoid of intrinsic merit.

Still, this is not to say that the outer layer conveys truth. Rather, Maimonides implies that the outer meaning contains wisdom that is politically useful, conducing to an ordered society; the inner meaning, in contrast, contains "wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is."<sup>12</sup>

Besides the "language of humans" and "filigrees of silver" assessments of the exoteric layer, there is yet a third approach to the text, one that at least implicitly denies that we always have two layers in texts that trouble the philosopher. In the early chapters of the *Guide*, the lexicographic chapters, Maimonides shows that specific terms which people tend to construe as anthropomorphic or anthropopathic in truth have multiple meanings that vary according to context. And here is the rub: the correct, literal meaning of such supposedly anthropomorphic and anthropopathic expressions is in their context, that is, given the subject of which those terms are predicated, non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropopathic. The term applied to God is "borrowed" from another context, in this case the human one, but its meaning is adjusted in accordance with the difference in the subject of predication. For example, when predicated of God, "standing" means "permanent" and enduring, "sitting" means changeless (when God is said to "sit for all eternity"). (This method is known in Hebrew as *hash'ulah*, borrowing a term, in contrast to *mashal* or parable.<sup>13</sup>) Maimonides uses this type of interpretation when he depicts the activity of the Targumim, to be discussed shortly: he hints that their (allegedly) anti-anthropomorphic renditions are simply the result of a good understanding of Hebrew.

In most cases of *mashal*, according to Maimonides, the *mashal* is not fully allegorical, that is, not every word is to be assigned either a figurative or a "borrowed" meaning. Rather, in most cases, many of the terms in the parable serve only to embellish the *mashal*. When Solomon describes at length a married harlot who is supposed to represent matter (Proverbs 7), most of the specifics supplied are simply descriptions of a harlot rather than figurative allusions to specific features of matter. And in the book of Job many details are needed just to flesh out the plot line. Departing from the usual interpretation of Song of Songs, Maimonides did not think that the details had to be interpreted figuratively; it was enough for the book to depict a man and woman in love in the ways characteristic of wooing.

Allegorization carries dangers. If not held in check, it can lead to radical assertions, even heresies. For this reason medieval philosophers usually cautioned that figurative interpretations of Scripture are not to be adopted unless a specific reason exists to depart from the literal meaning of a verse. Saadya Gaon identifies four such cases: the literal reading yields a thesis contrary to reason, which means its falsehood is subject to demonstration; it contradicts human experience; it contravenes accepted tradition; or it contradicts other verses (*Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, 7:2). Maimonides furnishes a nuanced example of how conflict between Scripture and reason should be approached. He presents three possible views of the origin of the world: creation *ex nihilo* (the Torah view); made from pre-existent eternal matter (Plato); eternal (Aristotle). The scriptural text, he says, could be read either literally as creation *ex nihilo* or figuratively to accord with a Platonic or Aristotelian view – the "gates of figurative interpretation" are not "shut in our faces." But, unlike the case of anthropomorphic language, there is no adequate philosophical reason to depart from literalism, no demonstration of a different side; if there were, a figurative interpretation could be accepted. Maimonides imposes a further restriction: any interpretation that would deny the possibility of miracles must be rejected – and that means that Aristotle's view could never supply the proper interpretation.

Notwithstanding Maimonides' insistence on the unacceptability of Aristotle's view, medieval philosophers arguably did not treat satisfactorily the question of just where the line should be drawn between admissible and inadmissible interpretations. Interpreters of Maimonides have long suspected he secretly endorsed Aristotle's view, or, alternatively, that secretly he felt Aristotle's view was compatible with Torah; these secret beliefs would be proof for some that the figurative method is too liberal. There is a radical strain of biblical interpretation in medieval philosophy. Gersonides claimed that the Platonic view could be demonstrated, and that Genesis 1 was best read in line with this view, even on the literal level. Other radical readers include Samuel ibn Tibbon, Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles and Joseph ibn Kaspi. Against philosophical readings of Scripture, Yitzhak Arama raised the criticism that the rationalists do not learn anything from the biblical text itself. They accept only



those propositions that accord with philosophy and interpret figuratively those that do not, so what they knew after the revelation is identical with what they knew before, and revelation teaches nothing.

Worthy of mention as well is the question: If the Torah is allegorical, why should Jews not allegorize the laws as well as the narratives? This antinomian argument was frequently brought up in Jewish-Christian polemics.

### *The Question of Precedent*

The notion of a two-layered text and the use of allegorical interpretation is found abundantly in Christian thought, most notably in Augustine, and the idea of a two-layered text was championed by Muslim thinkers as well, notably Averroes. But is there precedent in premedieval Judaism for interpreting biblical texts as metaphors or parables?

Various midrashim are fairly categorized as allegorical and thus afford a precedent, as when "the earth was *tohu va-vohu* [unformed]" in Genesis 1:2 is explained by the midrash as referring to foreign powers and the deeds of the wicked. In addition, Aristobulus in the second century BCE interpreted references to God's body as referring to noncorporeal things (hand-power; standing-permanence; descending-revelation; speech-establishing of things). Nevertheless, the founding of a systematic Jewish figurative interpretation of Scripture based on philosophy is usually credited to Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–50 CE). Philo understood the Bible, particularly Genesis, as Greek philosophers troubled by Homer's gods understood Homer: as an allegory to be construed via the principles of Hellenistic thought, in his case middle Platonic thought in particular. So, for example, Philo's reading of Genesis adapts Plato's account of creation in the *Timaeus* and states that God's first creation was the Ideas (Forms). Different biblical characters represent different personal characteristics or faculties: Adam, spirituality; Eve, feeling; Noah, righteousness. Places, animals, and plants likewise are symbols. Philo stresses the need for human beings to break from materiality and apprehend the intelligible world. Moses, for Philo, is a great philosopher. Philo influenced Christianity far more than Judaism and was not known to medieval thinkers; yet medieval

Jewish philosophers accept Greek wisdom, holding many of the same views about God and the value of reason as does Philo, owing perhaps to his indirect influence.

Philo believed in the historical truth of some of the biblical stories, but viewed others as purely allegorical and non-historical. Jewish philosophers did not generally question the historicity of the biblical narratives. Still, rationalists were accused of understanding "Abraham and Sarah as matter and form, the twelve tribes as the twelve constellations, the alliance of four and five kings in Genesis 14 as the four elements and five senses, and Amalek as the evil inclination."<sup>14</sup> Some statements of Maimonides struck his interpreters as denying historicity and thus using allegory objectionably. Specifically, one son of Adam, Cain, is said by Maimonides to represent the acquisitive instinct, the other, Seth, intellectual attainment (*Guide* 2:30); and, as in Philo, who draws from Plato's identification of reason (form) with man and matter with woman, Adam seems to represent form (intellect), while Eve represents matter, which distracts Adam and leads to his sinning (*Guide* 1:17).

Turning now from Philo, two important figures in our context are Onkelos "the proselyte" and Yonatan ben Uziel, whom Jewish tradition views as authors of the Aramaic translations of the Bible known as Targumim. An Amoraic statement reads: "Onkelos the proselyte said the [Aramaic] translation of the Torah [Pentateuch][comes] from the mouth of R. Eliezer and R. Joshua; Yonatan ben Uziel said the translation of the books of the prophets [comes] from the mouth of [the prophets] Haggai, Zechariah, and Malakhi" (*Megillah* 3a). (Modern scholars dispute this traditional view of the Targumim's authorship.) Now according to Maimonides,

Onkelos the proselyte was very perfect in the Hebrew and Syrian languages and directed his effort toward the abolition of the belief in God's corporeality. Hence he interprets in accordance with its meaning every attribute that Scripture predicates of God and that might lead toward the belief in corporeality.

"The Lord will descend" is rendered as "the Lord will manifest himself"; "the Lord heard" as "it was heard before God and received" (*Guide* 1:47). When motion is attributed to the deity, Onkelos – according to Maimonides – attributes it to a created entity, the Shekhinah (lit. indwelling) which medieval rationalists view not as

a name of God but as a term denoting a created thing, either a form (Saadya, *Doctrines and Beliefs* 2) or a created light whose presence in a place is a mark of that place's distinction (Maimonides, *Guide* 1:21).<sup>15</sup>

The Targumim are important for the rationalists for several reasons. First, as the quotation from *Megillah* 3a suggests, the authors of the Targumim studied with sages or even prophets. This implies that their work represents the views of the sages or prophets, and so the rationalists' modes of interpretation are not radical breaks with the past but on the contrary boast an ancient and authoritative pedigree. Second, the availability of the Targumim means that the average person from among the masses cannot justify or excuse being an anthropomorphist. Consider in particular the argument of Abraham ben David (Rabad) protesting Maimonides' categorization of an anthropomorphist as a heretic in *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 3:7: "People greater and better than he have followed this opinion, based on what they saw in scriptural texts and in the words of the Aggadah, which corrupt opinions." Contrary to Rabad's gloss, Maimonides in the *Guide* claims that this excuse is not valid because, inter alia, the Targumim exist to dispel false notions (1:36). Finally, it is interesting that Maimonides praises Onkelos' knowledge of languages but not his knowledge of philosophy. This suggests that when Onkelos translates phrases in a non-anthropomorphic way, he is rejecting an alternative approach that would translate terms anthropomorphically but understand them non-anthropomorphically. In this formulation, even the "literal" meaning of the relevant terms is non-anthropomorphic.

Maimonides' portrait of Onkelos is energetically disputed by Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), a major kabbalist, legal scholar, and biblical commentator. In his commentaries to Genesis 46:1 and Exodus 20:16, Nahmanides argues that, while Onkelos may remove the anthropomorphic flavor of words denoting motion and hearing, he translates terms connoting divine speech with their literal Aramaic equivalents ("God said," "God spoke," "God called"). Likewise Onkelos translates verbs connoting sight in a way that does not remove the anthropomorphism. Elsewhere Onkelos preserves in his translation biblical references to the Lord's hand and finger. Nahmanides' alternative account of Onkelos' method is obscure insofar as it is steeped in kabbalah, but his critique of Maimonides'

reading of Onkelos is powerful. In addition to being denied by Nahmanides, the notion that Shekhinah refers to a created thing has been disputed by modern scholars such as Ephraim Urbach, who argue that the term does denote the presence or nearness of God.

#### TALMUDIC AND MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

When we turn to dicta of the sages of the talmudic-midrashic era, and more specifically to the non-legal sections of the Talmud and midrash known collectively as the Aggadah, we find on the one hand numerous elements – or at least fragments – of a theology, enough to have generated several lengthy scholarly studies of the sages' theology.<sup>16</sup> The impact of philosophical schools, specifically Stoicism, on rabbinic thought is evident in teachings that the soul fills and vitalizes the body as God fills the world, that all humans have is borrowed from God, that God builds and destroys worlds, and that the soul is estranged in this world. Parallels to Platonic thought include the suggestion that there is knowledge prior to birth (albeit this is knowledge of the Torah, not the Forms) and the notion that God created the world by looking into the Torah.<sup>17</sup> But on the other hand we find no evidence of extensive involvement with philosophy (the borrowings are from popular versions of Stoicism and Platonism), and we even encounter statements that could be construed as opposed to "Greek wisdom," "the wisdom of the nations," and "logic."<sup>18</sup> Unlike the case with legal idioms, there are no borrowings of philosophical vocabulary. Oddly, the rabbis record debates with non-Jews and heretics over issues like creation without adducing philosophical arguments that were used by their side.<sup>19</sup> As well, according to an eminent scholar of the period, "none of [the rabbinic sources] provides systematic treatment of the subject of beliefs and conceptions, and there are almost no continuous discourses dealing with a single theme."<sup>20</sup>

Were the rabbis not literate in philosophy? Not interested in philosophy? Were they fearful of it? Did they engage in philosophical discussion at all? Warren Zev Harvey has argued that in all likelihood when the rabbis engaged in disputes with non-Jews and heretics, some of which we are told were quite protracted, they utilized philosophical arguments. Nevertheless, in summarizing those debates in a short space, they eschewed philosophical vocabulary

and argumentation. Harvey maintains further that particular views of the sages, for instance, that God builds and destroys worlds, reflect knowledge of Stoic and Epicurean views of cosmogony, even while (1) breaking from both Stoic determinism and Epicurean chance and in addition (2) asserting, unlike either of those schools, that this world will not be destroyed. Such awareness of philosophical schools was found in the land of Israel, where Hellenism flourished, but not in Babylon. Harvey suggests that the rabbis "considered philosophy to be foreign to their concerns not because they did not know what it was, but rather because they did know."<sup>21</sup>

Be that as it may, we must return to the challenge confronting the medieval philosophers. For all the convergence in ideas about a transcendent deity who exercises providence and gave the Torah, rabbinic views and dicta were not infrequently contrary to philosophical wisdom.

In the Aggadah, God wears phylacteries and dons a prayer shawl, roars like a lion yet also sheds tears, studies Torah, and suffers over the tribulations of Israel that he brought on, sharing in their exile (see *Avodah Zarah* 3b, *Berakhot* 9b, *Sifre be-Midbar* 84). At times a seemingly anthropomorphic theology even influences law, or at least the rabbis' understanding of it. A person blind in one eye need not make the festival pilgrimage, because just as the man who comes to the holy place must be seen by God with two eyes, so must he see God with two eyes (*Hagigah* 2a). Again, when the Bible prescribes that the body of a criminal executed by hanging must be buried before sunset (Deuteronomy 22:21), the rabbis explain that the law's purpose is to prevent people from thinking that the king himself is hanging instead of his twin (*Sanhedrin* 46b). Philosophy seems not to be a valuable objective: the statement "the holy one has nothing in his world but the four ells of halakhah [Jewish law]" (*Berakhot* 8a) *prima facie* cuts against the rationalist claim that non-legal disciplines such as science and philosophy represent, as per Aristotle, the highest human achievement. As a corollary, the motifs of Israel's election and the need for *mitzvot*, salient in biblical and rabbinic thought, are problematic for the philosopher who stresses scientific and philosophical pursuits that cut across ethnic and religious divisions.

Critics of rabbinic Judaism – from Karaites, to Christians and Moslem polemicists, to skeptical thinkers from within – assailed rabbinic thought as absurd and, as in the case of anthropomorphism,

even blasphemous.<sup>22</sup> The philosophical problems in the Aggadah led the geonim to pioneer two distinct approaches vis-à-vis the rabbinic statements: rejection and reinterpretation. The first was used by Hai Gaon and Sherira Gaon on a limited basis,<sup>23</sup> and much later was employed by Nahmanides when he needed to rebut allegations of a Christian interlocutor in a public disputation. Citing his father, Abraham Maimonides endorses occasional rejection of Aggadot. Rabbinic dicta are not the product of prophecy as biblical teachings are, and rejection is therefore more of an option.<sup>24</sup>

That said, the second approach – reinterpreting problematic statements to protect the view of the sages as wise men – seemed more desirable. Like the Bible, the rabbis were said (Abraham bar Hiyya being perhaps the first to claim this) to speak in the language of human beings. They used symbols and stories in figurative fashion, and at times anthropomorphic depictions of God were mere descriptions of scenes and objects beheld in a vision. In his introduction to his commentary to ch. 10 of *Mishnah Sanhedrin*, Maimonides alleges that scientifically knowledgeable people who take the sages' problematic statements literally, and on that basis reject those statements, lack an understanding of pedagogy. Teaching difficult matters must proceed through parables and other figurative techniques. Although Maimonides, as noted earlier, gave up on an earlier plan to provide a decoding of rabbinic texts, his rereadings of rabbinic texts, like his interpretations of biblical verses, constitute an exceptionally rich achievement. Not only did he engage offending statements, but he construed relatively benign ones in philosophical categories. While on occasion Maimonides ignored or even rejected problematic rabbinic statements, the cumulative effect of his hermeneutic achievements was an impression that the very project of the rabbis was the same as his – to give expression to the metaphysical and ethical assertions of Aristotelian philosophy.

What follows is a variety of examples of rabbinic texts to which rationalists, especially Maimonides, gave a philosophical spin:

1. In the tractate *Hagigah* 2:1, the Mishnah places restrictions on the study of "the work of creation" and "the work of the chariot." Probably these terms originally referred to certain mystical teachings. Maimonides holds they convey a limitation on teaching the esoteric subjects of natural science and metaphysics, and he uses the Mishnah's restrictions on how esoteric material should be taught

as a guideline for his own method of composition (introduction to *Guide of the Perplexed*).

2. Angels mentioned in the Talmud are said to refer to the ten separate intellects of medieval cosmology.

3. R. Haninah (*Berakhot* 33b) rebuked a prayer reader for augmenting established adjectives for God in the liturgy with additional laudatory ones. This is not, Maimonides tells us, because the man did not use enough adjectives. Rather, it is because no affirmative attributes pertain to God at all. This position Maimonides holds on the basis of various philosophical considerations such as the unity of the divine being. The pivotal anti-Aristotelian Hasdai Crescas (author of *Light of the Lord*) objected to this reading, and thought that the problem is that the list of positive laudatory attributes was too long.

4. The Mishnah in *Avot* (5:6) states that God created certain miracles on the twilight of the first Sabbath eve before the creation of Adam and Eve. Maimonides construes this and other texts as saying that miracles are part of the original creation. All events are located in the natural order, reflecting the dominance of divine wisdom as opposed to divine will (*Commentary to Avot; Guide* 2:29).

5. "Moses died with a kiss" (*Bava Batra* 17a). The Maimonidean reading is that, with his sensory and imaginative faculties enfeebled with age, Moses could focus on intellectual matters exclusively, and he died with the pleasure of intellectual apprehension (*Guide* 3:51).

6. *Hagigah* 15a relates: "Four entered Pardes . . ." For Maimonides, "Pardes" refers to wisdom – specifically, natural science plus metaphysics (= work of the creation plus work of the chariot). The point of the passage is that only R. Akiva emerged in peace because only he had grasped the fact that the human intellect is limited and not all truths can be demonstrated (*Guide* 1:32).

7. "Service of the heart," a biblical idiom construed by the sages to denote prayer (*Taanit* 2a) comes to refer, in Maimonides' thought, to a nonverbal intellectual contemplation, the highest form of prayer. (The heart signifies mind in medieval writing.)

8. The rabbis at times denigrate "this world" and affirm the importance and value of "the world to come." In rabbinic parlance, these terms refer to stages in history; Maimonides used the terms to denote the contrast between existence in the physical world – in which matter can wreak havoc upon human intellectual apprehension and upon concentration on scientific and metaphysical subjects – and

a higher disembodied existence in the afterlife. Now the sage Rav declared (*Berakhot* 17a): "In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, or intercourse. Rather, the righteous sit with crowns on their heads." The second sentence of the quotation suggests that the afterlife in the rabbinic conception is corporeal, contrary to the philosophers' devaluation of embodied existence. Maimonides understands the "righteous sitting with crowns on their heads" figuratively, as connoting a state of knowledge that brings peace. The first quoted statement, which denies the occurrence of corporeal activities in the afterlife, is used by Maimonides to argue that the future existence will be bodiless. Critics pointed out that existence could be embodied while the bodies could have needs different from those in this world. In any event, as a result of his portrait of the afterlife as disembodied, Maimonides was accused of denying resurrection of the body altogether, a charge he later denied in his *Treatise on Resurrection*.

9. We have already noted the significance for Maimonides of the Aramaic translations of the Bible.

10. R. Haninah states (*Hullin* 7a): "A person does not bruise his finger below unless it has been decreed from above." Maimonides holds that when the prophets speak of God doing x, what this means is that x occurs according to the laws of nature that God willed. Extending this to the rabbis, the statement now means that all bruises are the result of natural law. (On this reading, it is unclear what view the *Hullin* statement was designed to counter.)

A medieval critic considered such exegeses to be "like one who makes for a great king a crown of clay," and nonliteral interpretations of Aggadah were a major flashpoint in the Maimonidean controversy.<sup>25</sup> But for rationalists, rabbinic texts would have been an embarrassment to Jews if understood literally. Read figuratively, they represent "apples of gold in filigrees of silver" (Proverbs 25:11). In *Guide* 3:43, Maimonides suggests that such midrashim are poetical conceits that do not need all their details interpreted.

#### A SAMPLE ISSUE: DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Notwithstanding the difficulties in Maimonides' and other rationalists' interpretations of rabbinic texts, rabbinic thought is reactive to philosophical ideas and in some respects displays a surprising degree

of convergence with medieval philosophy. By way of illustration let us consider the subject of divine providence.

Medieval Jewish philosophers considered prophecy and providence to be natural phenomena dependent on the level of a person's intellectual development. In contrast to philosophical naturalism, the world of the sages seems punctuated by frequent divine interventions. This is clear both from stories told and statements issued: for instance, the already cited "a person does not bruise his finger below unless it has been decreed from above..." and "all is in the hands of heaven, save for the fear of heaven" (*Berakhot* 33b).

Close examination reveals, however, that the rabbis were far from oblivious of natural causation. In one talmudic story, a poor widower, unable to afford a wet-nurse, miraculously grows breasts to nurture his child; while one sage takes this to signal the man's greatness, another declares "on the contrary, how inferior is this man, that the natural order was changed for him" (*Shabbat* 53b).<sup>26</sup> More strikingly, the Amora Rav declares that children, longevity, and sustenance depend upon *mazzal*, or astrological flow, rather than on the individual's merits. Even the view in the Talmud that "Israel is immune from mazzal" means not that astrology does not affect Jews at all, but rather that exceptional Jews like Abraham and R. Akiva can counteract the *mazzalot* through their good deeds (*Shabbat* 156a-b). When Abraham frets that the constellations augur that he will not have an heir, God tells him that he can alter the position of the planets. Thus even the result that is contrary to the *mazzal* is achieved by exploiting astrological laws, not canceling them. Ironically, the rabbinic statement "the world follows its natural course" (*Avodah Zarah* 54a), quoted by medieval philosophers to corroborate the existence of a natural order, actually suggests, in context, that God directly shapes the human embryo. Thus statements that sound naturalistic are embedded in a non-naturalistic framework, and statements that sound non-naturalistic reflect a naturalism. The idea that nature by itself is wondrous occurs frequently.

A common misconception about rabbinic thought is that it subscribes to a simple doctrine that suffering and death (or at least the timing of a death) are always punishment for sin. Yet in the one place in the Talmud where a sage (R. Ami) asserts this explicitly, his view is rejected (for reasons, moreover, that are less than powerful), suggesting that the Talmud is far from satisfied with such a theodicy (*Shabbat* 55a). Yaakov Elman argues that Babylonian and

Israel-based sources evince differing approaches to theodicy. In contrast to sages of the Jerusalem Talmud, those in Babylon held that "divine providence in the private lives of even the righteous is the exception rather than the rule." The Babylonian Talmud invokes a range of explanations of unmerited suffering: "a time of anger," "sufferings of love," "vicarious atonement," and others. In post-talmudic times such explanations were often ignored or minimized, and other accounts developed.<sup>27</sup> For example, to explain certain anomalies, Gersonides developed an intriguing doctrine of inherited providence.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

1. See I. Twersky, "Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 231-57, esp. 238-42.
2. See Y. Muffs, "Of Image and Imagination in the Bible," in *Biblical Paintings*, ed. J. Tisso (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1982), 8-10.
3. See A. Melamed, "Philosophical Commentaries to Jeremiah 9:22-23 in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985), 31-82.
4. See N. Roth, "The 'Theft of Philosophy' by the Greeks from the Jews," *Classical Folia* 22 (1978), 53-67. Moses Nahmanides held the same historical thesis, but did not infer therefrom the legitimacy of studying philosophy; see D. Berger, "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times," in G. Blidstein, D. Berger, S. Z. Leiman, and A. Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration* (Northvale N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1997), 79.
5. Noted by A. Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 177-82; see, for example, S. Pines, "Translator's Introduction" to *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), cxx; cf., however, S. Rosenberg, "On Biblical Interpretation in the Guide of the Perplexed" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981), 88-94.
6. See Berger, "Judaism and General Culture," 61-84.
7. See M. Halbertal, *Interpretative Revolutions in the Making* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), ch. 8; M. Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27-32.



8. See J. Cohen, "Philosophical Exegesis in Historical Perspective: The Case of the Binding of Isaac," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. T. Rudavsky (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 135-42, esp. 136; W. Harvey, "On Maimonides' Allegorical Readings of Scripture," in *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. J. Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 181-88; S. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuben Maas, 1987), chs. 1-2.
9. For Ibn Kaspi's distinctive reading, see Twersky, "Joseph ibn Kaspi," 38-42.
10. J. Stern, "Language," in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. A. Cohen and P. Mendes-Flohr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), 549-50.
11. See, inter alia, L. Berman, "Maimonides, The Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974), 154-78.
12. *Guide*, trans. Pines, introduction, 12; see also 2:47. See J. Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 7-13; cf. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation*, 47-59.
13. See M. Cohen, "Radak's Contribution to the Tradition of Figurative Biblical Exegesis," Ph.D. dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1994.
14. Berger, "Judaism and General Culture," 102.
15. See G. F. Moore, "Intermediaries in Jewish Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* (1922), 41-8; E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 40-5.
16. For example: S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961); G. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927-30); Urbach, *The Sages*.
17. See J. Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. D. W. Silverman (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 45-6.
18. Analyzed by G. Blidstein, "Rabbinic Judaism and General Culture: Normative Discussion and Attitudes," in Blidstein, Berger, Leiman, and Lichtenstein, *Judaism's Encounter*, 9-26.
19. See S. Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); W. Harvey, "Rabbinic Attitudes toward Philosophy," in "Open Thou Mine Eyes": *Essays on Aggadah and Judaica Presented to William G. Braude on his Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to his Memory*, ed. H. Blumberg (Hoboken: Ktav, 1992), 83-101.
20. Urbach, *The Sages*, 4.

21. Harvey, "Rabbinic Attitudes," 101.
22. See M. Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), ch. 1, which aided me in compiling the examples that follow.
23. R. Sherira Gaon, *Sefer ha-Eshkol* 2:47 and R. Hai Gaon, in *Otzar ha-Geonim: Yom Tov, Hagigah u-Mashkin* 2:59.
24. See Rosenberg, "On Biblical Interpretation," 143-51, on the possibility of prophets making errors.
25. See B. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 39-103.
26. But see Urbach, *The Sages*, 110.
27. See Y. Elman, "The Contribution of Rabbinic Thought to a Theology of Misfortune," in *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering*, ed. S. Carmy (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1999), 155-212, and Elman's other articles cited there; cf. R. Goldenberg, "Early Rabbinic Explanations of the Destruction of Jerusalem," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982), 517-26; D. Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
28. See R. Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant, and the Chosen People: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Biblical Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

### 3 The Islamic context of medieval Jewish philosophy

*In memory of Franz Rosenthal*

#### INTRODUCTION

Medieval Jewish thought flourished under the aegis of Islamic civilization from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries when the venue shifted to the Christian West. Its language was Arabic, its concerns determined by issues raised in the context of Islamic thought. The same issues (e.g. the nature of the divine, creation, prophecy, providence, human perfection, and immortality) were later pondered by Jewish thinkers in the Christian milieu, and Hebrew scientific terminology was modeled on Arabic.

For Islam, as for Judaism, the religious law is paramount, a comprehensive guide to life in all its aspects. Study of Qur'an, tradition (*hadith*), theology (*kalam*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) dominated Muslim intellectual life. The '*ulama*' (clerics) regarded "the ancient sciences" as alien and useless, as an insidious threat to religious faith.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d. 1198), a philosopher and jurist, justified philosophy as a religious obligation, but his opinion had no effect on the career of philosophy in Islam, which was emphatically rejected by religious authorities. Even the Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) felt the need to refute philosophy.

The medieval Islamic world had no universities as did Europe, where philosophy was taught alongside theology. Muslim rulers sponsored scientific research, which was institutionalized in libraries, hospitals, and observatories. Philosophers taught privately or to circles that met in their homes or in other venues such as bookstores.

Philosophy and science were cultivated from the ninth through the twelfth centuries in the heartlands of Islam, as well as in Andalusia and the Maghreb. By the thirteenth century, however, an intellectual decline had set in as the result of socio-economic and military disasters (the Crusades, a "feudal" economy, the Mongol invasion of Iraq, plagues and famine in Egypt). This decline deepened in the later Middle Ages just as European intellectuals were awakening to the new spirit of the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to orthodox Islam, Christianity adopted philosophy at an early stage, making it a handmaiden to theology. Philosophy was a vital component of the officially sanctioned and required training of the student of *sacra doctrina*. Thomas Aquinas justifies the study of theology before the bar of philosophy. It is necessary, he says, that besides the philosophical sciences investigated by reason there should be a sacred doctrine based on divine revelation (*Summa Theologica*, First Part, 1:1).

The precarious status of philosophy in the Islamic milieu guaranteed its private, reclusive character and its freedom from state or clerical control. When philosophy receives official sanction, as in Christendom, it may serve ulterior purposes. Philosophy for the Christian Aristotelianism of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas was an *ancilla theologiae*. The reception of philosophy in the Christian world meant its subservience to ecclesiastical supervision.<sup>3</sup> This supervision was gradually broken with Galileo and the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century.

#### FROM GREEK INTO ARABIC

Classical culture, belonging to the *Kulturkreis* of the Mediterranean, was not considered alien wisdom by Islamic philosophers, who felt themselves affiliated with "the sciences of the ancients" – in the widest sense, the Greeks, Indians, and Persians. They believed that the Greeks derived their wisdom from the East (*ex oriente lux*), so that the study of ancient thought was a renovation rather than an innovation. Al-Farabi (Alfarabi) (d. 950) located the birthplace of philosophy in Iraq, whence it was transmitted to Egypt, then to Greece, and finally rendered into Syriac and Arabic. He envisioned

a rebirth of philosophy in its original home, ancient wisdom thus coming full circle.

The Islamic philosophers (*al-asifa*), reflecting ancient and Hellenistic lore, believed that the Presocratic philosophers acquired their wisdom from the Orient. Thales, they claimed, received instruction in Egypt, and Empedocles studied with Luqman the sage at the time of the prophet David. Pythagoras studied physics and metaphysics with Solomon's disciples in Egypt. He learned geometry from the Egyptians, receiving the sciences from the "niche of prophecy" (*mishkat al-nubuwwa*).<sup>4</sup> Solomon transferred the sciences to Greece. Scientific knowledge was thus legitimized as an indigenous growth, as Hellenistic and medieval Jewish thinkers also portrayed Abraham, Solomon, and Moses as philosophers from whom Greek wisdom was derived.

The Islamic philosophers were heirs to a late Hellenistic syllabus of Greek learning.<sup>5</sup> They integrated Aristotelian logic, physics, and ethics, Neoplatonic metaphysics, Platonic political philosophy, Ptolemaic astronomy, Euclidian geometry, and Galenic medicine into a cohesive structure, thereby transforming the eclectic diversity of late Hellenistic thought into a coherent system of cumulative knowledge within the broad framework of a Neoplatonic Aristotelianism.

True doctrine was associated with antiquity, and philosophy was pursued mainly by exegesis of ancient texts, by questioning them and by progressing to knowledge beyond them.

The cultural adaptation of the Greek heritage was not a passive reception of a foreign legacy but an act of creative appropriation.<sup>6</sup> The prominence of critical works (e.g. Abu 'Ali ibn al-Haytham's [d. 1039] *Doubts on Ptolemy* and Abu Bakr al-Razi's [d. 925] *Doubts on Galen*) underscores the ingenuity of Islamic science. Even Aristotle, a towering authority, was studied critically by readers attentive to obscurities and puzzles in his works. Islamic learning – with original contributions in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and optics – was not merely a transitional link between Greek antiquity and medieval Europe but a dramatic chapter in the progress of human knowledge.

The transmission of learning from Greek into Arabic, and then from Arabic into Hebrew, Latin, and other European languages, was a momentous achievement of human civilization, and it was

formative of the "Western" consciousness. Medieval European intellectuals, Christian and Jewish, studied Muslim thinkers such as al-Kindi (d. c. 866), al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (d. 1037), al-Ghazali (Alghazali) (d. 1111), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and early (ninth- and tenth-century) scientists such as Masha'allah, Abu Ma'shar al-Balkhi and Abu 'Abdallah al-Battani. Translators in Sicily and Toledo rendered Arabic works into Latin, French, Spanish, and Hebrew without a substantial loss of meaning, thereby creating a true internationality of sciences. Medieval thinkers – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – confronted identical philosophical issues, refracted through different linguistic prisms, their methods and basic postulates being similar. Without the intense Greco-Arabic translation activity in the Islamic world and transmission of these texts into Hebrew and Latin, medieval Jewish thought and Latin Scholasticism are inconceivable.

The extent of texts translated from Greek into Arabic is breathtaking in scope: the Presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Ptolemy, Galen, Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Alexander, Themistius, Nicomachus of Gerasa, and others.<sup>7</sup>

The Greco-Arabic translation movement began in full vigor under the caliph al-Ma'mun (813–33), and was centered at the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad. This was a library containing writings on philosophy and science, including manuscripts brought from the Byzantine empire. It served as a place for scholars to convene, and had an astronomical observatory. Here the Nestorian Hunayn b. Ishaq and his colleagues translated Greek philosophy and science, particularly medicine, into Syriac and Arabic, using sound philological method, hunting down and collating Greek manuscripts. The philosopher Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Kindi helped foster this enterprise. The Nestorian medical school in Persian Gondeshapur produced physicians and translators who contributed to the rise of scientific and intellectual pursuits in Islamic civilization.

A second wave of translation activity, mainly from Syriac versions, took place in the tenth century, with the Nestorian Matta b. Yunus and the Jacobite Yahya b. 'Adi in the forefront. These scholars, along with other Christian and Muslim philosophers in Baghdad, wrote commentaries on Aristotelian works. The Alexandrian tradition of Aristotle studies was transferred by Syriac-speaking Christians to intellectual centers in Antioch and Baghdad.

The accommodation to Christian beliefs in the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria served as a model for Islamic philosophers. Christian philosophers (such as the sixth-century John Philoponus) presented Aristotle in a light favorable to Christianity. Philoponus' rejection of Aristotelian cosmology provided Islamic theologians with effective arguments. Greek and Syriac Christian theological inquiry is considered to have been a main source of Islamic *kalam*.

The school tradition of the (pagan) Platonic Academy in Athens (Plutarch, Syrianus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, Simplicius) was also transmitted to the Islamic milieu. The Athenian school had been hostile to Christianity and rejected Alexandrian concessions to it. The philosophical interpretation of pagan mythology by Iamblichus and Proclus, like the philosophical hermeneutics of Plotinus and Porphyry, served as a model for monotheistic demythologizing of sacred texts. The Athenian school was more disposed than its Alexandrian counterpart to admit revealed knowledge and supernatural insight. Along these lines, the Muslim philosopher al-Kindi believed that prophetic revelation is superior to human knowledge.

Arabic translators rendered Greek terms by functionally equivalent idioms, recontextualizing them and making them rhetorically effective in their new socio-cultural context. Translation is not a mere transference of lexical items from source to target language but a communicative process of adaptation, a cultural transfer from source to target culture, a transmission from one language and cultural context to another.

The translators accommodated Greek locutions to an Islamic setting by using Arabic expressions with a religious nuance and a congenial semantic load. They rendered Greek *nomos* ("[civil] law," "custom") by the Islamic terms *Shari'a* ("religious law") and *sunna* ("custom," "tradition"), although the word *namus* was also used. Greek *nomothetes* ("lawgiver," "legislator") was regularly translated by *wadi' al-Shari'a* or *al-Sunna* – "one who posits the religious law."<sup>8</sup> The translators purged pagan vestiges from ancient texts by substituting "God" or "angels" for "gods." The Aristotelian First Mover was expediently equated with "Allah." Greek *enthousiasmos* was translated by religious terms for inspiration and prophecy like *ilham*, *wahy*, and *nubuwwa*, referring to the ultimate human knowledge. The Platonic philosopher-king became "Imam" (the head of the Islamic community). The struggle to convert the world to the

rule of philosophy and the sovereignty of reason is called *jihad*. This communication of Greek philosophical concepts in Islamic terms comports with the view of the *falasifa* that religious symbols are a mimesis of philosophical truths.

#### PLATO ARABUS

As the Platonic dialogues were not translated intact, the dialogue form and dramatic setting were lost. Plato's *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* were accessible, and select passages from the *Crito*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium* survive in Arabic. Socrates was viewed as a model of the philosophical way of life, his death cited as paradigmatic of the conflict between philosophy and the city. Passages from commentaries on Plato (e.g. Olympiodorus, Proclus) were available, as were Galen's synopses of the *Timaeus*, *Republic*, and *Laws*.

Plato's *Republic* was the basic text for theorizing about politics. It induced an understanding of the prophet as a guide of society along the lines of a philosopher-king. The Islamic philosophers understood political science to be an examination of the best polity, ideal rule, types of regime, justice, and human happiness. The study of prophecy and the law was subsumed under this science.

Plato's *Republic* is a model for al-Farabi's *Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* and is decisive for all his political writings. He wrote a commentary on the *Republic*, known from Averroes' citations in his own commentary.<sup>9</sup> Averroes appealed to the *Republic* for thinking about politics because, he says, he could not find an Arabic version of Aristotle's *Politics*, which he heard was available in the Muslim East. In his commentary, Averroes envisions the transformation of the Muslim state into Plato's ideal regime through a series of enlightened rulers who would gradually reform their societies.

Al-Farabi's summary of Plato's philosophy presented the dialogues in thematic sequence, stressing their political aspect and excluding Neoplatonic doctrines. It was the centerpiece of a trilogy beginning with the *Attainment of Happiness* and ending with the *Philosophy of Aristotle*.<sup>10</sup> In the *Attainment* al-Farabi gives his (and ancient) views on philosophy and religion. Philosophy is prior to religion in time, and religion is a *mimesis* of philosophy. The perfect philosopher, like the supreme ruler, teaches the populace and forms their character so they may reach the happiness they are capable of attaining. In the

next two parts he expounds the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, only rarely trying to harmonize them, which he does elsewhere.

Leo Strauss viewed the *Philosophy of Plato* as the key for unlocking al-Farabi's thought, on the assumption that he taught his own most personal views chiefly under the camouflage of interpreter. By omitting distinctive Platonic themes (theory of ideas, immortality) in a summary of Plato's entire philosophy, Strauss argued, he was intimating a veiled teaching. The editors of the *Philosophy of Plato* rather traced this politically oriented portrait of Plato to a presumed Middle Platonic source.<sup>11</sup>

In another interpretive work, the summary of Plato's *Laws*, al-Farabi shows how the Greek notion of divine law helps one understand divine laws in general. Plato's *Laws* represents the authoritative philosophic teaching on prophecy and the revealed laws.<sup>12</sup> Al-Farabi subsumed the study of religion, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and theology (*kalam*) under the heading of political science.<sup>13</sup> Avicenna followed suit by making practical philosophy, including Plato's *Laws*, the starting point for the study of prophecy and the religious law.<sup>14</sup>

The *falasifa* also read Plato through the prism of a Neoplatonic tradition, that is, as interpreted by Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus. Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi and the Islamic illuminationist philosophers (Ishraqiyyun) stressed the mystical aspects of Neoplatonism and revered Plato ("the divine") as the greatest of ancient sages, the *imam* and *ra'is* (chief) of wisdom. Reviving an ancient philosophical tradition, as he claimed, al-Suhrawardi established an intellectual affiliation with Hermes (who preceded Plato) and with the great sages, "the pillars of wisdom," like Pythagoras, Empedocles, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, along with sages of ancient Persia and India, and a number of Sufis in the same *silasila* (chain of spiritual descent).

#### NEOPLATONISM

##### *The Legacy*

Plotinus was transmitted to the Islamic milieu in the guise of the *Theology of Aristotle*, a paraphrase of parts of Books 4–6 of the *Enneads*, as well as in texts ascribed to "the Greek Sage," and in

a work entitled the *Divine Science*.<sup>15</sup> The *Theology of Aristotle* exists in a short recension ascribed to al-Kindi and in a long version, evidently an expansion of it.

The aim of the al-Kindi circle, in which the *Plotiniana Arabica* emerged, was to disseminate a natural theology transcending sectarian doctrine by using Islamic concepts to convey a philosophical monotheism appealing to intellectuals.<sup>16</sup>

The long version of the *Theology* was translated into Hebrew and Italian by Moses Arovas, a Cypriot Jewish physician, who was also influential in having it rendered into Latin. This version is intriguing, as it introduces a *logos* doctrine – "the word," also called God's "power" and "will" – between the Plotinian One and the First Intelligence. It also depicts one who creates the world *ex nihilo* (*la min shay'*).<sup>17</sup>

The supersensible substances in the Arabic Plotinus, as in the *Enneads*, are the One, Intelligence (Mind), Soul, and Nature. Plotinus regarded the One as "beyond being," as Plato's Good is beyond being (*Republic* 6:509b). The Arabic Plotinus, like Porphyry, portrays the One as pure being, being itself, or absolute being, not a limited, determinate being.

Proclus' *Elements of Theology* was reworked in Arabic with monotheistic modifications as *Kitab al-Idah (Kalam) fi mahd al-khayr (Discourse on the Pure Good)*, known in the West as *Liber de Causis*, and generally taken to be by Aristotle.<sup>18</sup> It comes from the same al-Kindi milieu as the *Theology of Aristotle*. Neoplatonic emanation is presented as an act of origination (*ibda'*). The First Cause is the Pure Good and the Originator of Intelligence and of all other things in the world through its mediation. The Pure Good causes good things to permeate throughout the world, each existent entity receiving in accordance with its potentiality. Since "everything is in everything but in a manner appropriate to each,"<sup>19</sup> the observable horizons in the world reflect invisible levels of being.

Proclus' system substitutes for Plotinus' Intelligence a triad of Being–Life–Intelligence. He bridges the gap between the One and Being with a series of principles of individuality called *henads* ("ones"). These are derivative unities, identified by Proclus with the Hellenic gods. They mediate between the One and lower realities and exercise providence in the world. The Arabic version displaces the many divine *henads* with the First Good. It is pure being (*anniyya faqat*),



the One, the Real,<sup>20</sup> and it is above eternity, without qualification, name, or form.

Neoplatonism is combined with monotheistic creationism in texts ascribed to Presocratic philosophers in Arabic doxographic and gnomological collections. Thales is said to have held a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. That is, originally only the creator (*mubdi'*) existed, and he created without the presence of a form along with him. Before creation he alone existed, and all attributes were contained in his unique self-identity, "he is he" (*huwa huwa*).<sup>21</sup> Pseudo-Ammonius' *Ara' al-falasifa* defines creation, or origination (*ibda'*), as making something exist that had not existed before (*ta'yyis shay' mimma lam yakun*).<sup>22</sup> Empedocles is said to have held that only God's being has always existed as eternally his own essence (*huwiyyatuhu*). He is pure knowledge, pure will, bounty, power, justice, goodness, and truth, all these powers belonging to his essence. This Empedoclean doctrine of divine attributes influenced the early Mu'tazili theologian, Abu l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf. The first simple intelligible entity produced by the Creator (*al-mubdi'*) is the primordial element or first matter (*al-'unsur al-awwal*).<sup>23</sup> Empedocles states that worldly beings have only possible existence (*al-wujud al-imkani*) insofar as they are produced, whereas God's essence is unique in having necessary existence (*wajib al-wujud*) independent of production.<sup>24</sup>

The ancient sciences that came to the Islamic milieu in Neoplatonic guise were bound up with the religious and pseudo-scientific heritage of late antiquity – alchemy, astrology, magic, and theurgy. Theurgic praxis, as followed by Proclus and Iamblichus, blended with Egyptian and Hermetic themes. The Sabians of Harran, in the Islamic period, heirs of the Platonic school of Athens, many of them outstanding astronomers and mathematicians, were astrolators who aspired to reach the spiritual beings (*ruhaniyyat*) by means of the planets, the celestial temples.

Astrology was widely accepted by intellectuals in the Islamic environment. It required sound knowledge of astronomy for making calculations of the positions of the various planets in the twelve constellations of the zodiac. Judicial astrology, which assesses the astral influences on human destiny, includes conjecture on dynastic fates and the advent of the Mahdi. These predictions were based on conjunctions of the planets Saturn and Jupiter in cycles of 20, 240 or 260, and 960 years. The forecasts gave rise to *malahim*

(or *hidthan*) works – books of oracles of an eschatological nature. These were popular among sectarian groups, such as Shi'i Muslims and Jews, who envisioned the end of Sunni Muslim domination, as they were also among Sunnis.

Alchemy was often treated allegorically in mystical speculation, where transmutation of base to precious metals was interpreted as a symbol of human transformation into a divine nature.

### Responses to Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism is a religious movement and a doctrine of salvation as well as a philosophical system. As such, its basic postulates conflict with the monotheistic faiths: an impersonal One and necessary emanation rather than voluntary creation, mystical illumination instead of revelation, a soteriology (including metempsychosis) submerging the individual soul in the universal soul.

These barriers were not, however, insurmountable. The method of figurative interpretation, cultivated by ancient Neoplatonists (as by Pythagoreans and Stoics) to identify pagan myths with rational concepts (as Proclus identified the *henads* with the gods of mythology), was used by the *falasifa* to apply a philosophical hermeneutics to Scripture. We have seen how creation became a metaphor for eternal procession. Prophecy and supernatural knowledge are presented in terms akin to illumination and vision in *Enneads* 5:3.17 and 5:5.8. The celebrated passage on ecstasy in the *Theology of Aristotle*, based on *Enneads* 4:8.1, is frequently cited: "Often have I been alone with my soul and have doffed my body and laid it aside and become as if I were naked substance without body, so as to be inside myself, outside all other things."<sup>25</sup>

Neoplatonism was congenial to religious sentiment. Assimilation to the divine (*homoiosis theoi*) was a goal of philosophy in the Neoplatonic introductions to Aristotle ("assimilation to God as far as attainable for man"), traceable to a famous passage in Plato's *Theaetetus* (176a). The intense spirituality of Neoplatonism inspired the kind of synthesis with religious feeling that we find in the intellectual mysticism of Avicenna, Ibn Tufayl, and al-Suhrawardi. Thinkers influenced by Neoplatonism and Sufism regarded human reason as limited and viewed mystical experience as a way to a higher awareness. Experience rather than reason is the path to the mysterious

One beyond being and intelligibility. Unlike these mystically inclined sages, *falasifa* like al-Farabi and Averroes regarded prophecy as contact between the supreme human intelligence and a cosmic, divine intelligence beyond it, the Agent Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'ali/nous poietikos*).

Neoplatonism has a dual aspect: a downward way of emanation from the One and an upward way by the soul's ascent to Intelligence and through love to ultimate union with the One. The soul's return to a blissful union with the divine is realized consummately in the afterlife.

None of the Muslim *falasifa*, except perhaps al-Kindi, accepted the doctrine of creation from nothing. Most presented emanationist doctrine in creationist language. The Platonic idea of a demiurge bringing the visible world from disorder to order (*min la nizam ila nizam/eis taxin ek tes ataxias*) (*Timaeus* 30a) – a *formatio mundi* – was appealing to the *falasifa* and agreeable to religious sentiment as a divine transformation of chaos into the order of creation.<sup>26</sup> The Arabic version of Galen's compendium of the *Timaeus* uses the language of creation, with Plato's demiurge becoming "Allah" and *al-khaliq* (the creator). The Platonic model, having the demiurge as efficient cause, was fused with Neoplatonic emanation, giving rise to a theory of eternal creation. This idea conformed with Qur'anic verses depicting Allah as the Creator who does not cease to create (*al-khallaq*) (10:4, 34; 30:11; 36:81).

When the philosophers spoke of creation, they usually meant some mode of dependence of the world on God, its eternal sustainer. Spoken figuratively it was temporal creation, but in the real sense it was an eternal process. The term *ibda'* (creation, innovation, origination), introduced into the philosophical lexicon by Pseudo-Ammonius in *Ara' al-falasifa*, means bringing into existence of the supernal simple substances, or the first innovated (*al-mubda' al-awwal*), by "an eternal, timeless existention."<sup>27</sup> *Ibda'* is conveniently reminiscent of Qur'anic *badi'*, "creator" (2:117; 6:101).

For Ibn 'Arabi and other mystical thinkers influenced by Neoplatonism, creation is a manifestation (*tajalli*) of God, as existent entities mirror the divine essence. The metaphor of light in Neoplatonist and Sufi texts was evocative of Qur'anic references to God as "Light upon Light" (24:35).

Islamic philosophers spoke of creation *a nihilo*, where by "nothing" they meant the One beyond being and attributes. God is called "nothing"/"no thing" because of his incomprehensibility and ineffability. The world is created from the essence of God (*creatio ex essentia Dei*) as for Dionysius the Areopagite and John Scotus Eriugena. Porphyry had expressed this by saying that God generates things from himself, and Plotinus spoke of being coming from the One. By "nothing" (*al-'adam*) the *falasifa* occasionally intended matter, which for Plotinus is non-being (*me on*).

Islamic Neoplatonism was multifaceted, as Neoplatonism was not simply an amplification of Plato. Plotinus had already adopted into his system aspects of Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, and Stoicism. Porphyry received Aristotle's corpus within the Neoplatonic curriculum. The school of Alexandria devoted much effort to commentaries on Aristotle. And while Neoplatonism combined philosophy with mysticism, it was also concerned with logical and semantic method, mathematics, epistemology, theories of space and time, and ethics.<sup>28</sup>

The Neoplatonic harmonization (by Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Simplicius) of Plato and Aristotle influenced the course of Neoplatonism in the Islamic milieu. Al-Farabi's *Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Wise Men: Plato, the Divine and Aristotle* sets out to prove this. In a deeper sense, however, it is a defense of philosophy against criticism that philosophers contradict one another and undermine philosophy's validity. Al-Farabi asserts that the two sages concur on the main issues, such as creation and immortality, and that their ideas do not conflict with religious beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Harmonization*, al-Farabi presents Aristotle as believing in creation. He argues that Aristotle does not affirm eternity in the *De Caelo* as is commonly believed. What Aristotle meant there was that the universe has no temporal beginning because time results from the movement of the sphere.<sup>30</sup> The creator creates the sphere in a single instant of time without temporal duration, and time results from the sphere's movement. Al-Farabi ostensibly accepts Aristotle's authorship of the *Theology of Aristotle* as proving the existence of an artisan who creates the world by his will. Accordingly, God is the efficient cause, the One, the Real, creator of everything. This, says al-Farabi, accords with Plato's teaching in the *Timaeus* and *Republic*.

Al-Farabi shows, following a late Hellenistic motif, that the divergent literary styles of Plato and Aristotle have the same aim.<sup>31</sup> Plato refrained from inscribing the sciences in books, favoring pure hearts and congenial minds (see *Phaedrus* 275ff.). When he was old and afraid of forgetting (*Seventh Letter* 344c), he wrote things down, but used parables (*rumuz*) and enigmas (*alghaz*) so that only the deserving would understand.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, however, communicated in writing by elucidation and exhaustive discussion, thereby making philosophy accessible, to which Plato allegedly objected. It is explained that Aristotle's style was nevertheless abstruse, obscure, and complicated despite its apparent clarity.<sup>33</sup>

Alexandrian introductions to Aristotle, which were known in the Islamic environment, elucidated that the aim of Aristotle's obscurity was to exclude the unworthy, like curtains in temples. The writings of the "pillars of wisdom" (Empedocles, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato) are filled with symbols and enigmas. They employed this style because (1) they were averse to having the unworthy delve into the secrets of wisdom and come to harm; (2) so that the lover of wisdom spare no effort to acquire it, however difficult, and so that the lazy shun it because of its abstruseness; (3) to discipline nature by taxing the mind, so that the student not be lax and complacent, and so that he strives to understand what is complex and intricate.<sup>34</sup>

#### ARISTOTELES ARABUS

##### *The Legacy*

Aristotle is called in Arabic philosophical texts "the philosopher," "the first teacher" (al-Farabi being the second), and is considered the ultimate in human perfection.<sup>35</sup> The Arabic Aristotle is not a dogmatic authority, as he is often portrayed later in the West, but a seeker of truth, tentatively promulgating plausible theories. Aristotle held that philosophy begins with problems and puzzles, and thrives by unraveling difficulties. Following this line, the masters of arts in thirteenth-century Paris found in Aristotle a model scientist and researcher who poses questions qua hunter (*Prior Analytics* 1:30, 46a11), discoverer (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3:3, 1112b19), and investigator (*Metaphysics* 1:2, 983a23).<sup>36</sup>

The Arab translators rendered into Arabic the bulk of the Aristotelian corpus, except for the *Politics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, *Magna Moralia*, and the dialogues. They translated the entire *Organon* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*, which was used as an introduction to it. The *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* were included in the logical works, so that rhetorical and poetical statements were treated alongside demonstrative and dialectical propositions.<sup>37</sup> The Arabic *Physics* was transmitted intact with citations from classical commentators and glosses by members of the tenth-century Baghdad school of Aristotle studies. The Islamic philosophers also had access to the *De Caelo*, *De Generatione et Corruptione*, *Meteorology*, *De Partibus Animalium*, *De Anima*, *De Sensu*, *Metaphysics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle was studied along with his commentators, in particular Alexander of Aphrodisias, Porphyry, John Philoponus, and Themistius. Some of their writings not extant in Greek are preserved in Arabic.

Averroes wrote many commentaries on Aristotle, including a middle commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and long commentaries on the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima* (the last extant only in Latin). Averroes' commentaries were done in three possible recensions, known as short, middle, and great, serving as a gradual initiation into Peripatetic thought. In the great commentaries (called *tafsir*), he comments on the text by paragraph and by citing lemmata in extenso, and using commentaries by predecessors like Alexander.

##### *Responses to Aristotelianism*

Aristotle's system contradicts the monotheistic revealed religions on the issues of creation, divine providence, and the hereafter. God is for Aristotle intelligence knowing intellection itself, *noesis noeseos*. He is simultaneously thought (*'aql*), thinking (*'aqil*) and object of thought (*ma'qul*). Aristotle's God is the final cause of the universe, not the efficient cause of its existence (although commentators disagreed on this last point). The Aristotelian idea of an eternal universe and permanent world order – his belief that the universe is static, with no beginning or end – conflicts with the Islamic doctrine of God as Creator of the world by a free act of will (Qur'an 2:117, 3:47, 16:40, etc.).<sup>38</sup>

Averroes, a devoted Aristotelian, affirmed the existence of an eternal world order, and was convinced that *creatio ex nihilo* undermines

natural causation and thereby precludes natural science. Yet he too used the language of creation or innovation. The world is coeternal with God as eternally moved by God (a non-temporally prior cause) in a process of eternal innovation. Existent beings are innovated as brought from potentiality to actuality. Averroes can describe this eternal process in the language of creation because God is the cause of the continuous motion of the heavenly spheres and thereby the cause of the existence of all other beings. God is an intelligent, creative agent which eternally brings the world from the non-being of potentiality to the being of actual existence.<sup>39</sup> This realization of being Averroes calls "creation."

Averroes' *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, directed against al-Ghazali's critique of the Aristotelian tradition (*Tahafut al-falasifa*), was at the same time aimed against Avicenna's Neoplatonic emanationism. Averroes carefully pruned Neoplatonic branches from his Aristotelian tree, discarding emanationism as crypto-creationism, and propounding a more naturalistic Aristotelianism.<sup>40</sup>

Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* regards arguments for creation and eternity as equivalent truth claims. Both the assumption of the universe's eternity and its innovation entail anomalies of reason. However, it is argued, the implications of both arguments are the same, for a created world must have an agent, and an eternal world having eternal motion implies a First Mover. As proofs for creation and eternity are equivalent, one's commitment to one over the other results from a decision of the will.

Averroes believed that arguments for the eternity of the universe are dialectical, and that Aristotle himself regarded them as no more than plausible. When Aristotle says that the question whether the universe is eternal or not is too vast for us to solve with convincing arguments (*Topics* I:II, 104b1-105a9), al-Farabi understands this to mean that the issue whether the world is eternal or not is dialectical, and that no solution based upon a demonstrative syllogism exists. The physician Galen, al-Farabi observes, could not find his way to demonstrating eternity, for all the demonstrations are of equal value.<sup>41</sup>

The *falasifa* did not rest their proofs for God's existence on the premise of creation as did the *mutakallimun*. In Avicenna's classic formulation – which reverberated through the centuries, and appealed to Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza – God is the Necessary

Being whose essence implies existence. For God, essence and existence are identical, whereas for all other beings, essence and existence are distinct, such that existence is an accident that may or may not accrue to essence.<sup>42</sup> God is self-caused, whereas existent beings always have the possibility of not being.<sup>43</sup>

Avicenna's cosmological proof for God's existence starts with our certainty that something exists.<sup>44</sup> This major premise, "something exists," is a simple postulate acceptable to everyone. Now this entity does not exist by necessity but is contingent, that is, there is no contradiction in its non-existence. It must therefore have a cause that actualizes its being. This cause may be necessary or contingent. If contingent, we must seek a prior cause and follow a series of causes until we come to a Necessary Being, for there cannot be an infinite series of causes bringing about an effect. There must therefore exist a Necessary Being (cf. *Metaphysics* 12:7, 1072b10-13). The existence of the Necessary Being is logically necessary such that its denial would involve a contradiction. Avicenna goes on to assert that this Necessary Being is equivalent to God.<sup>45</sup>

The Necessary Being produces a single Intelligence (following the Neoplatonic principle that "from the One can come only one"), which is the first innovated being. From Intelligence, by a process of emanation, a series of intelligences, celestial souls, and celestial spheres proceed until the tenth intelligence, the agent intellect, which presides over the terrestrial world.<sup>46</sup> In his description of God, Avicenna espoused the doctrine of negative attributes, that essential attributes ascribed to God (existing, one, wise, powerful) do not have a positive sense but must be understood as denials of their opposites.

Avicenna rejected the Aristotelian proof from motion because it does not establish the One, the Real, the ultimate principle of all existence, but only the principle of the motion of the celestial sphere, not the principle of its existence.<sup>47</sup> Averroes favored the proof from motion and opposed Avicenna's argument for a Necessary Being and its presumption that existence is an attribute superadded to essence. Averroes regarded the Aristotelian proof for a First Mover as the only convincing argument. The First Mover can be proven to exist only by reference to physics, its starting point being physical data like motion. The arguments of Avicenna and Averroes have in common that they are cosmological arguments and postulate the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes.

For Avicenna, the Necessary Being is proven to exist in the metaphysical realm, beyond nature. Avicenna's Necessary Being is transcendent, outside the cosmos and distinct from the intellect of the outer sphere. Averroes' deity is proven to exist in nature, and is identical with the intellect of the outer sphere, enmeshed in the workings of nature.

The world, for Islamic Aristotelians, is governed proximately by the Agent Intellect, the tenth intelligence, of the lowest celestial sphere (of the moon), which gives particular forms to sublunar physical objects and universal forms to the human soul. The *falasifa* identify the Agent Intellect with the angel of revelation, or Gabriel, *malakut*, "the spirit of holiness," and "the trustworthy spirit."

Essences, or forms, exist as paradigms in the Agent Intellect, abstractly in the human mind and concretely in objects. The truth is therefore defined by a correspondence theory, the intelligible forms in the mind conforming to forms in sensible objects. The correspondence between mind and the world order is thus both noetic and ontological. The universe is rational and can be understood by the human mind. There is a commensurability and reciprocal linkage between human beings and the universe.

The Agent Intellect is based upon an obscure passage in *De Anima* 3:5, 430a13-15, where Aristotle refers to a *nous* that becomes all things and a *nous* that makes all things, as light makes potential colors into actual colors. The commentators Alexander (and pseudo-Alexander), Themistius, and (pseudo-)Philoponus, with some variation of details, account for human cognition by distinguishing different stages. On its own the mind attains sensation and imagination. Understanding the intelligible, however, involves the following dynamism: (1) There is a potential intellect, called also "material intellect", a pure potentiality for intellection. The potential intellect comprehends all forms, receives all ideas and, like Aristotle's prime matter, is a universal potentiality that can become all things. (2) There is an Agent Intellect, which makes all things by giving forms to objects and to the human intellect. It enters the soul from outside, actualizes, or illumines, the potential intellect, and abstracts forms from their matter, making them known and producing thought. (3) When the Agent Intellect enters the human mind and creates a habitus (*hexis*) of intelligible thinking, it becomes the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafad/nous epiktetos*), capable of

apprehending intelligibles even when corresponding sensibles are absent. (4) When the acquired intellect performs its competence to intelligize it is said to be *in actu* (*bil-fi'l/kat'energeian*).<sup>48</sup>

We humans think by means of the same (Agent) Intellect, as though our minds were our personal computers tapping into a main-frame computer, the cosmic mind, or Agent Intellect. How else could we comprehend reality if we did not access the mind of the universe? The universe has a mind and we think with it. The universe is rational and knowable because the same cosmic mind that determines its order (the laws of nature) illumines human intelligence. The cosmos is mind-like, and so human beings can understand it and find in it a source of delight. Humans find meaning and order in life and nature because in the closed world of medieval astronomy everything had its natural place and purpose. The universe is not only intelligible but intelligent.

The Agent Intellect is separate, pure, and impassive, and it thinks incessantly (*De Anima* 3:5, 430a22). Alexander of Aphrodisias identified it with the divine intelligence itself, the First Cause of *Metaphysics* 12. Others (Themistius and Philoponus) did not equate the Agent Intellect with God. The Agent Intellect is akin to the Neoplatonic Intelligence, which emanates from the One, and they have similar noetic functions as actualizing thought. The Neoplatonic *nous*, however, is hypercosmic, whereas the Agent Intellect is encosmic as belonging to the lowest celestial sphere.

Averroes held that the faculty of intellection – the passive, or material, intellect – is universal and the same for all humankind, participated in by the individual person. This faculty is permanently actualized in the totality of humankind, so that humans are never without it. The human species is eternal, and immortality is collective and relates to this one human intellect.<sup>49</sup> The unity of the intellect (what Leibniz later calls "monopsychism") implies a denial of individual immortality. This thesis and others of Averroes and Aristotle were condemned in Paris in 1270 and in 1277.<sup>50</sup>

Immortality for the *falasifa* is the survival of the rational part of a human being, a boon for the happy few. Intellect when isolated as its true self is immortal and eternal (*De Anima* 430a23; cf. *De Generatione Animalium* 736b27). It is the point of contact between the human and divine. The *falasifa* regarded the religious idea of personal immortality and the belief in physical resurrection as



socially beneficial myths. For philosophers and mystics immortality is a spiritual ascension and return to God rather than a continued existence in a quasi-physical paradise as depicted in the Qur'an. Contact, or "conjunction" (*ittisal*), between the individual intellect and the divine intellect is a blissful enlightenment leading to immortality. It is the philosophical counterpart of the Sufi *unio mystica* (*ittihad*) where the union is with God.<sup>51</sup>

The Islamic philosophers, following Aristotle, saw the *summum bonum* as consisting in theoretical contemplation. They depicted supreme perfection as the conjoining of the human intellect with the cosmic intellect, or the realm of spiritual forms. Aristotle suggests a kinship between the divine and the human intellect by saying that during intellection the subject becomes one with its object, intellect becoming its intelligible, like the Unmoved Mover (*Metaphysics* 12:9, 1074b34), which is self-intelligized intelligence.

Ibn Bajja (Avenpace) and Ibn Tufayl present the ideal philosophical life as withdrawal (emigration) from imperfect cities and isolation from humankind in pure contemplation of the intelligible. This individualistic ethos differs from the ethical systems of other *falasifa* (al-Farabi, Miskawayh, Averroes) which stressed the human need for society and political order and the importance of love and friendship. Aristotle's well-known dictum, often cited by the *falasifa*, "Man is by nature a political animal" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1:7, 1097b12 and *Politics* 1:2, 1253a2), defined human nature for them.

Islamic ethical theory, like its classical forbear, is virtue based, as it was concerned with moral education, character, goodness, and nobility, the whole of life and its purpose.<sup>52</sup> The *falasifa* saw supreme happiness, following Aristotle, as being activity in accordance with reason. Theoretical reason is the divine element in humankind, and it above all else is what we as humans are (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10:7, 1177a12-28, 1178a6-7). Supreme happiness does not reside in the exercise of ethical virtue, justice, courage, liberality, or temperance; for the most felicitous human activity and that most akin to the divine is contemplation (*Nicomachean Ethics* 10:8, 1178b7-23). The object of the deity's contemplation is necessarily himself, the most perfect being (*Metaphysics* 12:9, 1074b33-35). The life of this First Mover is the best we enjoy, but for a brief time (*Metaphysics* 12:7, 1072b14-15). This elitist and intellectualist formulation of the

*finis ultimus* as a life of pure contemplation contrasts with another Aristotelian formulation that defines the aim of human existence as the organization of the broad range of human activity in a well-ordered and comprehensively planned life in accordance with ethical virtue and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Both formulations are represented in Islamic ethical thought.

#### PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

Philosophy had its starting point in research and theory, whereas theology (*kalam*) began with principles of religious belief. Its aim was defensive, its energies directed against non-believers, heretics, and free-thinkers such as the Mazdeans, Manicheans, and Dahriyya. The theologians wanted to prove creation and infer therefrom the existence of a creator, whilst the philosophers denied that a proof could be adduced for creation.<sup>53</sup>

The *falasifa* rejected the theologians' attempt to defend religious belief with rational arguments. The philosophers claimed that the theologians were ultimately apologists, disputatious and eristic, and they condemned the attempt by the theologians to enlighten the many, to publicly debate fundamental articles of faith, like creation and the existence of God and his attributes. The philosophers favored the certainty of science over the uncertainty of theology.

The theologians, for their part, regarded philosophy as threatening to religious belief. They considered the philosophers heretics, thereby obliterating the distinction between philosophers who sustained religious faith and real heretics.

The heretics, or free spirits, such as Abu Bakr al-Razi and Ibn al-Rawandi, advocated a rational enlightenment devoid of revealed religion.<sup>54</sup> Al-Razi accepted the Stoic principle that all human beings are capable of reasoning, not just a select few. They can dispense with religion, which is based on blind adherence to authority and blighted by internal contradiction, ignorance, and falsehood. Religion incites fanatic hatred, divisions among humankind, and warfare. The prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are "the three great imposters" (*tres impostoribus*). Al-Razi's direct Epicurean defiance of religion was a path that few of his fellow intellectuals were ready to take, however, and most shunned this brand of candid expression. But al-Razi was not alone. Free thinkers called Dahriyya

(eternalists or materialists) were said to believe in the eternity of the world, and to deny creation, resurrection, and a future life.

*Kalam* – especially the Mu'tazili school – was rationalist in its approach. The Mu'tazilis believed that human beings have the capacity to apprehend God, his nature, and justice through reason independently of revelation. They affirmed a pristine monotheism (*tawhid*) and divine transcendence, negating by *tanzih* (*via remotio-nis*) God's likeness to created entities (cf. Qur'an 23:91, 42:11). They ascribed to God only attributes of action, and considered attributes such as knowledge, power, and speech as identical with the divine essence. They consequently used symbolic interpretation (*ta'wil*) to explain metaphorically Qur'anic anthropomorphisms (face, eyes, hands, movement, sitting on a throne). A second principle was God's justice (*'adl*). The Mu'tazilis held the objectivist view that good and evil (*hasan, qabih*) inhere in the nature of reality, are discerned by reason, and are revealed in the religious law. God wills the good and wants to realize what is for the better. This means that humans have free will and are responsible for their actions.

The Ash'ari school of *kalam* refused to impose separate rational criteria upon God's actions. His will is inscrutable, and whatever God determines is good and just. This theistic subjectivism in ethics went along with a theory of atomism and occasionalism in physics. God's sovereign will is the true cause of all occurrences. The particular natural causes we see are merely occasional or incidental. There exists no permanent world order, no laws of nature, no limitation of divine freedom.

The Ash'ariyya rejected Mu'tazili *tanzih* as emptying the notion of God of meaning (*ta'til*) and thus being tantamount to atheism. They claimed that anthropomorphisms could be ascribed to God "without asking how and without comparison" (*bi-la kayfa wa-la tashbih*). In due course, however, even Ash'ari theologians relaxed their hermeneutic fundamentalism and interpreted Qur'anic anthropomorphisms metaphorically. The Ash'ari theory ultimately prevailed in the Islamic environment.

With al-Ghazali the Ash'arites delved more into the teachings of the philosophers, though at a critical distance. Al-Ghazali's *Maqasid al-falasifa* (*Intentions of the Philosophers*), an analytical exposition of the systems of al-Farabi and Avicenna, was widely read (in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin) as an introduction to philosophy. Al-Ghazali's

writings had the (unintended) effect of initiating philosophy into a Sunni milieu. In his *Tahafut al-falasifa* al-Ghazali dwells on the inconsistencies of the *falasifa* and argues that they do not succeed in supplying demonstrative arguments for their metaphysical claims.<sup>55</sup> He accuses them of unbelief for upholding the world's eternity, for denying God's omniscience (his knowledge of particulars), and for rejecting resurrection.

#### REASON AND REVELATION

In a remarkable conspectus of humankind's intellectual history, al-Farabi traces the historical evolution of modes of discourse, showing how human societies have progressed from a primitive level of poetry and rhetoric, myth and fable (Homer?), to a stage of dialectic (Plato?) and sophistical reasoning (Sophists?). Finally humans advance to the stage of science and philosophy, the peak of human development (Aristotle?). Not all humans, however, can evolve to this pinnacle. Hence, the founders of national religions portray the truths of philosophy in parabolic form. In the perfect religion the instrumentalism of rhetoric, poetry, sophistry, and dialectic will be laid bare. Insofar as proponents of jurisprudence and theology reason from religious premises that imitate philosophical verities, they are thereby twice removed from the truth. If, as in the case of Islam, a national religion comes to a national community (*umma*), like the Arab nation, before the appearance of philosophy, it may occur that the religion, though a parabolic version of philosophy, will discard the philosophy from which it evolves.

Realizing that this religion is a parabolic version of philosophy, the philosophers will not oppose it. But, alas, the theologians and other religionists will resist the philosophers and try to exclude them from their governing and educating role. Religion will then not receive much support from philosophy, while great harm may accrue to philosophy and philosophers from the religion and its followers. In the face of this threat philosophers may be forced to combat theologians and religionists, though not the religion itself. From al-Farabi's perspective, religion was a great achievement of the human spirit.<sup>56</sup>

Al-Farabi and his successors identify the supreme philosopher with the supreme lawgiver, Imam, and ruler, thereby making Plato's philosopher-king the head of the Muslim community. The best

*polis*, or political community (*al-madina al-fadila*) (see *Republic* 462d; *Laws* 710d) is ruled by a supreme ruler whom God inspires through the medium of the Agent Intellect. When the supreme ruler's intellect is activated by the Agent Intellect, he becomes a philosopher. If the emanation reaches his imagination, he becomes in addition "a prophet and warner." In al-Farabi's theory of prophecy, the prophets receive theoretical truths from the emanation of the Agent Intellect upon their rational faculty.<sup>57</sup> This emanation, actuating their faculty of imagination, gives rise to parables (*rumuz*), enigmas (*alghaz*), substitutions (*ibdalat*), and similes (*tashbihat*) – symbolic representations of the truth.<sup>58</sup> The symbols convey the identical knowledge displayed in demonstrative or discursive language used by philosophers. The ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy is thus resolved in favor of philosophy but not by banishing poetry. *Logos* is imparted by *mythos*. As Aristotle said, "even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of Wisdom" (*Metaphysics* 1, 982b18). Elsewhere, Aristotle speaks (*Metaphysics* 12:8, 1074b1–5) of a tradition conveyed in mythic form "with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to its legal and utilitarian expediency."<sup>59</sup>

When the emanation reaches the imagination solely, this person becomes a politician capable of addressing the people with rhetorical effectiveness. He is incapable of directing them to true human perfection, for he himself has not attained this perfection, nor was this ever his aim. The philosopher-king is capable of leading humans to a knowledge of true happiness and the way of attaining it.

The *falasifa* wanted a peaceful coexistence between philosophy and religion. They urged the freedom to philosophize by portraying religion itself as having summoned human beings to contemplate the universe. Averroes contends in his *Decisive Treatise* that the religious law commands us to philosophize, citing Qur'anic verses (e.g. 59:2 and 7:184) inviting humankind to reflect on creation, invoking Abraham as a philosopher who probed the heavens. Philosophy and religion are not at cross-purposes in this respect but identical in their intent. There is no need to enlighten the masses. They are abandoned to the plain meaning of the scriptural text. Philosophers, however, must be free to go beyond the surface meaning of Scripture and explain it in a tropic sense (*ta'wil*).<sup>60</sup>

The philosophers distinguished between *zahir* and *batin*, the external and the internal (deep structure) sense of texts and the inner

truth and outer aspect of the religious law. This *zahir-batin* dichotomy was prominent in the milieu of Shi'ism and Sufism. It was not simply a hermeneutic mode but a total *mentalité*, a way of observing the world and of constructing it. Ibn 'Arabi and fellow Sufis visualized the entire cosmos as an array of symbols, similar to the verbal symbols of revelation, requiring hermeneutic exposition. Some humans can comprehend the deep meaning of these cosmic symbols by unveiling mysteries (*kashf*, *mukashafa*), while others perceive only surface meaning. The cosmos cascades with signs and meanings, with numerical and verbal symbols and divine names. Everything in the world is a figure and a sign of an inner reality. The world is a *speculum* of God.

Intellectuals in the Islamic milieu had a "symbolist mentality."<sup>61</sup> They were convinced that natural and historical reality signified something beyond plain actuality, and that a symbolic dimension of that reality was discernible by the human mind. The meaning of historical events is revealed in prophecy. Sacred texts have a hidden, figurative, mysterious sense lifting them from their historical parameters to an eternal significance. The modern conception of a universe blind and indifferent to human life, history, ideals, and strivings – a vastness of darkness and terror – was remote from their consciousness.

## NOTES

1. Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), exemplifying this attitude, says that only science inherited from the prophet [Muhammad] deserves to be called science; the rest is either useless or not science at all; see *Majmu'at al-rasa'il al-kubra* (Cairo, 1324/1908), 1:238, cited by I. Goldziher, *Stellung der alten islamischen Orthodoxie zu den antiken Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Verlag der Akademie, 1916), 6.
2. This is not to overlook the school of Isfahan and important figures such as Mir-i Damad (d. 1630), Mulla Sadra Shirazi (d. 1640), or Ibn Khaldun in the Maghreb and Egypt (d. 1406). The study of the sciences was in steady decline from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.
3. L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 21 (originally published Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952); and "How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy," in his *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 221–4.

4. Abu l-Hasan al-'Amiri, *Kitab al-Amad 'ala l-abad*, ed. E. K. Rowson, *A Muslim Philosopher on the Soul and its Fate* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1988), 70, 205-9; Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani, *Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikmah*, ed. D. M. Dunlop (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 3-6.
5. Al-Shahrastani's expression "Islamic philosophers" (*falasifat al-islami*) includes non-Muslim philosophers in an Islamic milieu; see *al-Milal wal-nihal*, ed. M. Badran, 2nd ed. (Cairo: n.p., 1956), II: 168. The word *falasifa* is the plural of *faylasuf* (Gr. *philosophos*). By "Islamic" I mean the overarching civilization that harbored a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups, including Christian and Jewish communities, the way M. G. S. Hodgson intends "Islamicate" in *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).
6. See A. I. Sabra, "The Appropriation and Subsequent Naturalization of Greek Science in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Statement," *History of Science* 25 (1987), 223-43.
7. R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962); F. Rosenthal (ed.), *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, translated from the German (*Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam*) by E. and J. Marmorstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1975); D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
8. Medieval Hebrew translators generally rendered *shari'a* as *torah* even when it represented secular law (*nomos*), and modern translators and commentators in their wake invariably take *torah* to be the religious law (Torah), thereby distorting the text's original intent.
9. Averroes' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, ed. and trans. E. I. J. Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); *Averroes on Plato's Republic*, translated, with an introduction and notes, by R. Lerner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).
10. *Kitab falsafat Aflatun*, ed. F. Rosenthal and R. Walzer (London: Warburg Institute, 1943); *Kitab falsafat Aristutalis*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut: Dar Majallat Shi'r, 1961); *On the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. M. Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).
11. L. Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 357-93. Similarly, in the philosophy of Aristotle, al-Farabi avoided discussing metaphysics save for brief, cryptic remarks such as: "We do not possess a metaphysical science." See T.-A. Druart, "Al-Farabi, Emanation and Metaphysics," in *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought*, ed.

- p. Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 127-48, at 131.
12. See L. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and his Predecessors*, trans. E. Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 76, 125, and 152, n. 65; "How Farabi Read Plato's Laws," in his *What is Political Philosophy?* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 134-54; and see J. Parens, *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
13. See *Ihsa's al-'ulum*, ed. 'U. Amin (Cairo: n.p., 1948), 102-13; trans. F. M. Najjar, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 24-8; see M. Mahdi, "Science, Philosophy, and Religion in Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*," in *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, ed. J. E. Murdoch and E. D. Sylla (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975), 113-47, esp. 140ff.
14. Avicenna, *Aqsum al-'ulum*, in *Majmu'at al-rasa'il* (Cairo: n.p., 1908), 107-8; trans. M. Mahdi, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 96-7; trans. J. W. Morris, "The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," in *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin Mahdi*, ed. C. E. Butterworth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 152-98, at 168-70; G. C. Anawati, "Les divisions des sciences intellectuelles d'Avicenne," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales* 13 (1977), 323-6.
15. *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages: The Theology and Other Texts*, ed. J. Kraye, W. F. Ryan, and C. B. Schmitt (London: The Warburg Institute, 1986); see especially the articles by F. W. Zimmermann, "The Origins of the So-called *Theology of Aristotle*," 110-240, and P. B. Fenton, "The Arabic and Hebrew Versions of the *Theology of Aristotle*," 241-64.
16. Zimmermann, "Origins," 117-19, 143; and see 148 for an explanation of how Plotinus became "Aristotle."
17. See Zimmermann, "Origins," 177.
18. The *Liber de Causis* was translated by Gerard of Cremona as *Liber de Expositione Bonitatis Purae*. Aquinas commented upon it; see *Commentary on the Book of Causes [Super Librum De Causis Expositio]*, trans. V. A. Guargliardo, C. R. Hess, and R. C. Taylor (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996). Aquinas did not believe it was a work of Aristotle, noting its dependence on Proclus' *Elements* and its resemblance to the views of Dionysius the Areopagite. See R. C. Taylor, "Kalam fi mahd al-khair (*Liber de causis*) in the Islamic Philosophical Milieu," in Kraye, Ryan, and Schmitt (eds.), *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages*, 37-52; and see C. d'Ancona Costa,

- Recherches sur le Liber de causis* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1995). A number of propositions from the *Elements of Theology* have been recovered in Arabic; see G. Endress (ed.), *Proclus Arabus* (Beirut and Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973).
19. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. and trans. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Prop. 103, 92–3.
  20. Or "the True One," *al-wahid al-haqq*. The epithets are both philosophical and Qur'anic (see 37:4, *wahid*) and see 18:44 and 20:114 for God as the Real, or the Truth (*al-haqq*).
  21. U. Rudolph, *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonius* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), 34 (trans. 80). For similar ideas in Arabic Plotinus texts and in the al-Kindi milieu, see 120; and see A. Altmann and S. M. Stern (ed. and trans.), *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 70–71.
  22. Rudolph, *Pseudo-Ammonius (Ara' al-falasifa)*, 34 (trans. 80); see Kommentar, 121, on the *Textgruppe (Theology of Aristotle, Liber de Causis)* to which this notion belongs and the affiliation with al-Kindi; and see Altmann and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, 70–4.
  23. See Pseudo-Ammonius, *Ara' al-falasifa*, 37–8. The Empedocles texts are cited by al-'Amiri, al-Sijistani, Sa'id al-Andalusi, al-Shahrastani, and al-Shahrazuri.
  24. This foreshadows Avicenna's treatment of possible and necessary existence. Avicenna used the library where al-'Amiri probably wrote and deposited his *Amad*; see Rowson (ed.), *A Muslim Philosopher*, text and translation on 78–9, 170–1; and see 5, 37, 232–4; D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 250.
  25. *Theologia* 1:21ff. (trans. G. Lewis, in *Plotini Opera*, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, 2 vols. [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959], II: 225). See Fenton, "The Arabic and Hebrew *Theology*," 260 n. 2.
  26. J. Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13.
  27. P. Walker, "The Ismaili Vocabulary of Creation," *Studia Islamica* 40 (1974), 74–85.
  28. A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
  29. *Kitab al-jam' bayn ra'yay al-hakimayn Aflatun al-ilahi wa-Aristutalis*, ed. A. N. Nader (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1959); D. Mallet (trans.), *Deux traités philosophiques: L'harmonie entre les opinions des deux sages, le divin Platon et Aristote* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1989), 64–5. Some doubt its ascription to al-Farabi.
  30. *Kitab al-jam' bayn ra'yay al-hakimayn*, 100–4; trans. Mallet, 84–9.
  31. *Kitab al-jam' bayn ra'yay al-hakimayn*, 84–5; trans. Mallet, 64–5.

32. For Plato, see, e.g., *Phaedrus* 276a–277a. See also al-Farabi's introduction to his *Compendium of Plato's Laws*, ed. Fr. Gabrieli, *Alfarabius Compendium Legum Platonis (Talkhis Nawamis Aflatun)* (London: Warburg Institute, 1952), 3–4.
33. The difference between Plato and Aristotle on style is set forth in a dialogue between them in the biography of Aristotle by al-Mubashshir b. Fatik, *Mukhtar al-hikam*, ed. A. Badawi (Madrid: Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos, 1958), 184; trans. I. Düring, *Aristotle in the Ancient Biographical Tradition* (Göteborg: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1957), 201 (and see his comment, 432–3). See also the reference to the same correspondence by Avicenna, *Fi ithbat al-nubuwwa*, in *Tis' rasa'il fil-hikma wal-tab'iyat* (Istanbul, 1880), 85; trans. M. E. Marmura, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 116. See also Galen, *Compendium Timaei Platonis*, ed. P. Kraus and R. Walzer (London: Warburg Institute, 1951), 3, on Aristotle's terse, obscure style. On the terse, compressed style of Aristotle's acroamatic works, as opposed to the more popular style of his dialogues, see W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle. XII. Select Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 5.
34. Al-Sijistani, *Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikmah*, 10.
35. F. E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (New York: New York University Press, 1968).
36. See C. H. Lohr, "The Medieval Interpretation of Aristotle," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. N. Kretzmann, A. Kenny, and J. Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 91.
37. The matter is treated exhaustively by D. L. Black in *Logic in Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990). The translation of the *Poetics* was a major *tour de force*, as fundamental concepts like comedy and tragedy were foreign to Arabic culture. Jorge Luis Borges refers to this in "Averroes' Search," in *Labyrinths*, ed. D. A. Yates and J. E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 148–55.
38. The Qur'an is not explicit about *creatio ex nihilo*, which became doctrinal for Muslim theologians.
39. B. S. Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 209–22.
40. *Averroes' Tuhafut al-Tuhafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. S. van den Bergh, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).
41. See al-Farabi, *Kitab al-jadal*, ed. R. al-'Ajam, in *al-Mantiq 'inda al-Farabi* (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1986), III: 80–2. See G. Vajda, "A propos d'une citation non identifiée d'Alfarabi dans le 'Guide des égarés,'" *Journal asiatique* 258 (1965), 43–50.

42. A.-M. Goichon, *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sina* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937).
43. The idea that the universe may be other than it is or that it may not be at all opens the way for miracles and divine interventions. The notion of the ontological contingency of the world on God is expressed in the Qur'anic verse: "All things shall perish save His countenance" (28:88). The belief that the created world is one of fleeting impermanence evokes the Sufi idea of self-annihilation (*fana'*) in the Being that perdures (*baqa'*).
44. See L. Goodman, *Avicenna* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 63-5.
45. The Necessary Being and Allah are not in the strict sense equivalent, as the meaning of God for Islam goes beyond the sense of necessity of being.
46. Al-Ghazali criticizes the Avicennan account of procession of successive intellects and spheres. The philosophers judge on the basis of supposition (*zann*) and surmise (*takhmin*), without verification and certainty; *Tahafut al-falasifa*, trans. M. E. Marmura, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Provo, Ut.: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 4 and 65-7. Maimonides, in a chapter that has other earmarks of al-Ghazali (*Guide* 2:22), also criticizes Avicennan procession as no more than guess (*hads*) and conjecture (*takhmin*).
47. See his *Letter to al-Kiya*, ed. A. Badawi, *Aristu 'inda l-'arab*, 2nd ed. (Kuwait: Wikalat al-Matbu'at, 1978), 120-2. Avicenna is commenting there on *Metaphysics* 12:6 1071b5-31.
48. See H. A. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
49. Averroes, *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis de Anima Libros*, ed. F. S. Crawford (Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), 406; and see *Averroès l'intelligence et la pensée, grand commentaire du De anima, Livre III*, trans. A. de Libera (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1998), 111ff. See also O. Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), 84-103.
50. Thomas d'Aquin, *L'unité de l'intellect contre les Averroïstes*, trans. A. de Libera (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1994); R. McNerny, *Aquinas against the Averroists: On there Being only One Intellect* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993).
51. P. Merlan uses the term "rationalistic mysticism" to signify that the divine source with which the individual is united is not the God beyond thinking and being but thought thinking itself; see his *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul*

- in the Neoplatonic and Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 20.
52. For an introduction, see G. F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
53. For *kalam*, see H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 4 vols. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).
54. S. Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi and their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). For al-Razi, see especially L. E. Goodman, s.v., *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960-).
55. See al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.
56. F. W. Zimmermann, *Alfarabi's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), cxiv n. 1, from al-Farabi's *Book of Letters (Kitab al-huruf)*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1969), paras. 108-13, 129, 140-53; and see L.V. Berman, "Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974), 154-78, at 156.
57. See al-Farabi's *Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madina al-fadila*, ed. and trans. R. Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), chs. 14-15, 211-57; see also R. Walzer, "Alfarabi's Theory of Prophecy and Divination," in *Greek into Arabic*, 206-19.
58. *Rumuz* often renders *parabolai* or *mythoi* in translation literature. In *Kitab al-alfaz al-musta'mala fil-mantiq (Utterances Employed in Logic)*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut: Dar El-Machreq, 1968), 90-1, al-Farabi absolves himself from the need to investigate statements resembling lies (or "fables"), lit. "adornments," "embellishments" (*zakhirif*) in such a philosophic work. He adds, however, that while such fables may be repugnant in the various kinds of philosophical disciplines, they are perhaps indispensable in rhetoric and in the statements employed in political affairs.
59. The passage is: "Our forefathers in the most remote ages have handed down to us their posterity a tradition, in the form of a myth, that these substances [the heavens] are gods and that the divine encloses the whole of nature. The rest of the tradition has been added later in mythical form with a view to the persuasion of the multitude and to its legal and utilitarian expediency" (trans. W. D. Ross). See Averroes, *Tafsir Ma ba'd at-tabi'at*, ed. M. Bouyges, S.J. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1948), VII: 1686.
60. See *Kitab fasl al-maqal*, ed. G. F. Hourani (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 1-2; trans. G. F. Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Philosophy and Religion*



(London: Luzac, 1967), 44–5 (with pagination of the text in the margin). And see the excellent bilingual edition of M. Geoffroy, with introduction by A. de Libera, *Averroès discours décisif* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1996), 104–5.

61. M.-D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, ed. and trans. J. Taylor and L. K. Little (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 119–21.

## Part II

### Ideas, Works, and Writers