



After al-Ghazālī: Science Skepticism and the Life of Philosophy

Part Three

Introduction

Frank Griffel is the Professor in the Study of Abrahamic Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at Oxford University and Fellow at Lady Margaret Hall. This is a forum on his book, The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam (Oxford University Press). The book is part of a revolution taking place in Islamic scholarship, and it contributes to wider debates and conversations around the history of philosophy in the East and West, the questions that philosophy can meaningfully answer, and whether philosophy as a way of life, a living tradition, remains possible today.

Two wonderful scholars are part of the forum, also specialists in the history of medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy: Peter Adamson and Carlos Fraenkel. Professor Adamson is the Chair of Late Ancient and Arabic Philosophy at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. He is also the author of a very influential Oxford book series, A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps, which is based on the eponymous podcast, which has reached hundreds of thousands of listeners. Professor Fraenkel is the James McGill Professor at McGill University, with a joint department in Jewish Studies and Philosophy, and the author of Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy (Cambridge University Press) and the prize-winning book, Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World (Princeton University Press).

The forum will be released in four parts before the final publication of the entire conversation, which will be available as a free digital book at Marginalia. The transcript has been lightly edited for print and includes the last two paragraphs of Part Two, [“The Post-Classical Turn: How Islamic Thought Reinvented Itself After the Philosophers’ Crisis.”](#)

Why Do Philosophy?

Carlos Frankel

I wonder, what are our goals? What is our motivating force today, and can we still hold on to a unified view of the history of philosophy?



The cosmological and metaphysical background assumptions that, I think, underwrote much of ancient, medieval or pre-modern philosophy, collapsed after the Copernican Revolution and after Darwin and the theory of evolution. I see these as two quite important turning points in history that made philosophy as a way of life, in this ancient and medieval sense, more difficult to defend.

Samuel Loncar

Wonderful questions, Carlos. Your points call to mind to the last chapter of your book, *Teaching Plato in Palestine*, “On Nihilism,” and I think it is valuable here to have an explicit meta-philosophical conversation.

Peter, earlier you mentioned a deflationary account of the double truth theory, connected to a teaching context [in Part Two]. However, I want to briefly explore why the double truth theory emerged.

Aristotelian demonstrative reasoning is such that, if you say you have a demonstrative Aristotelian argument for a thing, then you cannot rationally embrace an opposing claim. It is irrational. So, what is at stake here is connected to what you were saying, Frank, about the status of science. Stephen Gaukroger wrote a great book, *The Failures of Philosophy*, which I think is very connected to what you are saying, Carlos.

For example, I argue in the book I am finishing that Descartes’ project is related to the failure of Aristotelian demonstrative understanding. Aristotle lays out the foundations of self-evident *archai*, or first principles, the understanding of which are what we would call both causal and rational. When one has a demonstrative understanding, the effect is seen clearly through the mediating causal or rational structures, and therefore one has certainty.

If philosophers in the Arts faculty saying, “We have Aristotelian demonstrative understanding here, so it is the case that the world is eternal,” then it does *not* make rational sense for them to then say, on the other hand, “But as Christians, we believe the world was created in time.” In this context, it makes complete sense why religious authorities, like the bishops in charge of the Paris theology faculty, would have seen this as talking out of both sides of the mouth, a kind of “wink, wink.” Therefore, the status of “Is there any demonstrative understanding?” is ultimately related to the idea that Aristotle provides a scientific doctrine of philosophy. If that doctrine exists, then the traditional claims of religion have a very difficult place to make for themselves.



By the time of Descartes, broadly speaking, many people do not believe in this kind of demonstrative understanding outside of mathematics. So, there is a shift in Descartes to the rooting of scientific certainty and subjective self-certainty through eidetic self-awareness. That, of course, breaks down by the period that you are talking about, Carlos. No one has to comment on what I am saying there directly, but I would love for us to discuss the question that Carlos has established.

Do we really have a framework without scientific understanding? Do we have a standard to unify philosophy as a shared activity? Or did philosophy actually fail, in one sense, as Gaukroger argues, as Stephen Hawking argues, and that philosophy has been replaced by science?

If it did fail, then who needs philosophers? Perhaps it is nice to have philosophers around to think about these questions, but ultimately, they do not have any rational claim on us. I would like us to reflect on that, namely: What is the rational stake, scientifically?

We are all in the university, and I think we all embody this beautiful vision that Carlos describes—philosophy as a way of life—which I share and practice. My scholarship and forthcoming book seek to show that a case can be made for this way of life today, but I also worry and wonder about it. I would love to hear what you think, Peter, about the kind of rational stakes of philosophy as a living practice.

Peter Adamson

I think you are right, Samuel. What you sketched there is not only correct, but also relevant for what Frank was talking about before. The failure of the Aristotelian project—of establishing demonstrations concerning anything anyone might want to inquire into—is something that is common to both the Islamic world and the Latin Christian world, and then the early Modern European world. What Frank was talking about before, for example, this idea that the philosopher might say, “Well, I can show you the arguments on both sides of an issue,” but then I will turn around and say, “But God knows best.” Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī does this. One way of reading that move, at least, is that this is an area where he does not actually believe the demonstration is available.

The Aristotelian demonstration theory was an incredibly ambitious version of what it would mean to use philosophy to come to know something. In fact, it may be one of the most ambitious theories that has ever been proposed. Aristotle is really saying, “If you are not reasoning from indubitable first principles and reaching truths that are *necessary, universal, eternal*, then you do not know anything, in the



strict sense of knowledge.” Aristotle would say that is what *episteme* (science)

is;

that is what knowledge is. You might also translate it as “understanding.” So scientific knowledge, scientific understanding, has to have that specific character. When the bar is that high, it is very easy for skeptics to say, “Well, hang on a second because I do not think philosophers are providing that.” One can read al-Ghazālī as saying that to Ibn Sina. In the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*—or however one chooses to translate the title of *Tahafut al-Falasifa*—al-Ghazālī is basically saying, “Your arguments do not rise to the standards that you set for yourself. Thus, you have not proven what you set out to prove.”

I think that you are right; the same thing happens in the transition from Late Medieval to 17th Century philosophy. But, we should bear in mind that contemporary philosophers do not think they are doing anything like what the Aristotelians were trying to do. They might go back to an argument in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and say, “That is a really good argument” even if Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī does not think that it is a demonstrative argument; it just has some dialectical weight, or something like that.

My response to Carlos’ meta-philosophical question is that what a contemporary philosophical audience might find interesting or worthwhile in the material that Frank is writing about is very different from the question of what people back then would have thought philosophy was, or could be. In a way, neither the word *hikmah* nor the word *falsafah* is well-translated into the contemporary English word “philosophy” because when we use the word philosophy, we primarily mean whatever people study in Philosophy departments, academic philosophy, which is very different from anything they were thinking about. There is a case that I like to propose in discussions like this:

Imagine that you have a 1000 page book, and it is incredibly tedious exegesis. Primarily, all it is doing is telling you the meaning of the Hebrew words, parallel passages where a word is used, and what theologians ought to think about this. So, nothing anyone would say is philosophical. But then on page, 637 there is one paragraph where the author says, “Oh, by the way, I think that this particular claim is true because of X and Y,” and then proceeds to give a five-sentence philosophical argument, which just so happens to be extremely innovative, interesting and fascinating. So, I claim that I could show up at a philosophy department, give a paper on that paragraph, and no one would say, “Hold on, this is not philosophy because it is in a work about Biblical exegesis” They would ask me questions about the argument. A Religious Studies department might say, “That cannot be philosophy because it is from a text that is exegeting the Bible.”



Both of these perspectives are right, in a way, and also maybe wrong in a way, but I think they are both legitimate. Because one can ask the question, “What was philosophy in a given context?” Or, what may be better, “What was culturally motivating the practices that we study as historians of philosophy?” Because, of course, there is what we call philosophy, and there are cultures that do not have the word philosophy. So we always need to ask, “What is the cultural context of this kind of discourse?” Another question is “Will a room full of contemporary philosophers think that something is interesting?” Frank and I are both interested in both questions, but Frank's working more on the first question, and I am working more on the second question.

At some level, I am willing to bracket the question of what the Islamic philosophers thought they were doing. If I look at their argument for representationalist theories of cognition, for example, then I have very little interest whether the *reason* for their argument is some possibly theologically motivated project. I do not know whether you agree with that, Frank.

Frank Griffel

I can generally agree, but let me make the case here for the study of context.

Both of you have characterized the *Tahafut al-Falasifa* correctly as raising this point, which we can restate like this: “You, Avicennan philosopher, on this particular issue, present arguments that do not rise to the standard of apodeictic as to the standard of demonstration.” But the book cannot be understood unless one sees the context of it—namely, al-Ghazālī’s conviction that *only* apodictic arguments can trump or override what is known as religious truth. So, in this case, wherever these points contradict things that al-Ghazālī thought were essential for Islam, what we might call Islamic doctrines, there he says, “Well, the fact that you do not have demonstrative arguments is extremely important here, because you have nothing.”

What I am most interested in—*The Formation of Post-classical Philosophy* is largely about context—are the conditions under which philosophy was possible in this particular century, specifically between 1110 to 1210, and how philosophers were identified, what they were called, and what we would call them.

Samuel, you said something earlier that I want to respond to. You made some comparison between the Latin tradition and the Arabic tradition, and I thought that was a very good way to approach what is happening in the Islam. But there is one



important thing that was not stressed, and that is the existence of *kalam*, and the

development of *kalam*, together with the translation movement. The translation movement from Greek into Arabic starts in the early Middle Ages, but it picks up steam in the ninth century. At the same time, we have very, very sophisticated physical theories, theories about the soul, theories about human actions, theories about God's interaction with creation, that are extremely refined, extremely complicated, well-developed, and which produce amazing debates. They can be reconstructed today. None of the specific books written at that point in time by *mutakallimun* [those who engage *kalam*] are physically still with us, but we are still able to reconstruct them from later Arabic literature. That is something, and of course, in the majority, this is a pushback towards the Aristotelian tradition.

On the one hand, yes, there is the Aristotelian tradition in *falsafah* and in *hikmah*. But there is, as we have pointed out on various occasions, thinkers, sometimes the same thinkers, that say, "If you start from different premises, then you end up with totally different conclusions." And those different premises are really systems that were developed earlier that become further developed.

This connects to what Carlos said about the criticism of rationalism, for instance, Maimonides' son. Now, the criticism of rationalism in Islam also has very interesting repercussions. And it does not take long, namely, in this case, the next generation after Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, until we have a very central figure, Ibn Arabi, who becomes the center of the next philosophical system, I would argue, that is built on a critical approach towards rationalism. That is, again, something I would say that we have another four or five decades to study until we finally understand it.

Peter Adamson

Frank, the issue of *kalam* is really interesting, and I think what people make of *kalam* tells us a lot about their position relative to the issues Carlos was raising.

The *mutakallimun*—people who do *kalam*—are people who are, as Frank said, providing very complicated, clearly rational arguments within an explicitly theological context. People like me are not worried about whether *kalam* is part of the history of philosophy in the Islamic world. We are beyond that. In fact, this is where a lot of the action is now in the field, both in the pre-classical, or in the perhaps classical and post-classical periods. Some of the people who are coming from a more philosophical training, like me, include Fedor Benevich, Francesco Zamboni, and Nadia Gaman. Some people are in philosophy departments, often not



consensually, but we are all working on *kalam* as if it is only philosophy. Whereas I think other people, like Dimitri Gutas would be an example, who is not trained as

a philosopher and is thinking more about the cultural standing of this kind of material. He is very against the idea that *kalam* is philosophy because *kalam* does not play, as it were, the right cultural role—it is not abiding by the right kind of conditions of inquiry.

You can talk about how rationalist *kalam* is and how open it is (or not) in terms of its inquiry. But I think the philosophers who are working on this are often thinking, “What do you mean it is *not* philosophy? It’s full of good arguments.” That settles the issue for us. If it is full of philosophically interesting arguments, then we are going to work on it. In some sense, it does not matter that much whether we think that they were philosophers or theologians because that is a historical question: What was their self-conception?

That also affects what Carlos was asking about, as in, why does any of this matter? There are two very different reasons, or at least two different answers, very different answers you could give to that question.

One is what Frank was sketching out, in fact, what you started with Samuel, which was wondering about the intellectual decline in the Islamic world. This can even explain why the Islamic powers were defeated by colonialist powers, which had become more rationalist and so on. The historical question is much more about what they thought they were doing and why, and that is important.

But another reason might be whether representationalist theories of cognition are true or false. I am a philosopher of mind, and so to read a 13th century philosopher who wrote twelve pages about this, which are incredibly interesting, is a completely different kind of motivation for working on the same material. I think this is often overlooked, because I think the two types of scholars working on this have a tendency to talk past each other.

A Social Space for Philosophy

Samuel Loncar

That is very helpful, Peter. As we come to the close, I want to ask each of you to reflect on what philosophy is, or what you see yourselves doing, and how you would like this work to change public perception.



These two different disciplinary divides are significant. There is a lot of science skepticism today, and if you look at the arguments, they are very largely repeating these same problems. The demonstrative understanding criteria is very intense. It is the same criteria, in a different way, that Kant has. Kant thinks arguments have

to be universal and necessary, or they have no place in the university. So, the Neo-Kantians then defend the existence of the philosophy profession by arguing that it is an adjunct to the natural sciences, whose rationality they think is unquestionable.

But now, even the rationality of the sciences is questioned because of the historical fact that scientific knowledge itself clearly changes, the scientific theory changes. So to push this at the existential level, if each of you could reflect briefly on how you think we can develop these arguments today, or develop this material, to practically help the public have a broader understanding of the issue in spite of massive disagreements across disciplines. It is clear, as we have shown in this conversation, that there is enormous rational power in the Islamic tradition.

Peter, you were indicating that myth of Islamic irrationality should die, hopefully by bringing the significance of all the work you are all doing to the public. At the same time, the public, and I think many scholars, wonder what is the best way to defend philosophy? Or, what is the best way to defend, broadly, the rational pursuit of scientific understanding? We all want the answer to be self-evident, but alas, it is not.

Peter, do you want to start by continuing? Then, Frank or Carlos, if you could like to pick up on that. You can take it any way you like, but I think what you have already done builds to this place. I want to push that, because I think it is part of the great value of this work. Scientific funding, certainly, where I'm at in America, has been so imperiled, and I think that what we are doing, and what you have done, has provided a beautiful defense of the intrinsic value of this work.

At the same time, for those who may not be aware of some of the more subtle aspects, I think giving a sense of what philosophy is, in your own view, or what the university's culture of rationality means for you, and how we should think about it today would be a beautiful gift to those listening.

Peter Adamson

Carlos, do you want to tell us what you think since I just spoke? These questions seem very connected to some of your earlier ones.

Carlos Frankel



I like Peter's suggestion that the criterion for identifying a good philosophical argument is not whether it satisfies the requirements of Aristotelian demonstration of *apodexis*, but rather if one can get a room of philosophers interested in engaging with it now. So, that is certainly an interesting way of thinking about it and probably

a good criterion because, whenever that is possible, then we have good reasons to believe that we are engaging with material that remains interesting; it speaks to people today.

I suppose my ambition has always been to find something that has a little bit more metaphysical anchoring. I have spent so much time engaging with philosophers who, not only do philosophy, as in make interesting arguments, perhaps even demonstrative arguments, but who are also campaigning for the value of philosophy.

For Plato and Aristotle, it was not only about coming together in the Academy or the Lyceum to discuss things, but it was also about creating a social space for this practice, about changing people's perception of philosophy—from Thales who contemplates the stars and falls into a well and makes the people around him giggle to showing a respect for wisdom and the people who pursue it. It is a larger project about the value of wisdom, of practicing philosophy.

By instinct and nature, I live a more or less Aristotelian life. The three of us have this immense privilege of being in this one pocket of capitalist societies where a person can actually pursue the life of the mind, get a salary for it, and even a little bit of social recognition because we are professors. We can have our cake and can eat it, too. So, I feel extremely privileged that I have had this opportunity to devote myself to these questions undisturbed.

But is there a more broad justification for philosophy as a life choice, or is it my own idiosyncratic attraction? Of course, I would like to be able to give an explanation for why I live the life I live, but I'm not sure it is possible, so it remains a meta-philosophical life question for me.

I have found that, if I cannot provide an Aristotelian justification for this life that I live, this life of the mind, then Plan B is Epicureanism. Epicureanism, I think, provides the kind of tools one needs to justify a philosophical life that does not appeal to a Divine Mind ordering the universe, or knowledge being the bond between the human mind and some kind of divine rational structure. If I cannot give an Aristotelian justification to my life, then there is another kind of philosophical way of life that remains open, even if I live in a universe that is a random



configuration of atoms, or was randomly configured by the Big Bang, or whatever. Epicureanism is something one can point to in such a case. But I think there is some value in keeping those questions alive, at least to me, they remain important.

Frank Griffel

I am inspired by the nominalist tendencies that I see in the in the Islamic and the Jewish tradition. And so, I would actually argue that truth is not something that is “out there;” it is something, in this case, that we need to agree upon. That requires a lot of debate, continuous debate, with those people who deny that there is scientific truth, or anything else. It is a task; it is a hard job.

I see the challenge—particularly for myself and the people who work in the field of the study of post-classical Islamic philosophy—of explaining ourselves to a wider public. I mean, you can make a clear case that Avicenna is a good philosopher. You can make a clear case about Averroes, al-Kindī, and al-Ghazālī, who is an entertaining philosopher. Carlos mentioned his autobiography, which is a great piece of literature that a high school student might easily understand.

Carlos Frankel

His autobiography is an excellent introduction, I think, to philosophy. I use it in many of my classes, and it always really, really grips the students.

Frank Griffel

There are other books in the in the classical Islamic tradition, philosophical tradition, like Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, which is great to teach. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī does not have any texts like that.

One thing that I see as going the right direction is Peter’s *The Heirs of Avicenna*, project, of which two of the three volumes have come out. That is a tangible book for anybody who is interested in this tradition. So on the one hand, yes, we need documents, but we also need narratives. In a sense, that is what I tried to do with this book so that a person could read it from beginning to end and hopefully be entertained. It was a real challenge. But we are in the early days—and hopefully one day, and hopefully we will all witness this—there will be events at such forums as the Frankfurt Book Fair, or even on Arthur TV, that will engage with this tradition.

Peter Adamson



That bears out something we were talking about before, which is the parallel to Latin scholasticism. You cannot exactly hand Duns Scotus or Ockham to someone who is coming into philosophy for the first time and say, “Here, check this out!” You cannot do that with Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī either, but you *can* do it with

al-Ghazālī, and you can do it with Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, which you mentioned. I use that a lot, actually. Maybe I am more optimistic about the public interest in philosophy because have been producing the *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* podcast for fifteen years. People who listen to a history of philosophy podcasts are predisposed to be interested in philosophy itself. But my experience is that, if you put out accessible material on philosophy, then a group of people will go for it.

I think it is significant that in a time when the humanities are struggling to find students, the student numbers in philosophy, at least in Germany, are quite stable. If you ask eighteen-year-olds what they are interested in, they will often say philosophy. If you toss philosophical questions at nine-year-olds, they go at it immediately. So, the default attitude of humans toward philosophical questions—not philosophy as a discipline or academic phenomenon—is to be interested in philosophy.

For example, take this question: Should we eat animals? Most people in Europe and North America have seriously thought about this question. They may not have thought about it deeply, but culturally they are aware of the issue, and it is even the kind of thing people talk about over dinner. It is a philosophical question. It can be more challenging with questions that are not about ethics and politics, that do not feel immediately relevant, but you can even get people talking about free will pretty easily, if you throw the topic out there.

I think that the deviant, or strange phenomenon, is actually people who are hostile to philosophy or to philosophical questions. The reason they are hostile to philosophy is that, the more philosophy you do, then the more you learn to take other points of view seriously and you become highly concerned about arguments while working to look at things objectively. If you are polemicizing against the sciences generally, then from that point of view, philosophy is bad news. But I think that from the point of view of humankind generally, philosophy is good news and is quite welcome. We should not be embarrassed about philosophical questions simply because philosophical questions are not they kind of questions that you ask and answer to achieve something. The questions tell us something about who we are. So, that is my answer to your question, Carlos, as to why we are doing this.



The answer is that philosophy is the best thing we could be doing, or at least one of the best things we can be doing, as humans.

Like Aristotle says, asking why we want to have more knowledge or do philosophy is like asking why we people want to have pleasant experiences, to have pleasure. It is intrinsically valuable, and I think Aristotle is actually right about that.

Of course there are practical outcomes of studying philosophy: you will learn to write better arguments; you will learn to think well; you will not depend on AI to do everything for you. But the real answer to “Why do philosophy?” is that doing philosophy is valuable for its own sake.

Samuel Loncar

Thank you all. You have all exemplified the value of philosophy, I think, in both the clarity and the profundity of the conversation and scholarship. Frank, thank you for your book, and Peter and Carlos, for being part of this wonderful conversation.

Peter Adamson

Thank you.

Frank Griffel

Thank you.

Carlos Frankel

Thank you.



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Carlos Fraenkel grew up between Germany and Brazil, studied in Berlin and Jerusalem, and teaches philosophy and religion at McGill University and Oxford University. He’s written on philosophers such as Plato, al-Fârâbî, Maimonides, and Spinoza, and on conducting philosophical debates in places of conflict—for example with Palestinian students, lapsed Hasidic Jews, and members of an Iroquois nation. His publications include *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World* and pieces for, among others, the *London Review of Books*, the *TLS*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times*.

Samuel Loncar is a Yale-trained philosopher and scholar of religion and science. He is a Fellow at the Gulbenkian Institute for Advanced Study and a visiting scholar at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Marginalia Review of Books* and the Director of the Institute for the Meanings of Science. His book, *Philosophy as Religion and Science from Plato to Posthumanism*, is forthcoming with Columbia University Press.