

Frank Griffel. *The Formation of Post-Classical Philosophy in Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 664 p. ISBN: 9780190886325. Cloth: \$ 125.00

Reviewed by SULTAN SALUTI
Freie Universität Berlin
sultan.saluti@gmail.com

According to a widely accepted conception, that goes back at least to the nineteenth century, the works of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), particularly his “Incoherence of the Philosophers” (*Tahāfut al-falāsifa*), led to the end of philosophy in the Islamic world. This conception still resounds today, even among specialists in Islamic philosophy. Indeed, in a recent article “Avicenna and After”, Dimitri Gutas argues that after Avicenna, i.e., in the “post-classical” period, there was no philosophy really, but what he coins as “para-philosophy”, which means: “doing what appears to be philosophy/ science in order to divert attention from, subvert, and substitute for philosophy/ science, and as a result avoid doing philosophy/ science.”¹

Griffel’s outstanding study wishes to rewrite the standards of these accounts. At the heart of his critique stands the assumption that philosophy is a *discursive tradition* which “requires a volitional act to be part of that tradition... [i.e., a rationalist thinker] has to want to make a contribution to the tradition of philosophy by engaging with its past iterations” (p. 569). Concretely, philosophy which was practiced in the eastern parts of the Islamic world during the twelfth century, was not only *falsafa* but it also included other important traditions which positioned themselves vis-à-vis Avicenna’s philosophy. One such tradition, which constitutes the center of Griffel’s book, and which is explained through the two early compendia of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), namely, *The Eastern Investigations (al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya)* and *The Compendium on Philosophy (al-Mulakhkhaṣ fi al-ḥikma wa-l-manṭiq)*, is the tradition called *ḥikma* which replaced that which was known as *falsafa* or Avicennism.

Griffel expounds this shift in the first chapter of the first part arguing that it was the result of al-Ghazālī’s legal condemnation, (*fatwā*) in the aforementioned *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, where he condemned three teachings of the philosophers (*al-falāsifa*), mainly Avicenna, as constituting unbelief and apostasy from Islam: (1) the pre-eternity of the world, (2) that God knows only universals, and (3) the rejection of bodily resurrection in the afterlife. This *fatwā*, reasons Griffel, motivated philosophers such as Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī (d.1165) and Yahya al-Suhrawardī (d.1192,) to avoid the labels *falsafa* (philosophy) and *faylasūf* (philosopher) and to borrow the terms *ḥikma* and *ḥukamā’* instead.

¹ Dimitri Gutas, “Avicenna and After: The Development of Paraphilosophy. A History of Science Approach”, in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, edited by A. Al Ghouz (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2018), 19-71, 43.

The other two chapters of the first part problematize two widespread claims. The first is that the eastern Islamic world, particularly the Iranian province Khorasan, had witnessed a decline in scholarly activity during the twelfth century. The second claim is connected to al-Ghazālī's *fatwā*. However, through a meticulous exposition of primary sources, Griffel casts doubts on the execution of this *fatwā*, contending that the existence of two such cases in one century (the execution of 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadhānī (d.1131) in Hamadan and Yaḥya al-Suhrawardī in Aleppo, where political and social reasons played roles also) "do not make a war *against philosophers* or a campaign of persecution" (p. 158, referring to a phrase used by Ernest Renan). However, despite the lack of historical evidence that al-Ghazālī's *fatwā* was executed, it is important to emphasize, perhaps against Griffel's thrust of argumentation, that this by no means devaluates or alleviates al-Ghazālī's *fatwā*: it is and remains an intellectually serious condemnation.

Drawing mainly on the corpus of *The Cabinet of Wisdom* (*Ṣiwān al-ḥikma*)² in the second part of his study, Griffel provides a vivid and contextualized depiction of philosophers' lives and sets up a corpus of their writings. In the background, the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* plays a significant role as it prepares the ground for two opposing camps: the Avicennan proponents, on one side, and the Ghazālīan followers as their adversaries, on the other. In the Avicennan camp, attention is given to 'Umar al-Khayyām (d. 1123-24) and to Abū al-'Abbās al-Lawkarī (d. after 1109-10). Among the Ghazālīan followers and critiques of Avicenna, Ibn Ghayalān al-Balkhī and Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī (both d. c. 1194) are brought to the fore.

The first chapter of the third part, which constitutes the fundamental part of this study, discusses mainly the character of philosophical works written in the twelfth century. Griffel highlights primarily al-Rāzī's two compendia which the latter refers to as *ḥikma* works – *al-Mabāḥith al-mashriqiyya* and *al-Mulakhkhaṣ fī al-ḥikma wa-l-mantiq*. Here lies the core of Griffel's argument of this study: these compendia neither teach nor defend Ash'arism, nor do they only report Avicenna's teachings, but they also improve and correct them, resulting consequently in two significant "Rāzīan innovations" in philosophy: one in epistemology the other in ontology.

As for epistemology, al-Rāzī deviates from Avicenna's understanding of the theory of knowledge. According to the latter, knowledge implies the impression (*intibā' or irtisām*) of the form (*ṣūra*) of the object of knowledge (*al-ma'alūm*) in the knower (*al-'arif*). Al-Rāzī, however – influenced heavily by Abū al-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's (d. c. 1165) understanding of knowledge as a "relational attribute", (*ṣifa muḍāfa*) and drawing on Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī, al-Ghazālī, and Avicenna himself – argues that knowledge is a relational state (*ḥala idāfiyya*), i.e., a relation between the knower and the object of knowledge. Griffel argues that at least two important points follow from al-Rāzī's theory. The first concerns the acquisition of knowledge, where al-Rāzī responds to Meno's paradox and reasons that the thing sought is

² Which is considered to be the most comprehensive Arabic doxography of philosophers who wrote in Arabic and Greek.

a relation between the knower and the object of knowledge. The second point, which is coupled with the first, is about the circular nature of definitions and what Griffel describes as “epistemic phenomenalism”. Although these might indeed be significant innovations, as Griffel contends, one could question the real motivation underlying al-Rāzī’s theory of knowledge. In fact, in her dissertation, Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed recently argued that al-Rāzī’s theory of knowledge has theological concerns which are embodied in the need of defending God’s capability of knowing particulars. This, Ben Hammed adds, is an Ash‘arite view which is also discernable in al-Ghazālī’s thirteenth discussion of the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*.³

As to the innovations in the field of ontology, which bear significant implications on theology, Griffel holds that this results from al-Rāzī’s opposition to Avicenna’s concept of God as a necessary existent, the essence of which is identical with its existence. Al-Rāzī, however, objects that God’s existence is distinct from His essence and that the latter is more fundamental than the former, i.e., that His existence is a concomitant (*lāzim*) to His essence. Griffel points out, this view results in a number of philosophical problems and leads to certain corrections of Avicenna’s teachings. For instance, the content of God’s knowledge is understood as His positive attributes, which does not entail multiplicity in God, and thus, does not affect His unity. This, however, raises once more the question about al-Rāzī’s motivation to “correct” Avicenna as argued by Griffel, and it seems to be more likely that al-Rāzī asserts the priority of God’s essence over His existence in order to defend a theological doctrine, namely, the creation of the world.⁴

The second chapter gives a detailed attention to al-Ghazālī’s *Doctrines of the Philosophers* (*Maqāṣid al-falāsifa*) which, as Griffel tells us, evoked confusion among al-Ghazālī’s followers with its “sympathetic” attitude towards the philosophers. Griffel argues also, that authors in the twelfth century wrote two genres of books, one is philosophical (*ḥikma*) the other is theological (*kalām*) which may differ in opposing teachings, as is the case with al-Rāzī. Griffel notices, that while in his philosophical works, at least in his two compendia (*Mabāḥith* and *Mulakhkhaṣ*) al-Rāzī teaches that the world is pre-eternal and that God acts out of His necessity; however, in his *kalām* works, such as *The Utmost Reach of Rational Knowledge in Theology* (*Nihāyat al-‘Uqūf fi dirāyat al-uṣūl*), he teaches the creation of the world and that God has a free will to choose between alternatives. To explain this inconsistency, Griffel borrows Thomas Bauer’s conception of ambiguity and applies it to authors of the twelfth century

³ See Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed, *Knowledge and Felicity of the Soul in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Dissertation, Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018), 126-27.

⁴ This is because: were God’s essence to be equal to His existence, then every concomitant (*lāzim*) of His essence – among which is His eternity – would also occur to every other existent, as every other existent participates in God’s existence by simply existing. This would entail that every other existent is eternal. However, this is invalid. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Arba‘in fi uṣūl al-dīn*, edited by Aḥmad Ḥujājī al-Saqā‘ (Cairo: Maktabat al-kuliyāt al-azhariyya, 1986), pp. 147-48. See also, Yasin Ceylan, *Theology and Tafīr in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh), pp. 128-29; Toby Mayer, “Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Critique of Ibn Sīnā’s Argument for the Unity of God in the *Iṣārāt*, and Naṣīr ad-Dīn at-Ṭūsī’s Defence”, in *After Avicenna: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group*, edited by D. C. Reisman and A. H. Al-Rahim (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 199-218, 208-09.

contending that scholars experienced a “crisis of ambiguity”, as they could not decide whether they should follow Avicenna’s approach or al-Ghazālī’s. Thus, they fashioned “two different discourses”, both of which ought to be mastered (as for example al-Rāzī did).

Although Griffel is right that al-Rāzī had written two types of books with incongruent teachings, an exception to the twofold perspective might be the puzzling nature of al-Rāzī’s late work *The Exalted Requirements in the Divine Knowledge* (*al-Maṭālib al-‘āliyya mina al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*, hereafter, *Maṭālib*), which does not escape Griffel’s attention. This book cannot be easily classified as a work of *ḥikma*, as Griffel observes, because al-Rāzī concedes of revelation as evidence to undergird his views in many cases, while it cannot also be classified as a *kalām* work either, because al-Rāzī articulates views in psychology and prophecy, for instance, which go against Ash‘arite theology. Accordingly, Griffel raises the hypothesis that “Maybe this is the book [i.e., *Maṭālib*] in which al-Rāzī wished to put down his final assessment of those subjects that are disputed between *ḥikma* and *kalām*” (p. 546). To my mind and substantiating Griffel’s hypothesis, this is conspicuous, at the very least, in the case of psychology. Since indeed, al-Rāzī does outline his final evaluation on this subject in *Maṭālib*, after he was wavering between his *kalām* and *ḥikma* works concerning the quiddity of the human soul for instance. Thus, “ambiguity” borrowed from Bauer to describe the hesitation between positions, is unnecessary or is overcome by al-Rāzī who eventually asserts his final opinion in a work he authored late in his life.

The third chapter explores the methods of philosophical books in the twelfth century. Griffel holds that, Abū al-Barakat’s method of *Careful Consideration* (*i‘tibār*) – which considers an exhaustive list of relevant positions and ultimately selects the most compelling – plays a substantive role in the development of new philosophical methods in post-classical period. Griffel highlights that this method paves the way for al-Rāzī’s approach both of *apprehension* (*taḥṣīl*) and of *probing and dividing* (*sabr wa-taqṣīm*). These methods, which Griffel calls “dialectical”, are significant since they could replace demonstrations (*barāhīn*) – particularly after al-Ghazālī’s attack – at least for authors such as al-Rāzī who are occasionally unable to provide a demonstration, in which case, a set of less convincing arguments (which usually called “compelling proofs” *dalā‘il iqnā‘iyya*) might still be enough for determining a firm position.

Without doubt, Griffel’s extensive study is an inspiring and thought-provoking contribution to our understanding of the post-classical era. His careful analysis and contextualization of the corpus of authors who were active in the sixth/twelfth century, especially of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Abū al-Barakāt, make a robust case of our reconceptualization of Islamic philosophy in general, and for reinterpreting philosophy as a discourse developing within a certain tradition in particular. However, we still need to reconsider the agenda or the motivation which underlies philosophy as a specific discourse, vis-à-vis the classical-pedantic understanding of philosophy as a pure rational and universal activity. In other words, were “philosophy” to be motivated by defending a specific tradition – as it might be argued in the case of al-Rāzī’s epistemology – then its vindication as a philosophy, in the strictest sense of the word, shall be questioned.