Book Review

***The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*. Edited by Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke. Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 720 pp. ISBN 978-0-19991-738-9. Price: $175 (cloth).**

Coleman Connelly
Institute for the Study of the Ancient World,
New York University

(coleman.connelly@nyu.edu)

The modern academic study of philosophy in the Islamic world has, since its nineteenth-century inception, privileged works written in Arabic from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. To some extent, this focus makes intellectual-historical sense. For one thing, the period hinges on the floruit of an inarguably central figure, the philosopher and scientist Avicenna (d. 428/1037). For another, if origins are important, the ninth century certainly deserves scholars' attention. Philosophy (*falsafa*) performed in Arabic by self-identified philosophers living in Islamic lands begins only in the ninth century, a movement in part conditioned by and in part conditioning the translation of Aristotle and other ancient Greek authors into Arabic, sometimes via Syriac Aramaic or, less commonly, Middle Persian. At least until the modern period, all subsequent philosophers who lived in Islamic societies and wrote in Arabic, New Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and other languages were in dialogue with a tradition inaugurated in this formative century.

Yet the focus on the ninth through twelfth centuries has rested on several far less defensible assumptions as well. First, European and Middle Eastern scholars alike have long designated the first two centuries of the Abbasid caliphate as a "Golden Age" or a "classical period" of "Islamic civilization."[1] Scholarship has unduly privileged philosophy in this period and in its immediate aftermath just as it has privileged the period's theology, science, belles-lettres, historiography, and other fields of literary production. Second, scholars writing in European languages long labored under the nineteenth-century theory that the twelfth-century theologian al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) criticism of Aristotelian *falsafa* marked a turning point in the history of Islamic

1. See Michael Cooperson, "The Abbasid 'Golden Age': An Excavation," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017): 41–65.

CC BY NC ND

philosophy. A new spirit of narrow-minded orthodoxy allegedly spelled an end to rational inquiry across the Islamic world, especially in Sunni quarters.[2] All of the post-twelfth-century Islamic word's philosophical output, according to this theory, is necessarily inferior and hence less worthy of study. Until at least the 1960s, scholars' cursory examination of later materials seemed to bear out this "al-Ghazālī theory." For instance, many later contributions to Islamic philosophy come in the form of commentaries or even versifications, which were often dismissed as derivative or unoriginal on the basis of inadequate study. This narrative of decadence has long since been exploded in scholarly circles, though it continues to influence some popular narratives of the development of philosophy in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, the long-held assumption that the ninth through twelfth centuries are uniquely worthy of consideration has meant that the bulk of monographs and articles, not to mention critical editions and translations, have covered texts from this period. Even after scholars realized the shortcomings of this historical focus, the imbalance has been hard to correct. In a sort of inexorable snowball effect, the disproportionate amount of resources facilitating the study of the ninth through twelfth centuries has ensured that philosophy from this period continues to receive disproportionate attention.

The excellent new *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke, sets out with the aim, made explicit in its introduction, to correct this disproportionate historical emphasis. As such, the volume supersedes the shorter and less comprehensive, though still valuable, *Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (2005). The new *Oxford Handbook* treats philosophy in the Islamic world from the ninth through twentieth centuries, across thirty chapters contributed by an international and intergenerational group of scholars, with roughly equal weight given to each century. The volume is clearly intended as a companion or follow-up to the *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (2014), also edited by Schmidtke.[3] Yet the volumes are quite different in structure and purpose. Where the *Theology* volume structured its chapters according to themes and case studies, followingly a loosely chronological order, the editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* explicitly eschew organization according to theme or even according to author. They argue, convincingly, that the present state of research precludes

2. This mistaken attitude is exemplified by the statement of Edward Sachau in the introduction to his translation of al-Bīrūnī's *Kitāb al-āthār al-bāqiya*: "The fourth [Islamic] century is the turning-point in the history of the spirit of Islâm, and the establishment of the orthodox faith about 500 sealed the fate of independent research for ever. But for Alash'arî and Alghazzâlî the Arabs might have been a nation of Galileos, Keplers, and Newtons"; see Sachau's introduction to al-Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. Edward Sachau (London: Allen and Co., 1879), x. One factor underlying this attitude is surely a Eurocentric narrative of the history of philosophy, as the editors of the volume under review note (p. 1). Once the progress of Islamic philosophy had been mapped up until the twelfth century, the point of its reception by western Europe, its continued development was deemed unimportant.

3. Reviewed in this journal; see John Renard, review of *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, edited by Sabine Schmidtke, *al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 25 (2017): 240–242.

a thematic organization. Moreover, they fear that an author-based approach would yield overwhelmingly diffuse chapters. Instead, they have opted to give the reader a representative taste of Islamic philosophy's thousand-year development by centering each chapter on a single work by a single author, ordered chronologically from the ninth-century Plotinian *Theology of Aristotle* (ch. 1, Cristina D'Ancona) to the twentieth-century Egyptian philosopher Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd's (d. 1993) *Naḥwa falsafa ʿilmiyya* (ch. 30, Muhammad Ali Khalidi).

The result is impressive, a wide-ranging and detailed yet still readable presentation of the field. The works overviewed treat not only logic, metaphysics, and epistemology but also ethics and physics. After a summary of the philosophical work in question and a brief biography and historical contextualization of its author, chapter contributors are free to explore the work however they wish. Some, such as Emma Gannagé (ch. 2, on al-Kindī's *On First Philosophy*) and Ayman Shihadeh (ch. 14, on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's *Pointers*), give detailed analytical philosophical outlines of the contents, highlighting certain sections to make broader points about the author's philosophical system or to reorient our understanding of his thought. Others, such as Sarah Stroumsa (ch. 4, on a lost work by Ibn Masarra [d. 319/931]), perform painstaking philological and intellectual-historical detective work—a favorite scholarly genre of this particular reviewer. Still others, such as Peter Adamson (ch. 3, on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's [d. 313/925] *Spiritual Medicine*), Khalil Andani (ch. 8, on Nāṣir-i Khusraw's *Jāmiʿ al-ḥikmatayn*), and Taneli Kukkonen (ch. 11, on Ibn Ṭufayl's [d. 581/1185] *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*), offer accessible and engaging chapters that will be of interest to experts but would also not be out of place on an advanced undergraduate syllabus.

As strong as the early chapters are, the standout stars of the volume are the explorations of later Islamic philosophy, and not just by virtue of their quality. The unjustly understudied subject matter itself makes for fascinating reading, as in the case of Khaled El-Rouayheb's chapter (ch. 23) on the Egyptian scholar al-Mallawī's (d. 1181/1767) versification of al-Sanūsī's influential logical handbook, or Fatemeh Fana's study (ch. 35) of the post–Mullā Ṣadrā *ishrāqī* philosopher Sabzawārī's (d. 1295 or 1298/1878 or 1881) *Ghurar al-farāʾid*. Beyond such later developments in metaphysics and logic, the volume also includes later works of natural philosophy. For instance, Asad Q. Ahmed and Jon McGinnis (ch. 24) highlight the Indian scholar Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī's (d. 1295/1861) *al-Hadiyya al-saʿīdiyya*, which they characterize as "perhaps the last independent work written within the Arabic-Islamic tradition of physics" (p. 535) and which includes a critical engagement with the Copernican system. One laments, with the editors in the introduction, that external factors prevented the inclusion of further chapters on several important Ottoman, Safavid, and post-Safavid authors. The volume concludes, in an exciting first for the field of Islamic philosophy as traditionally conceived, by discussing four twentieth-century philosophers—Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr (d. 1979), ʿAllāma Ṭabāṭabāʾī (d. 1981), and Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, treated respectively by Mustansir Mir (ch. 27), Saleh J. Agha (ch. 28), Sajjad H. Rizvi and

Ahab Bdaiwi (ch. 29), and Muhammad Ali Khalidi (ch. 30).

Beyond their individual quality, the millennium-spanning array of chapters provokes an important question—and this is the perhaps the *Handbook*'s greatest contribution. What features unite the works and figures that the volume encompasses? In other words, what is the "Islamic philosophy" of the *Handbook*'s title? Regarding the second part of that phrase, the editors clearly state that they are interested in "philosophy" or "*falsafa*" in the general, modern sense of those English and Arabic words, not merely in the more restrictive premodern Arabic sense of *falsafa*.[4] Hence their inclusion of a chapter on a figure like al-Ghazālī (ch. 9, Frank Griffel), who would emphatically have rejected the title of "philosopher" (*faylasūf*). Nevertheless, most of the chapters do treat texts dealing with *falsafa* in the restrictive, premodern sense of the word—namely, as the particular Neoplatonizing Aristotelianism that the Islamic world received from Graeco-Roman late antiquity and creatively developed.[5] Might it have been helpful to include more borderline figures? One thinks especially of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), who, in his works against Aristotelian logic, is clearly "doing philosophy" in the modern sense of the word, even if he disavows *falsafa* in the premodern sense.[6] Even more boldly, might someone like Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), also no friend to premodern *falsafa*, have been included on the grounds that he is engaging in "philosophy of history"? There are no easy answers to these definitional questions, and the volume's strength lies in its refusal to offer any, preferring instead to let readers think through the problem themselves.

Perhaps more interesting than the word "philosophy" in the title is the label "Islamic." What do the editors mean by this term? Whereas the 2014 *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* did not need to justify its inclusion of the modifier "Islamic," the editors of the present volume are aware that many readers will find the phrase "Islamic philosophy" problematic. Responding to proponents of the equally popular "Arabic philosophy," El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke point out that the term excludes philosophical works written in other languages, such as Persian and Turkish. Quite rightly, "Arabic philosophy"

4. For a statement of the difference between the modern and premodern understandings of "philosophy" or "*falsafa*," see Dimitri Gutas, "Avicenna and After: The Development of Paraphilosophy; A History of Science Approach," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. Abdelkader Al Ghouz, 19–72 (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2018), at 20–21. It should be noted, of course, that *falsafa* ("philosophy") and *faylasūf* ("philosopher") do occasionally appear in the generic sense of "wisdom" and "wise man" even in premodern Arabic and that various Islamic philosophers give their own abstract or tendentious definitions of *falsafa* and related words.

5. It should also be noted, however, that from the beginning, some self-identified *falāsifa*, such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, could nevertheless consciously reject central Aristotelian tenets.

6. On the perception that Ibn Taymiyya is "doing philosophy" or "*falsafa*" in the modern sense, see Anke von Kügelgen, "The Poison of Philosophy: Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle for and against Reason," in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, ed. Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer, 253–328 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), especially at 283–284. Von Kügelgen argues, moreover, that Ibn Taymiyya was more influenced by the medieval *falāsifa* than he would have cared to admit.

was inappropriate given their volume's scope. Yet as the editors themselves admit, "Islamic philosophy" runs the risk of excluding Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, or even "freethinking" philosophers writing in Islamic lands—some of whom, such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Yaḥyā b. ʿAdī (d. 364/974), receive dedicated chapters in the *Handbook* (ch. 3, Peter Adamson, and ch. 6, Sidney H. Griffith). What the editors clearly mean by "Islamic philosophy" is philosophy as it was practiced historically and today in Islamic lands. Why not "philosophy in the Islamic world," then, or the increasingly popular "Islamicate philosophy"? El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke argue that the former is unwieldly and the latter obscure, liable to render an already difficult field still more inaccessible to general readers. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a marketing team at Oxford University Press greenlighting a volume entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Islamicate Philosophy*.

Of course, many scholars prefer "Islamicate philosophy" to "Islamic philosophy" for another reason, one not raised by El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke when discussing the volume's scope. To use the term "Islamic philosophy," the argument goes, is to imply, intentionally or not, that there is something essentially "Islamic" about the philosophy under discussion. That is, beyond merely describing philosophy written in lands where Islam predominated, the term "Islamic philosophy" appears to assume a fact not immediately in evidence: that Islam influenced the essential character of this tradition.[7] By way of illustration, a critic might object that a companion to European philosophy including such diverse thinkers as Abelard (d. 1142), Descartes (d. 1650), Nietzsche (d. 1900), and Derrida (d. 2004) would never receive the title *The Oxford Handbook of Christian Philosophy*. All four philosophers hailed from Christian-majority countries, but it is highly debatable whether they all participate in something that could meaningfully be described as "Christian philosophy." Use of the term "Islamic"—though perhaps unavoidable in a volume of this scope—inevitably risks invoking monolithic notions of culture that postcolonial and other theorists have worked to deconstruct.[8]

Such controversy over the term "Islamic" gets at the heart of the volume's central, if unspoken, question, alluded to above. Even if the philosophy under discussion is not essentially "Islamic," what essential features unify the volume's disparate chapters? Since the volume is arranged chronologically, is there a central historical narrative that unites all the thinkers whom *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* brings together? Take, for example, the Iraq-, Syria-, and Egypt-based al-Fārābī (d. 339/950–951) (ch. 5, Damien Janos), the Andalusian Ibn Ṭufayl (ch. 11, Taneli Kukkonen), and the Iranian Sabzawārī (ch. 25, Fatemeh Fana). All three philosophers clearly belong to the same tradition inaugurated in ninth-century Baghdad, a tradition that, for

7. By contrast, for a defense of the term "Islamic philosophy" on the grounds that philosophy as practiced in Islamic lands is meaningfully "Islamic," see Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 10–19.

8. Of course, at the end of the count, terms such as "Islamicate" and "Islamic world" run these same risks.

convenience, we might choose to label "Islamic philosophy," whether or not we view it as Islamic in essence.[9] Although geographically and chronologically disparate, al-Fārābī, Ibn Ṭufayl, and Sabzawārī shared many preoccupations and consulted many of the same texts and authorities, albeit sometimes through commentaries and other filters. By contrast, a figure like Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd, featured in the volume's final chapter, engaged in an analytic philosophy that was closely in dialogue with his twentieth-century contemporaries in Britain, where Maḥmūd studied, and elsewhere across the world. This global school of logical empiricism has its own distinct history and is connected with ninth-century Baghdad only at many removes.

In other words, one could readily posit an unbroken historical through-line, passing via Avicenna (ch. 7, Amos Bertolacci) and Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045 or 1050/1635–1636 or 1640–1641) (ch. 21, Cécile Bonmariage), that connects al-Fārābī with Sabzawārī. The *Handbook* includes chapters on every major link in that chain. By contrast, to situate Maḥmūd's logical empiricism fully in its intellectual-historical context, the reader would require chapters covering Austria's Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951), Britain's A. J. Ayer (d. 1989), and China's Hong Qian (Tscha Hung, d. 1992), among others. From a historical or philological perspective, is it useful to describe both al-Fārābī and Maḥmūd as "Islamic philosophers" in the same way that it useful to assign that label to both al-Fārābī and Sabzawārī? Alternatively, are historical through-lines and textual traditions reductive and unhelpful ways of approaching "Islamic philosophy" in the first place? Might a theoretical perspective that emphasizes hybridity and historical rupture or an ahistorical focus on philosophical themes be more fruitful?

Again, the *Handbook* does not attempt to answer such questions, nor should it, given the current state of research. It would in any case be inappropriate, not to say offensive, for the volume to exclude a set of Islamic-world philosophers on the basis that they were somehow less "Islamic"—even if the term "Islamic philosophy" were couched in a historically restrictive, nonessentialist sense. Instead, the volume opts for a refreshingly maximalist spirit of inclusivity, one that challenges future scholars to consider and reimagine precisely what we mean when we use terms like "Islamic philosophy" or even "Islamicate philosophy." In the end, one feature that undeniably unites the figures and works in El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke's volume is their long and inexcusable exclusion from Eurocentric histories of philosophy. The two editors, and indeed all of the volume's contributors, are to be thanked for producing a book that treats so many understudied philosophical works so expertly. *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* will serve as a definitive reference for years to come.

9. This philological approach based on textual traditions and authorial influence is exemplified by Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 no. 1 (2002): 7, although Gutas uses the term "Arabic philosophy" rather than "Islamic philosophy."