The Post-Classical Turn: How Islamic Thought Reinvented Itself After the Philosophers' Crisis

Part Two

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-wining 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 One,* "Did al-Ghazālī End Islamic Philosophy: An Oxford Professors' Revisionist Perspective."

The Relevance of the Revolution in Islamic Philosophy

Carlos Fraenkel

I recently was in touch with a scholar in Iran who has translated my book on philosophical religion into Persian. From our correspondence, it became very clear that what was a historical project for me is very much a life project for him because there is a living intellectual cultural context for the kind of philosophy that I describe in this book. For him, this is a kind of appropriation of something that is still alive in Iran. One can trace a story that goes from Ibn Sina to Ayatollah Khomeini, and that is mediated, in part, through medieval Islamic thinkers and the reception of Plato. That tradition remains alive in the Islamic world much more than it does in the West. But is this something that we should applaud? Is this kind of philosophy still something that we should be concerned about as human beings—something like a philosophy of life that we could embrace?

There, I am more skeptical. I am certainly happy to applaud the kind of historical revolution that is taking place, but I am unsure that this type of philosophy remains a life option for us today or that there is any sort of deeper significance to the fact that there are intellectual and cultural centers where that this type of philosophy is still cultivated beyond historical curiosity.

Samuel Loncar

Frank or Peter, I would love to hear your thoughts on this.

Frank Griffel

I think there are three points to address. The question is, *What is the significance of the revolution?* Whether one associates the death of philosophy, living philosophy, with Islam has profound political implications. Here is one example, which comes from the last pages of my book:

When Germans were debating whether Turkey should be admitted to the European Union, the cultural conservative's argument was always, "No, they are too religious. They have never heard about the Enlightenment. They are not a part of us, of Europe, philosophically."

Second, and this connects to what Peter said, I think each one of us has our own perspective about the relevance of the revolution. For Peter, who comes from a philosophy department, it is the argument. In his writings, he is very clear that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī is a great analytical philosopher, and he is—there is no question about that. But I come from a religious studies department. I am indeed much more interested in *perceptions* of Islam and reconstructing Islamic history. For me, on one hand, it is important to point out that, as Peter also pointed out, that the main point of my book is not that there was philosophy. The main point is that it was *a different philosophy from what existed in the West.*

The West was dealing with what we would call a philosophical *aporia*, something, in this case, where a thinker had a hunch—or at one point, a clear realization—that X or Y is a point that philosophically cannot be clarified, cannot be answered. Such questions are, in my opinion, something like “Is the world eternal?”. One can deal with that in different ways.

In the West, what has become the canonical treatment goes back to Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant basically sets the parameters and says that the question of whether the world is eternal or not is a question that can never be answered through reasonable inquiry. He adds a number of others, and of course, these others also existed in the Islamic tradition. Now, in my opinion, what happened in the Islamic world is something different in so far as certain philosophers began to realize that this is the case. Now, I might say, *this* is the post-classical moment.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was probably one of the first, and he dies in 1210, one hundred years after al-Ghazālī. The way he deals with the case is to, on the one hand, strengthen Case A, and at a different place, strengthened case B. But he does not really offer an adjudication. He tries at the very end of his life to do an adjudication, and that becomes very, very difficult. The genre of the book is very hard to understand and not as much appreciated as his earlier work. I believe this is happening when the other books of *hikmah* that I mentioned early were being printed. Now, the number of printed books of *hikmah* from the Arabic tradition from the post-classical tradition is much, much larger and has already reached at least two dozen or something like that. In this case, I think that the approach is not individual to the author, but rather it is something that is part of a significant philosophical culture, a philosophical tradition. And I think that we may be able to learn something from it.

Samuel Loncar

Could you say a bit more about this before Carlos or Peter responds? Carlos, I think this is what you were getting at earlier, thinking about what can we actually inherit here (or not) from our philosophical ancestors or forefathers. Frank, can you expand a bit on this idea before others come in on that?

Frank Griffel

In my view, what happened in the post-classical tradition is this: the key thinkers of that culture realized that a number of questions, which earlier philosophers in the same tradition were very adamant about, could not, in fact, be philosophically solved in the sense of proven.

We mentioned the eternity of the world. But the other question, which is behind that one, is whether God is a necessary acting entity, or whether God acts out of necessity, or whether God has a free will. Another question, for instance, is whether or not humans have free will. What then crystallizes—Peter hinted at this—is that certain genres of literature emerge that defend a certain set of teachings, which are counter to another genre of literary discourse that defend the opposite view. The really interesting thing—which I try to show in my book, and this is where I received the most significant pushback—is that I think an author could write books in discourse A *and* books in discourse B. This is what I characterize as the Eastern tradition.

There are other authors—Maimonides, for instance—who try to use both approaches in one book. And this creates a philosophical literature that, on the surface level, is very hard to understand. I think that we have decades to go to truly find out what is really happening in these books. We have to read them much more closely than we do now. I should also say, in this case, I am not free of mistakes. For instance, I know that my judgment about one particular book that I dealt with was a bit over-hasty because, at the time, the book was only in manuscript, so it was very hard to study. That text is now available in print.

Samuel Loncar

Thank you, Frank. This is exciting, and Carlos and Peter, I am very much looking forward to both your responses, so I will just add this briefly to make some connections:

To your earlier point, Carlos, my forthcoming book, *Philosophy as Religion and Science: From Plato to Posthumanism* (Columbia University Press), is about the historiographical significance of what actually counts as philosophy. So there are two things that are very striking, Frank, about your book and about what you just said in response to Carlos' question.

One is, there was a tradition, we know from the condemnations that rolled over the 13th century in the Latin West, of a so-called "double truth theory"—the idea that there are truths that philosophers can know, but these are different from truths of faith. To me this is deeply connected, although distanced to the generic distinction that you show in your work, to the emergence of two different kinds of philosophy. Essentially, one continues a supposedly capital punishment proscribed tradition of Avicennian, Aristotelian, rationalistic philosophy. Another, you could say, is in dialogue with the rational presumed premises of the relevant theological tradition.

Now, the institutional difference in the West, of course, becomes that the philosophy faculty—as you point out at the end of the book, the Arts faculty—

establishes a free space for philosophical inquiry. It is exactly the Arts faculty that is the subject of the controversies that become known in the historiography of medieval philosophy as Latin Averroism and the doctrine of double truth.

My perception is that broadly speaking, historians of philosophy, for good reasons, have questioned the so-called relevance of the double truth theory, or whether there even was such a theory. I am not suggesting that you say there is a double truth theory in your book. But I think it is a very important historical consideration to bring up because it connects to the second point, which is: Is there an underlying philosophical logic as to why these two genres emerge?

I would suggest that, based on the Latin development, there is. Because once we have the reception of Aristotle's texts, there is, for the first time, a complete body of a doctrine of science as well as a doctrine of rational theology. This was connected to Platonism—and you mentioned John Philoponus in the Christian reception—but broadly speaking, until the Latin reception of the Islamic translations of Aristotle, there is no clear idea that there is a different version of the Platonic tradition which looks, in many ways, completely incompatible with the monotheistic creation traditions.

Thomas Aquinas writes the *Summa Contra Gentiles* for the purpose of establishing a rational philosophical theology. As a result, he leaves out the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation, which are exactly the two doctrines that Jewish and Islamic philosophers would say make Christianity philosophically incoherent. So interestingly, his attempt to defend the rational intelligibility of Christianity involves punting generically on exactly the two most controversial things even though, as a commentator, he wrote many beautiful discourses on the Trinity and the Incarnation.

His *Summa Theologica*, as I have argued in a recent article, is a part of the attempt to justify why theology should exist beyond the Arts faculty, which already had rational Aristotelian theology built into it. He begins with asking whether there should even be any additional discipline of theology beyond the Arts faculty because there seems to be a very deep pressure to have a single vision of philosophy, reason, and theology.

To me, that seems to be part of the great existential significance in the present, as well as in the broader historiography of philosophy, that there may be an internal tension built into the reception of Aristotle's texts in particular that put pressure on traditions with revelation to account for this. This is what makes Aquinas work very controversial, because he is doing philosophy from one side and then doing a very different kind of rational theology from the other side. This was absolutely loathed by many people, including Bonaventure.

Peter and Carlos, you do not have to comment on that, but I think this is one way of thinking about the broader historical and existential significance of this discussion.

Peter Adamson

So this idea that you might reach different conclusions in different contexts could be for different reasons. I think there is a very plausible, fairly deflationary explanation of what is going on, which is that these texts are connected to a teaching context. For example, on Tuesday, you will learn about Avicennian philosophy, and on Thursday you will the *kalam* system. These do not cohere with each other, so we have different books about them. There are just fundamentally different presuppositions in the two systems. It would be as if you had a class on Euclidean geometry, and then you had a class on non-Euclidean geometry the next day. You have different axioms, so there are two independent ways of reaching conclusions, and your conclusion depends on your starting point.

This is actually exactly what the so-called Latin Averroists said they were doing. The reason why they do not have a double truth theory—and I agree that they do not—is because they are not saying that what they are arguing in an Aristotelian context is true. They are simply saying that it is what follows from Aristotelian premises.

Now, they are professional expositors of Aristotelianism, so you might rightly be thinking, *Why are they doing this if they do not think that it is true*? I think their answer is straightforward: This is our job; we are in the Arts faculty, not in the theology faculty. They explicitly say things like: “If you only have access to the starting points of Aristotelian natural philosophy, then it follows that the universe is eternal,” and that is because there is this supernatural form of causation, which we call divine creation, which changes all the rules. Now what is going on in the Islamic context could be more complicated because there is not as much of an institutional framework to say, “Well, I am just in the Arts faculty.”

As Frank has shown, it is often the same people writing in these apparently different genres. So, for example, I worked on the topic of time and space in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Those are important philosophical topics that do have theological implications in some sense, and he basically says the same thing about them; it does not matter which book you read. So-called *kalam* books, so-called *falsafah* books, so-called *hikmah* books—it does not really change. Another example would be one of his more distinctive positions in regarding the soul, which is that there are not multiple soul-powers or faculties, as the Aristotelians taught. Rather, there is the soul, or the self, which does everything. It is not clear what that distinction actually amounts to, but he is consistent about it.

That is why Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī will say that it does not matter what book he is writing, as far as I know. So, I am not sure that we really have a good handle yet on whether, in fact, this so-called genre or approach of a given work always determines everything that is said in that work. So as Frank said, it is going to take us decades to deeply engage the many, many, many philosophers-theologians who write between just the 12th and the 15th centuries. We are literally talking about hundreds of philosophers here.

I often compare the situation we are in now to the situation that you would be in if, for example, you suddenly realized that Latin medieval philosophy existed, and you knew a work by Aquinas, a work by Ockham, and a work by Abelard, and that all of those had been studied a little bit. That is kind of where we are now. It should also be mentioned, by the way, that to some extent, we are catching up with scholars in the Islamic world. They knew that this was important decades ago and a lot of research and work has gone into the study of people like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī before we started writing about it in English and German. And in fact, as Frank said, there are only a few printed books on *hikmah*. Where did they come from? Not England. They were edited in Islam, in the modern Islamic world. So, we are standing on the shoulders of colleagues who do not work in the Western academic world.

Carlos Frankel

Thank you. I would like to add one brief comment going back to al-Ghazālī, who, in some ways, inspired many of these considerations that we were talking about right now. I take his project, in part, to be to exploring the limitations of reason. In his intellectual autobiography, *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (*Deliverance from Error*), al-Ghazālī describes these different skeptical crises that he went through, and his quest is to establish, in an infallible way, what the truth is.

He then looks at these different schools that interpret Islam—*kalam*, *falsafah*, Sufism, and the Batiniyya—and the main objection that he has against *falsafah*, if I remember correctly, is not that they actually make erroneous claims, but rather that the claims that they make do not have the status of demonstrative knowledge.

So ultimately, the philosophers themselves are somehow subject to what he calls *taqlid*, a term generally used in Islamic jurisprudence to denote the conformity of one person to the teaching of another. Philosophers also submit to the authority of tradition, only in their case, it is not the tradition of Islam: it is the tradition of Plato and Aristotle. They consider them the great authorities. They embrace their claims as truth, even though there are no demonstrations that can establish those *conclusively.* But by no means is he saying that they are somehow false. He does not claim that he can show that they are false, including the claim that the world is eternal and including the claim that God's nature is pure mind and that he does not have will and so on. So, these remain open questions.

Al-Ghazālī's claim is that philosophy cannot get us all the way to the goal. If you are a religious person, these questions are very important questions to you: Did the world have a beginning? Was it created by God? What is the nature of God? What exactly is God's relationship to the universe? You do not want to leave these questions open if you are a religious person because they have existential implications. These are fundamental questions on which you want to have some clarity as a religious person. And al-Ghazālī then suggests that there is an alternative path that can get you to that goal, and that path is, somehow, not dependent on intellectual practices but on Sufi practices. The Sufis are able to go beyond reason and taste God. They have some kind direct experience of God.

When Frank, many years ago, invited me to give a lecture at Yale, I tried to point out some interesting parallels between al-Ghazālī and Maimonides' son, Abraham, who is aware of his father's—let us call it, "metaphysical skepticism"—which was inspired by al-Ghazālī. So, Maimonides takes seriously al-Ghazālī's objections to the philosophers; he thinks they have bite. I think there is strong evidence that Maimonides is a kind of metaphysical skeptic who thinks that these questions about God's nature and God's relationship to the universe are questions that cannot be conclusively decided by reason. So his son, Abraham, takes that as an incentive to turn from *falsafah* to Sufism and tries to establish those things, like al-Ghazālī, through incorporating practices from the Sufi path. You can see the parallel here.

I think it would be fascinating to explore—this has been brought up couple of times now— the connections between this kind of discussion and the discussion in Kant, in the chapter "Antinomies of Pure Reason," on this idea that, somehow, because we cannot conclusively answer certain questions, we have to resort to faith. I do not know if one can really start with a literary connection, but I think it is definitely not anything related to a double truth theory. Rather, it is something about the limitations of reason and the need to sometimes surpass reason, or look for alternative paths that allow you to answer the question that reason by itself cannot answer, at least according to al-Ghazālī and those who bought into his arguments.

So, I want to go back to the value of continuity in this philosophical tradition, and something that Peter suggested, that we can look at sophisticated philosophical argument as the linking thread that allows us, as philosophers now, to identify with medieval philosophers, and say: In some ways, we are doing the same thing as you were. We are trying to argue our way to the best justified conclusions.

There is a kind of fundamental practice that has not changed from the beginning of philosophy to the present. And medieval Islamic philosophers, and philosophers in the Indian tradition, and so on, they all contribute to that practice. They all have, in their particular cultural context, made arguments for or against certain claims, and we can engage with those arguments today because that is what philosophers do. And so, you have, Avicenna, Averroes, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who make sophisticated philosophical arguments. And you have Bertrand Russell, and John L. Austin, and Quine, and they also make sophisticated philosophical arguments.

This is the idea that philosophers are all citizens of the same Universal Republic of Reason. We are all united by the pursuit of the truth, each of us within our own particular cultural setting, but still united by this common practice, by this common goal. I was very attracted to this vision.

I came of age at a time when identity questions started to become pressing, and I was never able to sort out my own identity. I was too Jewish for Germany. I was too German for Brazil. I was not Jewish enough for Israel. I did not serve in the army, for better or for worse (I think for better), which is a uniting experience of being an Israeli. So even though I studied several years in Israel, I never quite felt at home there.

So I was excited to discover philosophy as an alternative, cosmopolitan identity. I actually had the aspiration to become like Plato, Aristotle, Maimonides, Averroes, and so on: a citizen of this Republic of the Mind, where we are all united by the pursuit of the truth, and it does not matter if you are Jewish or Christian, German or Brazilian, queer or straight, black or white, man or woman. As long as you have a passion to discover the truth, then you are in the club. It is a very inclusive club in that sense.

But I have come to wonder if that story really holds. Because it still seems to me that, if you are pursuing the truth because you want to unite with the active intellect—as is a case of Averroes—or because you see that as a way of implementing the intellectual love of God—as is the case of Maimonides and *mutatis mutandis* Spinoza—you may be doing something quite different from Russell or Austin or Quine.

So, the sort of fundamental motivation for engaging in philosophical argument, to my mind, may have changed, or may, at least, complicate the story of continuity and this possibility of a Universal Republic of Reason that we all inhabit. It is not entirely clear to me what the fundamental motivation is for philosophers today to continue making sophisticated arguments and to pursue the truth because, it seems, that grasping the truth has become much less attractive for us than it was for someone like Averroes or Maimonides, or Plato or Aristotle.

If you are a Platonist, then grasping the truth means connecting to the universal, eternal, immutable forms that arguably are part of the divine mind. If you are an Aristotelian, then you are connecting to the divine intellect, the Unmoved Mover. We do not seem to have those goals when we make arguments.

So, 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.

PART THREE FORTHCOMING

Frank Griffel is Professor of the Study of Abrahamic Religions at Oxford University and Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. He has published widely in the fields of Islamic philosophy and theology as well as Muslim intellectual history. After working on apostasy in Islam and on the leading theologian and philosopher al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Griffel turned his interest toward the history of philosophy in Islam and Judaism, particularly during Islam's post-classical period after the 11th century. He publishes in English and in German and his books have been translated into Turkish and Arabic. Griffel is also the Louis M. Rabinowitz Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Yale University.

Peter Adamson is a professor of philosophy at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. He is the author of several books, including *The Arabic Plotinus* (2002), *Great Medieval Thinkers: al-Kindi* (2007) and *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (2016), and he hosts the podcast, *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps.*

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.