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Post-Classical Islamic Philosophy – A Contradiction in Terms?

Jari Kaukua*

Abstract: This paper engages critically with Dimitri Gutas' recent characterization of post-classical Islamic philosophy and theology as a form of parafilosophy or intellectual activity that merely simulates philosophy. I argue that this view arises from a misguided understanding of the concept of philosophy that should provide the standard for its historiography. In order to avoid a number of problematic consequences, such as gaps in historical continuity or a disconnection from what we understand by philosophy today, we must take our cue from a sufficiently uncontroversial contemporary concept of philosophy instead of any particular historical concept, such as the Peripatetic amalgam of metaphysics, theory of science, and the empirical sciences. Such a strategy provides a sound basis for the inclusion of post-classical thinkers, as well as many classical thinkers who are not falāsifa, in the history of Islamic philosophy without vicious circularity or loss of a normative concept of philosophy

Keywords: Concept of philosophy, Dimitri Gutas, historiography of Islamic philosophy, parafilosophy.

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Most enterprising historians of philosophy will occasionally ponder the question of what counts as philosophy in their chosen contexts and what, by contrast, belongs to the more general narrative of the intellectual historian. This is no doubt because the concept of philosophy, both in philosophical practice and in its historiographical use, is inherently normative, even if determining its central virtues will most likely be a matter of some controversy as soon as more than one scholar is involved. Although the question of which historical authors and works count as philosophy is valid more generally, it is particularly pertinent for the historiography of Islamic philosophy,¹ in part because of the relative immaturity of the field but also because in our context, the Arabic equivalent of the Greek term *philosophia* singles out a specific tradition of thinkers. Consequently, one popular approach has been to qualify as philosophy only the work of those authors who expressly identified themselves as proponents of the translated Greek tradition, the *falāsifa*.² Such an approach may seem historiographically motivated, but bearing in mind the normative nature of the concept of philosophy, identifying an appropriation of the name of philosophy with the sole prerogative to philosophical activity is not entirely unproblematic. In a situation where *falāsifa* are rivals in a joint debate with the *mutakallimūn*, this identification means that we tacitly adopt the bias of the appropriators of the title and have decided in advance, without proper jurisdiction as it were, which of the parties in the debate belong to our story. Moreover, as a preliminary judgment concerning the entire context, such a choice of focus risks distorting our understanding of the work of the *falāsifa* themselves. Can we fully understand their thought without also studying their rivals? If not, then what do we call the debate both parties were engaged in?

The problem is exacerbated when we come to the post-classical period in which the line of demarcation between *falāsifa* and *mutakallimūn* becomes all but blurred. Since the mid-nineteenth century until quite recently, the prominent narrative in the West was to see this blurring of boundaries as a sign of the atrophy

- 1 When I use the term 'Islamic philosophy' in what follows, I only intend the philosophical thinking practiced in a cultural context decisively determined by Islam. Thus, the term is shorthand for what Peter Adamson, for instance, calls 'philosophy in the Islamic world.'
- 2 As a recent example of this trend, Ulrich Rudolph ("Einleitung," in Ulrich Rudolph (ed.), *Philosophie in der islamischen Welt 1: 8.-10. Jahrhundert* [Schwabe: Basel, 2012]: XXIX-XXXI) rules out the theology of the formative and classical periods largely because it stands in a combative position to *falsafa* (although Rudolph's first reason for excluding theology is distinct) – and this is despite a preceding argument (XXIV-XXV) for an inclusive concept of philosophy in the historiography of philosophy.

of philosophy.³ During the past three decades or so, increasing research into the post-classical period has undermined this view by asking whether we should not read at least some post-classical theologians as well theoretically oriented Sufi authors as genuine philosophers, albeit ones who walk under different banners and sometimes sport conceptual vocabularies that are radically at odds with those of the Peripatetic *falāsifa*. In a recent polemical paper, however, Dimitri Gutas questions this emerging mainstream in favor of what seems like a new, historically conscientious variation on the traditional narrative.⁴ Since the argument comes from one of the most prominent authorities in the field, it has already elicited a great deal of interest in the scholarly community – to put it mildly. What is more, as the opinion of an eminent expert, it no doubt has the potency of consolidating the traditional view, not only among experts in neighboring disciplines but among the larger reading public as well.

Make no mistake, I take it as obvious that Gutas' paper serves no political agenda. On the contrary, it emerges from an objective most historians would recognize as a necessary condition of their discipline, namely the attempt to avoid anachronistic projections of contemporary beliefs onto historical authors. In this case, however, I believe that the caution has highly undesirable consequences that extend far beyond the confines of the historiography of philosophy in the Islamic world and that few historians of philosophy are likely to accept. Because I find this inherent tension between noble objectives and absurd consequences potentially illuminating, I would like to use Gutas' paper as a point of departure for some methodological reflections on the historiography of post-classical Islamic philosophy and, to some extent, on the historiography of philosophy in general. My aim is to argue that these problematic consequences arise not so much from the historical material as from the historically grounded concept of philosophy that Gutas adopts as the standard through which he evaluates that material. In other words, I will focus on the question of where historiographers of philosophy should take their cue when demarcating the scope of their discipline: What is the philosophy that we have set out to study, and whose concept of philosophy should we take as our guide?

3 This view is commonly traced back to Ernest Renan's *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (Durand: Paris, 1853).

4 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. by Abdelkader Al Ghouz (V & R Unipress and Bonn University Press: Göttingen, 2018): 13–65.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I would like to emphasize that my contribution is little more than a reflection on a methodological question that I take to be presently crucial to our field; I have no illusions of making a substantial historiographical case here. It is true that the proper way to address Gutas' argument is to sustain the rigorous investigation of the post-classical debates and to show that much in them does amount to genuine philosophy. On its own, my paper is bound to remain – to borrow the phrase of my perspicacious reviewer – a kind of “armchair philosophy.” My only hope is that these cozy reflections prove of some use for future work in the field.

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In Gutas' diagnosis, the recent hype over post-classical Islamic philosophy is largely undeserved for it is mainly due to the historians' application of an inadequate notion of philosophy:

For us moderns (... leaving aside the professors of philosophy – *not* the historians of philosophy – in academic departments today), philosophy is a fuzzy concept, basically meaning deep thoughts about life and the world in general, and at best including ethics of a non-religious character. For the ancient and medieval philosophers, though, ... philosophy was something quite concrete: it meant all the rational sciences, so basically what we broadly term science nowadays. ... [O]nce we stop using the (for us) fuzzy word “philosophy” we can acquire a better tool with which to gauge what Avicenna as well as his predecessors and successors were doing.⁵

As a corrective move, Gutas proclaims, “[o]ur investigation is ... the history of *science*, as understood by the medieval thinkers themselves ..., and not by us and our categories and definitions.”⁶ As a proper science, philosophy in this mediaeval sense has to bear three characteristics: it must be “(a) open-ended and rational inquiry into reality ...; (b) an investigation and explanation of first principles and causes; and (c) a continuous discussion and re-evaluation of the methods used in the inquiry both by oneself and by others.”⁷

For Gutas, the Islamic development of this amalgamation of philosophy and science reaches its culmination in the work of Avicenna, after whom everything

5 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 14–15.

6 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 15.

7 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 16.

goes downhill.⁸ He presents three historical “steps” that led to this decline, the first two of which concern substantive topics of research that I cannot fully address in the confines of this paper. Let us, however, make a couple of general remarks.

The first step is the endorsement of supra-rational types and methods of knowledge by such important twelfth-century CE thinkers as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī or Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī. The aim of this move is to make the claims of its maker immune to reasoned critique, and it is clear that were such a strategy to have become prevalent, it would have been prone to undermine any culture of rational discussion and debate that might have prospered hitherto. Ghazzālī is also the culprit for the second downhill step, namely, his “criminalization of heterodox thought” by famously labelling the *falāsifa*’s views concerning the eternity of the world, God’s knowledge of particular things, and the resurrection of the soul, as unbelief (*kufr*), and consequently philosophy as a form of apostasy that deserves capital punishment.⁹ Obviously, the proliferation of such maneuvers would be counterproductive to the development of critical philosophy.

When it comes to the first step, I believe the concern would be legitimate, if it were shown, first, that the reference to the supposed supra-rational modes of knowledge amounts to a flat denial of rational inquiry and argumentation, and second, that endorsing such knowledge really did become pervasive in the post-classical period. However, I do not believe that the present state of research yields sufficient evidence on either count. On the contrary, as Alexander Treiger has shown for Ghazzālī, the use of terms like ‘taste’ (*dhawq*), ‘revelation’ (*kashf*), or ‘immediate experience’ (*mushāhada*) can be interpreted as an attempt to appropriate (or naturalize) elements of an Avicennian theory of knowledge.¹⁰ This change of terminology was undoubtedly motivated by religious concerns but, as

8 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 26–30. The ensuing account of the post-Avicennian development stands in striking contrast to Gutas’ influential earlier paper, “The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy: 1000 – ca. 1350,” in *Avicenna and His Heritage*, ed. by Jules Janssens and Daniël De Smet (Leuven University Press: Leuven, 1999): 81–97.

9 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 30–35. For *takfir* in Ghazzālī’s time and Ghazzālī’s novel use of it, see Frank Griffel, *Toleranz und Apostasie im Islam: Die Entwicklung zu al-Ġazālī’s Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen* (Brill: Leiden, 2000), 74–82, 92–99; and *idem*, “Toleration and Exclusion: al-Shāfi’i and al-Ghazālī on the Treatment of Apostates,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 64 (2001): 339–354.

10 Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011). Gutas notes this tendency in Ghazzālī, but he dismisses it as “replacing scientific terminology with vague concepts that have no specific referents,” and are designed for “only rhetorical effect” (Gutas, “Avicenna and after,” 30, fn. 38).

such, it does not amount to a fundamentally different approach in the epistemology conveyed by the new terms. Similarly, more research is required to settle whether such seemingly mystical terms were employed as a means of speaking about the experiential or phenomenal foundations of knowledge. For instance, upon close inspection, much of the forbidding vocabulary of Suhrawardī's Illuminism is motivated by a reasoned departure from the Avicennian framework, and his appeal to *dhawq* or *kashf* as its source does not have to mean anything more than that he came up with some of the central ideas by himself.¹¹ Thus, the jury is very much out when it comes to the questions of how one should interpret the emergence of the supra-rational modes of knowledge, as well as to what extent such modes of knowledge actually pervaded post-classical Islamic intellectual culture.

The second step does admittedly appear as an ignoble move from Ghazzālī. However, it is an entirely different question whether he thereby inaugurates a trend of *takfīr* in philosophically inclined post-classical theology and whether his *fatwā* on the matter was consistently appealed to in theoretical debates. I do not think sufficient evidence presently exists for this. The traditional story, of course, is that Ghazzālī's blow was fatal, but this is precisely the claim that recent research into the post-classical texts has set under serious doubt.

So much for the substantive reasons for the corruption of philosophy after Avicenna. By contrast, the third step Gutas pins down is a sweeping generalization about the nature of the entire post-Avicennian intellectual culture; according to Gutas, during this period "the Avicennan corpus of school science ... was reformulated, re-packaged, and regurgitated in a new genre of writing" that was "neither science/philosophy nor the traditional theology/*kalām*."¹² Although he recognizes the sophistication of the authors in this new genre, Gutas does not consider their work to merit the congratulatory title of philosophy:

11 Notice also that in the introduction to the *Hikmat al-ishrāq* (ed. by John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai [Brigham Young University Press: Provo, 1999], *muqaddama*, §5, 3), which provides Gutas' central evidence, Suhrawardī's ideal philosopher is one that combines this capacity to have ideas by means of *dhawq* with their scrutiny by means of reasoned investigation (*balḥth*). Moreover, his main works are extremely rich in such investigations of a broad range of problems inherent to Avicennian philosophy. For some recent studies of this side of his *œuvre*, see Hanif Beidokhti, "Suhrawardī on Division of Aristotelian Categories," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. by Al Ghouz: 375–406; Fedor Benevich, "A Rebellion against Avicenna? Suhrawardī and Abū l-Barakāt on 'Platonic Forms' and 'Lords of Species'," *Ishraq* 9 (2019): 23–53; *idem*, "Individuation and Identity in Islamic Philosophy after Avicenna: Bahmanyār and Suhrawardī," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, forthcoming; and Jari Kaukua, "I *tibārī* Concepts in Suhrawardī: The Case of Substance," *Oriens* 48 (2020): 40–66.

12 Gutas, "Avicenna and After," 35–36.

[I]t was neither [theology nor] philosophy, that is, science ..., in that it violated all the principles of what historically had meant to do science, which was the open-ended rational investigation of all reality. It was not open-ended, in that it strove to argue for one pre-determined thesis, the Islamic mythological narrative; it was not completely rational, in that it admitted selectively supra-rational modes of acquisition of knowledge; and it was not an investigation of all reality in that it narrowed the discussion to certain subjects, those of interest to religious doctrine Accordingly, it cannot be called “philosophical theology,” since it was neither. The expression “philosophical theology,” whatever rhetorical value it might have in granting the discipline enhanced status because of the very presence of the valorized word “philosophy” in it, does so merely because of the fuzzy and inchoate notion of philosophy that we moderns have as something intellectually profound For this reason I suggest that we call this sort of clandestine theologizing that *simulates* and presents itself as philosophy “paraphilosophy,” and understand the term to mean, “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.”¹³

As a culturally safe way of showing one’s learnedness, paraphilosophy becomes an empty game of intricate conceptual showmanship. For centuries, its proponents were nevertheless capable of scoring funding for their “research” as well as adopting esteemed roles as members of the administrative and educational elite of their societies. The recognition gained from abiding by the rulebook of orthodoxy led to an intellectual stagnation, albeit a sophisticated one, as a result of which scholars at the tail end of the nineteenth century would still debate the same abstruse metaphysical questions as the first post-Avicennian thinkers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE.¹⁴

In the end, Gutas’ critique of the recent rehabilitation of the post-classical paraphilosophical culture as genuine philosophy is twofold. First, our concept of post-classical philosophy is invalid because it attributes to post-classical authors historically grounded philosophical virtues that they evidently lacked. Second, we are thereby fooled by the disingenuity of the post-classical authors whose work “simulates and presents itself as philosophy” in order to substitute itself for philosophy proper. These two points are interrelated in the sense that the truth of the second depends on the truth of the first: you can fool another person by simulating an activity only if what you actually do fails to *be* a genuine instantiation of that activity.

13 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 37.

14 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 57–60.

Obviously, the truth of the first claim hinges on what one adopts as the normative concept of philosophy. It therefore traces back to Gutas' general thesis that, as historians of philosophy, we must not take our cue from any modern notion of philosophy but qualify as philosophy only the sort of amalgam of science and philosophy that the Peripatetic tradition embodied. If one accepts this general thesis, Gutas' conclusion inevitably follows. This is not surprising, given that we have then established the criteria of philosophy based on an intellectual current from which many of the theologically inclined post-classical authors expressly distanced themselves because they found many of its central doctrines (such as the eternity of the world or the idea of a Creator who is necessitated to create by His own essence) deeply problematic. However, the gains of such a methodological choice come at the cost of two considerable casualties.

The first victim of such an exclusive concept of philosophy will be the historiography of philosophy as a discipline with at least a moderate degree of disciplinary unity. If, as historians of philosophy, we anchor our concept of philosophy to the Peripatetic system, there will no longer be one historiography of philosophy to which we can contribute together with our colleagues working in mediaeval Latin and early modern philosophy.¹⁵ At best, we may try to join with those who work with sufficiently strong amalgams of science and philosophy in an effort to appropriate the title of history of philosophy, leaving the others to do whatever they like as long as they agree to call it something different. I take it as obvious that not very many colleagues would willingly endorse such a prospect. Moreover, this would leave yawning gaps in the historical narrative of philosophy proper, indeed so big as to threaten the intelligibility of its development. We would have to let the generalist intellectual historian explain to us how and why an amalgam of philosophy and science re-emerges after so many centuries of dark Middle Ages during which the foundational doctrines of religion were not subjected to critical scrutiny. For the historiography of philosophy, understood as an investigation into the historical development internal to a narrowly defined tradition of research and argumentation, those centuries would remain foreign and impenetrable territory.

A related problem concerns the fact that the marriage of philosophy and science is itself subject to historical change. This raises the question of whether any

15 Gutas explicitly dismisses mediaeval philosophy, but I believe his concept of philosophy would also rule out many prominent early modern thinkers, such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and even Locke, given their unwavering commitment to theism.

amalgam deserves the title of philosophy, or whether only the sort of epistemological optimism characteristic of the Peripatetic system qualifies. For instance, Lockean empiricism with its explicit fallibilism and more modest, even pessimistic, attitude toward our access to the foundational make-up of reality would be ruled out on the latter basis.¹⁶ If early modern representatives of such epistemic pessimism are allowed into the canon, on what grounds do we exclude such post-classical Islamic critics of Avicennian theory of science as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī? Furthermore, early modern philosophy was more closely aligned with the science of its day than the most naturalistically inclined philosophies of today; as Margaret Dauler Wilson has shown, for thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the allegedly foundational level of physical reality overlapped with our perceptions in a way that is no longer the case.¹⁷ In addition to this, the methodological prevalence of mathematical modelling in contemporary physics is prone to distance philosophical thinking, based as it is on concepts, from the cutting edge of scientific research. As a result, philosophical research in metaphysics may seem condemned to either stay aloof from the hard sciences or wrestle with second-order questions, such as the debate concerning whether the mathematical models are a necessary concomitant of our epistemic limitations at grasping physical reality or capable of mirroring the network of relations that is constitutive of that very reality.¹⁸

This brings us to the second casualty. If the specific type of intimate and epistemically optimistic connection to science embodied in the Peripatetic tradition is required of philosophy, most of contemporary philosophy, even in the narrow sense of the mainstream of analytic philosophy that Gutas recognizes, no longer qualifies. It is a bare fact that philosophers today, as in the past, argue from a variety of background assumptions that they may never subject to open-ended scrutiny, regardless of whether these assumptions are of religious, political, or scientific origin. Importantly, these background assumptions are not commonly thought to

16 For an argument on this crucial difference of Avicennian and Lockean empiricism, see Jari Kaukua, "Avicenna's Outsourced Rationalism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 58:2 (2020): 215–240.

17 Margaret Dauler Wilson, "History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of the Sensible Qualities," in *eadem, Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1999).

18 For an illuminating comparison of the latter debate, between epistemic and ontic structural realism, to the early modern difference between Descartes and Newton, see Mary Domski, "Mediating between Past and Present: Descartes, Newton, and Contemporary Structural Realism," in *Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Mogens Lærke, Justin E. H. Smith, and Eric Schliesser (Oxford University Press: New York, 2013).

preclude them from participating in a joint debate or even from endorsing a shared set of criteria, according to which success in that debate is evaluated. However, if we follow Gutas' requirements for philosophy, this allegedly shared set of criteria would be mere illusion, or worse, a matter of dissimulation. Many philosophers today would either be fundamentally mistaken about their profession or just pretending to go through the motions of proper philosophical research.

Note that I do not mean to deny that closed communities exist in contemporary philosophy – they obviously do – or that all philosophers are engaged in a genuine conversation with everyone else. My point is that the problematic consequence would follow even for the narrower communities of academic philosophy, such as those of contemporary analytic metaphysicians, epistemologists, or philosophers of mind. For instance, think about the recently reinvigorated debate between the endorsers and deniers of essentialism: how likely is it that anyone among them will come up with a decisive argument for one view rather than another, or even for a middle position that would settle the issue in a way satisfactory to both parties, allowing them to move on to the next problem? I would even venture to suggest that fundamental doctrinal preferences of this kind are not always, perhaps not even in most cases, the result of research or argumentation. Instead, they are starting points that guide the research and are rearticulated and refined in the process. The same holds here for the historical context of Islamic philosophy, for I believe there is no reason to assume that Avicenna himself would have been prepared to yield his essentialism, his belief in the world's eternity, or his monotheism, in light of any critical argument. If anything, it seems more likely that he would have stubbornly kept refining his own arguments and undermining those of his opponent. Even so, we do not think such obstinacy disqualifies him from being a philosopher; his ingenuity just lies in what he does within the framework of those unquestioned background doctrines.

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Prompted by these undesirable consequences, I claim that the historian of philosophy *must* work with a broader concept of philosophy than any particular historical concept with partisan biases. What is more, I claim that in so doing, she cannot but take her cue from a concept of philosophy prevalent in her own time. I hasten to add, however, that we are not left with only the two alternatives of the Peripatetic amalgam and the rather uncharitable caricature of a “fuzzy” notion of philosophy, designed to cover everything from self-help manuals to various musings over “deep problems.” To mention just one of the many intermediate

possibilities, we can anchor our concept of philosophy in the intellectual practices that we consider paradigmatically philosophical in our own time and exclude all such popular abuses of the term ‘philosophy.’ In an argument against a purely historicist approach to philosophy, Hans-Johann Glock has made the cogent heuristic definition of philosophy as an intellectual pursuit concentrated on “*problems* of a peculiar kind,” such as the possibility of knowledge, the mind-body relation, or the existence of universal moral values.¹⁹ If you excuse the pun, such an approach is by no means unproblematic,²⁰ not least because the peculiarity of those problems is equally difficult to pin down as philosophy itself – which is not a surprise given that they are quintessentially *philosophical* problems. However, Glock’s attempt provides a methodological model to follow: we can narrow down our concept of philosophy by means of a quasi-ostensive reference to a sufficiently broad range of unproblematic contemporary cases, in which uncontroversially philosophical questions are investigated, tested, and debated with uncontroversially philosophical methods.

Depending on how we employ this heuristic model, we will end up with a more or less normative concept of philosophy, which will always exclude certain voices in the historical contexts of debate or certain aspects of historical bodies of work as unphilosophical. For instance, if we approach an author like Suhrawardī as a philosopher, our adopted concept of philosophy may lead us to downplay certain aspects in his texts, such as the baroque references to a perennial tradition of mystical philosophy, and highlight by contrast the abundant passages, indeed entire works, in which he engages with unproblematically philosophical questions by way of systematic argument. This may result in a partial view, but partiality does not automatically signal falsity; such selective sifting of historical material is constitutive to the historiography of philosophy and distinguishes it from general intellectual history. Nor does this mean that our endeavor is viciously circular and only allows us to find imperfect images of ourselves in foreign historical contexts. That tensions between our contemporary concept of philosophy and the foreign appendices to its historical instantiations give rise to interesting and often critical comparative questions concerning the philosophical practice of our own time is

19 Hans-Johann Glock, “Analytic Philosophy and History: A Mismatch?” *Mind* 468 (2008), 872–873.

20 For some of the problems, as well as the emergence of such a conception in eighteenth- and nineteenth century German historiography of philosophy, see Leo Catana, “Philosophical Problems in the History of Philosophy: What Are They?” in *Philosophy and Its History*, ed. by Lærke, Smith, and Schliesser: 115–133.

not unusual. Here, one naturally thinks of Hellenistic philosophy as reconstructed by Pierre Hadot and Martha Nussbaum,²¹ or indeed the Peripatetic conception of philosophy as a system of all sciences.

Regardless of which criteria we adopt, however, we will always be left with some amount of fuzziness, for we have to recognize the fact that, even in this more rigorous sense, philosophy is not definable by means of any single set of background assumptions, any uniform attitude towards scientific research, or even any universal agreement about valid means of argument.²² Statistical tendencies of different kinds will certainly emerge among philosophers, but there will also be genuine conflicts, with individual thinkers belonging to the majority with respect to one standard but to the minority with respect to another. Importantly, one such dividing line will be the philosophers' attitude toward religion (or other similar ideologies) – think about David Lewis and Alvin Plantinga, for example. The moral we historians of Islamic philosophy should draw from this is that an unwavering commitment to religion is not a sufficient reason to exclude an author from our scope of interest as long as we consider it an improper policy in our own time.

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If we find the strict historical criteria for philosophy objectionable, Gutas' second point about the disingenuity of post-classical Islamic philosophers is no longer a given conclusion. Of course, this is also insufficient to falsify the claim – the post-classical authors could be dissimulating philosophy also in the more liberal sense – but given that such dissimulation is a considerably more complex literary agenda than sincere participation in a debate, I think it does put the burden of proof on the one making this claim. To be fair, Gutas does present ample corroborative material, five pieces of evidence as far as I can see. However, I also believe that it is a fair assessment to say that this evidence is largely circumstantial and far from conclusive. The first in the series is Averroes' statement that Ghazzālī's confusion

21 Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Gallimard: Paris, 1995); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1996).

22 Cf. the perspicacious points raised by Rüdiger Arnzen, "Philosophy in the Islamic World and the Debates on the Aims and Methods of Philosophical Historiography: Some Remarks on the State of the Art," in *Studying Arabic Philosophy: Meaning, Limits and Challenges of a Modern Discipline*, ed. by Jean-Baptiste Brenet and Olga L. Lizzini (Librairie philosophique J. Vrin: Paris, 2019): 80–82. Moreover, even if it were possible to define 'philosophy' in a strict manner, such a definition would not be particularly useful for the *historian* of philosophy, for like the historicist concept of philosophy, it would be too exclusive.

regarding the division of labor between *kalām* and *falsafa* has failed to further the cause of either, instead only increasing confusion among the general populace.²³ But Averroes' statement is hardly a neutral observation, of course, for his central objective here is to defend the philosophical doctrines Ghazzālī had attacked.²⁴ As historians of philosophy, we should thus not take his word for a reliable description of his opponent's intention, let alone a correct assessment of the philosophical validity and depth of his argument. The ignobility of his *fatwā* notwithstanding, Ghazzālī's critique of the Peripatetics is philosophically quite perspicacious, as many scholars have pointed out.

Gutas then introduces Ibn Khaldūn's unfavorable contemporaneous assessment of post-classical *kalām*; according to Ibn Khaldūn, the misguided philosophical aspirations of later Ash'arite theologians have rendered their efforts invalid as either philosophy or theology, the latter conceived in its classical sense of a defense of Sunnism.²⁵ Once we read this statement in the larger context of Ibn Khaldūn's chapter on *kalām*, however, it appears less as a devaluation of paraphilosophy than as a condemnation of theoretical thinking as an end unto itself. The chapter begins with the blunt claim that the human intellect cannot penetrate the causal makeup of God's creation, and that vain attempts at this are potentially harmful. Instead of pursuing theoretical knowledge, we should concentrate in cultivating faith (*īmān*) as a kind of embodied interiorization of the central principles of Islam. Theology, in the sense exemplified by Ash'arī and his early followers, must step in as a corrective move when misguided conceptions about those principles threaten the stability of the community, but once this task is accomplished, theological speculation serves no further purpose. The error inaugurated by Ghazzālī and repeated by the subsequent generations of theologians is engaging in a debate with philosophers concerning questions of causal explanation that are in principle inaccessible to us.²⁶ Importantly, Ibn Khaldūn's point is *not* to say that in the proper division of labor, matters of this sort belong to the philosophers, for he shows even less sympathy

23 Gutas, "Avicenna and After," 39. The reference is to Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, ed. by Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jabāri (Markaz dirāsāt al-waḥda al-'arabiyya: Beirut, 1997), II.54, 113 (at the time of writing, I lacked access to the 'Emāra edition used by Gutas).

24 Gutas recognizes this, but he says that Averroes' "imputation of dishonest motivations to al-Ghazzālī ... is not unfounded and worth keeping in mind" ("Avicenna and After," 39).

25 Gutas, "Avicenna and After," 39–41.

26 Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, tr. by Franz Rosenthal (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1986), three volumes, VI.14, III.34–55.

to their intellectual project.²⁷ Thus, instead of the bastard form of paraphilosophy, he appears to me to condemn philosophical investigation in all its forms. For him, the post-classical theologians are engaged in the same perversion as the *falāsifa*.

As a third piece of evidence, Gutas refers to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī’s *Durra al-fākhira*, written at the request of Sultan Meḥmed II (r. 1451–81) as an epitome of the theological positions of the philosophers, the theologians, and the theoretically oriented Sufis concerning God’s existence, unity, attributes, and the creation of the world. Jāmī concludes his treatise by juxtaposing the different views without any attempt at deciding between them or evaluating their respective superiority. For Gutas, this is a sign of the intellectual infertility of the entire epoch: we are dealing with a mere dissimulation of genuine research that lacks the required standards for a reliable evaluation of the truth of a theory. I cannot engage in a proper discussion of Jāmī here, but let me just point out a more charitable interpretation of his conclusion. If we bear in mind the function of the treatise, namely to meet a specific request by an educated layman, Jāmī’s method of procedure seems perfectly apposite: in the case of saturated questions like the ones posed by the Sultan, a conscientious epitomist will present the different views together with their best arguments. Whether we should take this as a sign of a broader decline of philosophy is an entirely different question. By way of comparison, think of how you would approach the task of writing an introductory volume on, say, the mind-body problem today.²⁸ I take it that most would find a balanced introduction to consist of a charitable reconstruction of the debate from the point of view of the most important theoretical alternatives, coupled with the conclusion that despite all the intellectual wrestling, the question remains unsolved and each of the parties is capable of cashing out some but not all of the relevant theoretical virtues. Some of us might want to end with the diagnosis that this shows the bankruptcy of academic philosophy and that financial and intellectual resources should henceforth be directed at proper sciences, but I am sure this would be a more controversial claim. And if this is genuinely controversial, then so is Gutas’ similar claim about Jāmī.

Next, from a period just after Jāmī, Gutas introduces a catalogue of manuscripts by a scholar named ‘Āṭūfi, who acted as librarian to Sultan Bāyezīd

27 Cf. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima* VI.30, III.246–258. Again, Gutas notes that Ibn Khaldūn is not a neutral observer, but he states that “even if [his account] may deceptively appear as not entirely objective in tone, [it] is nevertheless accurate” (“Avicenna and After,” 41).

28 For those disinclined to engage in such an exercise of the imagination, a good example is Jonathan Westphal’s *The Mind-Body Problem* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2016).

II (r. 1481–1512). Among other features of this highly interesting document, we find a distinction between the classes of Islamic philosophy (*ḥikma islāmīya*) and “philosophical philosophy” (*ḥikma falsafīya*), with the former described as philosophy that abides by the standard of *sharī‘a*. For Gutas, this distinction offers “further [...] and prime evidence for the development of the new genre of paraphilosophy in the eastern Islamic lands after Avicenna.”²⁹ I agree that the document, like Gutas’ other pieces of evidence, does witness a division between old-style *kalām*, Peripatetic philosophy, and the new genre that is a cross-pollination of the two. However, while it is important to stay attuned to this categorization, which Gutas himself admits is “fluid,”³⁰ identifying one of the categories with philosophy pure and simple is a foregone conclusion. Even if *ḥikma islāmīya* were a genre founded on unquestionable religious principles, the judgment that the result is philosophy only in name depends on *our* adopted criteria, as I have argued above. In the sense relevant to a historian of philosophy, the philosophical merits of the authors building on those principles must be determined independently.

As a final piece of evidence, Gutas compares Avicenna to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, arguably the most critical of his commentators whom scholars endorsing the concept of post-classical philosophy often trumpet as its prime representative. As far as I can see, there are three philosophically interesting differences due to which Avicenna emerges as a philosopher but Rāzī as a paraphilosopher. First, unlike Rāzī, Avicenna conducted open-ended research and “had no pre-determined ... doctrine to which he tried to make Aristotle fit.”³¹ Second, Rāzī meddled with Avicennian modal logic in order to distinguish regularity (what has always been the case) from necessity (what must be the case).³² Third, Rāzī showed a relative lack of interest in special sciences, such as zoology or botany, or applied sciences, like medicine, and this is because he focused on the topics discussed in Avicenna’s *Ishārāt* – a sign of the emergence of a scholastic phase of science in which paraphilosophy has replaced scientific and philosophical research.³³

29 Gutas, “Avicenna and after,” 44.

30 Dimitri Gutas, “Philosophical Manuscripts: Two Alternative Philosophies,” in *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3–1503/4)*, ed. by Gülru Necipoğlu, Cemal Kafadar, and Cornell H. Fleischer (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2019): 907–933, especially 909–10.

31 Gutas, “Avicenna and after,” 45, fn. 73.

32 Gutas, “Avicenna and after,” 45, fn. 74.

33 Gutas, “Avicenna and after,” 45–46.

When it comes to the first question, I am not convinced that the comparison is entirely fair. While I recognize that the argument is awkwardly *e silentio*, I dare say that I have no reason to believe any evidence would have incited Avicenna to genuinely question such foundational principles as the existence of one God who is the complete cause of the world, which is certainly a pre-determined doctrine to which Aristotle could only be fitted with considerable difficulty. On the other hand, our perception of dogmatism is partly a matter of perspective: why should Rāzī's preparedness to doubt the foundations of Aristotelian doctrine, such as its robust essentialism, be a mark of a non-philosophical or anti-scientific attitude? If it is, then the protagonists of the late mediaeval and early modern scientific revolution in Europe are destined to the same niche as Rāzī. The second question concerning modal logic is largely similar. For some reason, Hume's denial that regularity entails necessity is commonly perceived as a philosophically interesting remark worthy of our serious attention, even if we were disinclined to agree with him. Why should we judge Rāzī's modal logical revisions to have been mere dissimulation? In this connection, it might be worth noting that the lack of doctrinal commitment Gutas spotted in Jāmī also holds of many post-classical authors of arguably superior acumen, such as Rāzī. This may seem foreign to a modern reader and may well be a unique aspect of post-classical philosophical writing, but the meaning and consequences of such a non-committed stance are not unambiguous. In particular, it seems at odds with the judgment that an unquestioning endorsement of the Islamic dogma stilted Rāzī's philosophical thought. On the contrary, freedom from doctrinal commitment opened him the possibility of a non-partisan investigation of a broad range of conceptual possibilities, which sometimes border on the absurd, often entail radically heterodox ideas about God and His relation to the world, and frequently testify to an exceptional combination of philosophical imagination and acuity.

The third point about the post-classical waning of interest in the special sciences is a substantive question, to the complexity of which I cannot do justice here. Suffice to say that I find the evidence insufficient for saying that the new structure of philosophical encyclopedias introduced by Rāzī was incapable of integrating these sciences.³⁴ Moreover, a properly grounded judgment on this matter requires

34 Indeed Heidrun Eichner, on whose pioneering study of the structuring principles of post-classical philosophical works Gutas relies here, explicitly says that these sciences were incorporated, albeit only in a rudimentary fashion (*The Post-Avicennian Philosophical Tradition and Islamic Orthodoxy: Philosophical and Theological summae in Context*, Habilitationsschrift, Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle, 2009, 420). At best, this is evidence of a lack of interest in, not of a principled exclusion of, the empirical sciences.

a thorough investigation into the commentaries and marginal notes based on these works, as well as research into other literary genres. Finally, even if interest in the sciences did wane in the post-classical period, the decline of *philosophy* must be shown independently. We do not expect philosophers to be jacks-of-all-trades today, and we should grant the historical authors the same liberty to specialize.

Parallel to the inconclusive nature of the positive evidence for paraphilosophy, Gutas all but disregards the substantial philosophical discussions that have already been noted in the scholarship, such as the post-Avicennian metaphysical debates concerning causation³⁵ or the metaphysical status of the key concepts of Avicennian philosophy (the so called *i'tibārāt*).³⁶ The question concerning the ground of causal explanation is still alive in contemporary metaphysics, and the debate about the fundamentality of essence as opposed to the modal properties or the existence of things has recently been revived in analytic metaphysics.³⁷ On the other hand, the post-classical theologians also engaged with Avicenna's natural philosophy,³⁸ and their critique of his theory of science gave rise to epistemological views much more radically empiricist than any Avicenna had ever entertained.³⁹ If liberation from

Furthermore, there are conflicting studies about the relation between theology and the sciences; cf., for instance, F. Jamil Ragep, "Freeing Astronomy from Philosophy: An Aspect of Islamic Influence on Science," *Osiris* 16 (2001): 49–71; and Bilal Ibrahim, "Beyond Atoms and Accidents: Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī and the New Ontology of Postclassical *Kalām*," *Oriens* 48 (2020): 67–122.

- 35 See Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2009): 147–213.
- 36 See Robert Wisnovsky, "Essence and Existence in the Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic East (*Mashriq*): A Sketch," in *The Arabic, Hebrew and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Metaphysics*, ed. by Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (De Gruyter: Berlin, 2012): 27–50; Fedor Benevich, "The Essence-Existence Distinction: Four Elements of the Post-Avicennian Metaphysical Dispute (11-13th Centuries)," *Oriens* 45 (2017): 203–258; and Kaukua, "I'tibārī Concepts."
- 37 References to the discussion concerning causality abound in any textbook of analytic metaphysics. By way of example, two seminal parallels to the debate about the *i'tibārāt* are Kit Fine, "Essence and Modality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994): 1–16; and E. J. Lowe, "Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 62 (2008): 23–48.
- 38 See Peter Adamson, "Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī on Place," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 27 (2017): 205–236; *idem*, "Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī on Void," in *Islamic Philosophy from the 12th to the 14th Century*, ed. by Al Ghouz: 303–320; *idem*, "The Existence of Time in Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī's *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya*," in *The Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Physics and Cosmology*, ed. by Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (De Gruyter: Berlin and Boston, 2018): 65–100; Peter Adamson and Andreas Lammer, "Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī's Platonist Account of the Essence of Time," in *Philosophical Theology in Islam: Later Ash'arism East and West*, ed. by Ayman Shihadeh and Jan Thiele (Brill: Leiden, 2020); and Andreas Lammer, "Time and Mind-Dependence in Sayf al-Din al-Āmidī's *Abkār al-afkār*," in *The Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Reception of Avicenna's Physics and Cosmology*, ed. by Hasse and Bertolacci: 101–162.
- 39 See Bilal Ibrahim, "Fakhr ad-Din al-Rāzī, Ibn al-Hayṭam and Aristotelian Science: Essentialism versus Phenomenalism in Post-Classical Islamic Thought," *Oriens* 41 (2013): 379–431; and Kaukua, "Avicenna's Outsourced Rationalism."

Aristotelian metaphysics can be considered a step of philosophical and scientific interest in early modern Europe, I cannot see why it should necessarily signal decline in the Islamic context. On the contrary, the severance of the strong bond between empirical research and a metaphysical theory with strong epistemological commitments may actually have proved beneficial for the development of the empirical sciences.⁴⁰

The point of these examples is not to anchor the value of Islamic philosophy to the parallels it may have with philosophy in the West. However, if the inclusion of post-classical Islamic philosophy in our general historiography of philosophy depends on our adopted concept of philosophy, its similarities to uncontroversial contemporary cases are significant.

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By way of conclusion, I have argued that Gutas' dire judgment concerning post-classical Islamic philosophy emerges not so much from historical reality as from the standards forced upon that reality. The post-classical development may have been a decline from the point of view of the particular kind of philosophy embodied in the Peripatetic system, but it appears more complex and more variegated once we approach it with a broader concept of philosophy. If we want to do justice to the post-classical thinkers in the minimal sense of applying the same criteria to them as we do to our contemporaries, we must work with a more inclusive concept. Funnily enough, *mutatis mutandis*, many of Gutas' descriptions of paraphilosophy are apt characterizations of contemporary philosophy⁴¹ – perhaps this is why reading post-Avicennian paraphilosophy as philosophy proper seems natural to many of us. Be that as it may, this jocular observation lies on a hermeneutical truism: historiography must take its cue from its own time, and in doing history of philosophy, we can only study the history of what *we* recognize as philosophy. This is not simply “relativist and tautological,”⁴² because our understanding of

40 Cf. F. Jamil Ragep, “Freeing Astronomy from Philosophy.”

41 For instance, it is not difficult to imagine a future historian of philosophy describing the philosophical landscape of early twenty-first century in something like the following terms (Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 48): “This indicates that scholars had the feeling of being able to discuss the taboo subject of the eternity of the world [replace with your favourite topic from contemporary metaphysics], but it also reveals the inconsequential nature of whatever conclusions, negative or positive, were reached, since there seemed to be no discernible criteria for evaluation. The arguments were just arguments, and the step from these conclusions to the position challenging the mythological narrative [replace with ‘naturalism,’ for instance] was not (or was not even intended to be) taken”

42 Gutas, “Avicenna and After,” 38, fn. 57.

what counts as philosophy is subject to revision and critique, including the kind of critique that arises from historiographical work.

Admittedly, all of this does result in a certain vagueness or fuzziness at the very core of our work, but instead of an insurmountable problem, such vagueness constitutes an important source of the life of a human science. In particular, it does not entail giving up the normative aspect of the concept of philosophy, and thereby refraining from a critical discrimination between historical sources. On the contrary, we should heed Gutas' sensible call for a heightened attention to "the intent, epistemic basis, and function" behind the theoretical arguments of our authors⁴³ – this is indispensable for any historian of philosophy who wants to make historically sound sense of the authors she studies. I also think that some of the conceptual tools Gutas introduces, such as the distinction between research science (or philosophy) and school science (or philosophy), may prove very useful for future research of the post-classical material. However, we should exercise caution with the assumptions we load into such concepts, as well as with what we take to be evidence of one or the other. In the foregoing, I have tried to argue that a critical research attitude in philosophy does not necessarily go together with an optimistic epistemological attitude, and that a religious motivation does not necessarily result in counterfeit philosophy. As long as the possibility remains that something similar to the mediaeval and early modern critique of Aristotelianism took place in post-classical Islamic philosophy, we should hesitate to take critique of Avicennian science for a decline of philosophy. Robert Wisnovsky's initial call for a studious and unprejudiced research of the later texts remains a requisite for a fair judgment about their eventual philosophical value.⁴⁴

In all this, it is crucial to recognize that instead of a single intentional framework, the concept of philosophy can and should incorporate a spectrum of possible intentions, presuppositions, and argumentative functions, and should that not be the case, *our* preliminary decision is what has narrowed them down. As historians of philosophy, we need to be able to make sense of both the similarities and the differences, and this requires conceptual tools that are sufficiently sensitive *and* inclusive.⁴⁵

43 Gutas, "Avicenna and After," 38.

44 Robert Wisnovsky, "The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-Classical (ca. 1100– 1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observation," in *Philosophy, Science & Exegesis in Greek, Arabic & Latin Commentaries*, ed. by Peter Adamson, Han Baltussen, and M. W. F. Stone, Institute of Classical Studies: London, 2004: 149–191.

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