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INTRODUCTION



Mind and knowledge of mind in classical Islamic philosophy

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Classical Islamic philosophy has in recent years started to receive the sort of attention that this rich period and tradition in the history of philosophy deserves. The number of English translations is rapidly increasing, and several landmark studies have brought the tradition to a much wider audience than just those trained in Arabic philology and those working in Islamic Studies departments.¹ A consequence of this has been that people working in the field are beginning to approach it in a more philosophically thematic way, and in such a way that its insights look relevant to contemporary research.²

Questions concerning the mind (Ar. *dhihn*), the intellect (Ar. *‘aql*), or the soul (Ar. *nafs*), occupied a central place in the thought of many classical Islamic philosophers. Their inquiries into the nature of mind, its faculties, and its relationship with the body, the world, and God were deeply intertwined with their metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, and ethical concerns. Theories of perception, consciousness, and intentionality were to a large part developed in ‘psychology’; that is, in texts dealing with the general principles of life in all its forms, including the mental functions of human and non-human animals. However, since crucial aspects of these topics, such as belief formation, had a broader epistemological relevance, discussion about them often took place in logical texts. Furthermore, since many

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¹For three recent volumes readily accessible to a broader audience, see Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World*; El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke, *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*; and Taylor and López-Farjeat, *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*.

²For examples of historically grounded research that is also informed by expertise in analytic philosophy, see Azadpour, *Avicenna and Analytic Philosophy*; Benevich, “Avicennian Essentialism”; and Zarepour, *Necessary Existence and Monotheism*.

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classical philosophers were psychological substance dualists, they found the human mind to be in tension with the Aristotelian division of sciences that they endorsed. Insofar as it functions as the principle of life in the human body (i.e. as a soul), it must be discussed in psychology, which is part of natural philosophy. On the other hand, insofar as the human mind is an incorporeal intellect, it ought to be studied in metaphysics along with other incorporeal things. On top of this, various questions stemming from religious concerns, such as the nature of prophecy or of the afterlife, had to be worked out within the same theoretical framework.

Consequently, we should not expect to find a neatly bounded literary niche corresponding to modern philosophy of mind among the works of the Islamic philosophers. On the contrary, studies pertaining to their theories of the mind can and should be conducted on many different fronts. This special issue presents a snapshot of the multifaceted dimensions of the philosophy of mind and related areas as developed by some key thinkers in what Peter Adamson calls ‘the formative period’ of philosophy in the Islamic world, from Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950/1 CE) to Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198 CE), with a particular focus on the towering figure of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037 CE). The issue’s aim is to shed light on the period’s contribution to the broader history of philosophy and its relevance to contemporary debates in the field.

Issues such as the nature of consciousness, the mind–body problem, the role of perception and imagination in cognition, and the nature of the intellect continue to be central topics in contemporary philosophy of mind. Islamic philosophers’ intricate theories of the internal senses, intentionality, and the active intellect can contribute to current debates on those issues. Their views on the immateriality and immortality of the soul offer alternative perspectives to materialist and reductionist accounts of the mind. And their meta-philosophical reflections on thought-experiments, and on the relationship between logic and epistemology on the one hand, and metaphysics, psychology, and theology on the other, provide the contemporary philosopher of mind with rich resources to mine. This is especially the case given recent interest in methodological concerns regarding the relevance of empirical sciences such as neuroscience to the philosophy of mind, and the extrapolation of folk-psychology into what has been called ‘Experimental Philosophy’, and its attendant attention on non-expert philosophical concepts.

The earliest philosopher the issue addresses, al-Fārābī, played a pivotal role in the transmission and development of Greek philosophy in the Islamic world. The methodological question of whether logic had primacy over the other sciences, and especially theology, was clearly one that al-Fārābī grappled with, though there is little consensus on exactly what his position was. The role of the imagination was a particular source of reflection for al-Fārābī here, an issue we see later developed further by Avicenna. In the

volume's first paper, Muhammad Ali Khalidi considers al-Fārābī's views on the acquisition of philosophical concepts – a topic that also occupies contemporary philosophers of mind, especially given the methodological concerns related to the role of non-expert concepts and the rolling out of folk psychology to broader philosophical methodology. Khalidi argues that al-Fārābī took the understanding of novel philosophical or scientific concepts to sometimes depend on the grasp of related concepts from ordinary discourse, that experts rely on these everyday concepts in acquiring the more specialized concepts, and that using the same linguistic terms to denote both concepts can lead to a productive ambiguity that aids in the acquisition of new concepts.

Avicenna, one of the most influential philosophers in the Islamic tradition, made ground-breaking contributions to the philosophy of mind. His monumental works integrate philosophical, scientific, and medical knowledge. Avicenna's theory of the soul, particularly his arguments for its immateriality and immortality, had a profound impact on both Islamic and Western philosophical thought. His seminal use of thought experiments, such as in his famous 'Flying Man', provide us with insightful and standing contributions to methodological reflection, together with contributions to the philosophy of self-consciousness. Continuing the theme of philosophical methodology in the second paper of this issue, Silvia Di Vincenzo considers Avicenna's view of logic as both a science in its own right and a tool for other sciences, in particular metaphysics and psychology (understood as above). She argues that Avicenna assigns a primary foundational role to metaphysics, as well as a secondary foundational role to psychology, for metaphysics and psychology prove the existence of, respectively, the subject-matter of logic and the mental operations in which the subject-matter is involved. Her paper provides some much needed clarity on the meaning of notoriously difficult parts of Chapter I.4 of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Madkhal*, arguing that it gives us a case for conceiving of logic as *sui generis* for Avicenna.

Jari Kaukua turns to Avicenna's view of the God-world relation – the philosophy of mind encompasses questions about the divine mind, in this tradition as in its more Western counterparts. According to Kaukua, Avicenna argues that God knows particulars by knowing their complete causes, and when contrasted with human knowledge of particulars, this epistemically superior access shows that the apparent contingency of statements about future particulars is not due to the modal properties of real particulars but to the nature of our access to them. Avicenna is not a metaphysical indeterminist; he acknowledges the limits of the human mind.

The next paper in the special issue, by Hashem Morvarid, explores Avicenna's conception of common natures or essences and their role in providing an objective basis for the categories of being. The issue is relevant to the philosophy of mind, since it concerns whether, or to what extent, categories

of being are or rest on mental characterizations. According to Morvarid, Avicenna holds that common natures or essences explain why entities fall into specific categories, but he rejects both Platonic and Aristotelian realism, suggesting a nuanced position according to which natures or essences are neither purely mental nor fully mind-independent entities. Morvarid raises deep questions about Avicenna's view of the mind-world relation, and thus about intentionality and the content of our mental states. He concludes that traditional interpretations of Avicenna's common natures fail to adequately account for their core function, instead proposing two alternative interpretations for further investigation, including an account that appeals to Avicenna's view of the relation between human minds, the divine mind, and 'separate intellects'.

Mohammad Saleh Zarepour then explores Avicenna's views on intentionality, specifically the problem of empty intentionality, or mental reference to non-existent objects. Zarepour argues that intentionality according to Avicenna typically involves three distinct elements: an indirect relation to actual objects, a direct relation to their mental representations, and a direct relation to their essence. Empty intentionality differs in that it does not involve the first element. Thus, Avicenna rejects the notion of non-existent objects as mind-independent entities; thinking about such objects involves mental representations without external counterparts.

In the final paper of this special issue Deborah Black investigates the conceptions of consciousness in classical Islamic thought through the works of Avicenna, Averroes, and the 'theologians' (*mutakallimūn*) from both major schools of kalam, the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites (including al-Ghazālī, d. 1111 CE). She aims to elucidate how these thinkers conceptualized consciousness and how their ideas contributed to the broader philosophical discourse on what we would now recognize as the philosophy of mind. The paper returns to several issues that have arisen in the preceding papers, including intentionality and the mind-world relation, the limitations of the human intellect, and the relation between philosophy and other disciplines. It underscores the richness and diversity of classical Islamic thought and its relevance to contemporary philosophical discussions of consciousness and self-awareness.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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