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# Introduction: Forms and Functions of Islamic Philosophy

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## Abstract

This article presents an introduction to this special issue of *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*. We suggest that this collection of papers broadens the scope of Islamic philosophy by bringing new insights into diverse forms and affective experiences of philosophy. Together, these papers suggest a way of doing Islamic philosophy that is both living and communal. This issue emerges from the community formed within the Islamic Philosophy in Conversation Working Group. As such, the introduction to the collection also serves as a reminder of the necessity of support specifically for women and nonbinary academics, scholars of color, and other minoritized scholars in our field.

## Keywords

*falsafa* – philosophy – community – affect

It is no accident that scholastic treatments of philosophical topics, laid out in books and treatises that put various quandaries to the test of logic, are familiar to the modern reader.\* Even more than the content, the methodology of

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\* Note: both authors contributed equally to the writing of this introduction.

dialectical reasoning calls out to us that these treatises – numbering in the thousands, and spanning over a thousand years, in the Islamic context – constitute philosophy proper. Indeed, it was Europe's encounter with Greek, Islamic, and Jewish philosophy through the medieval translation movements that sparked its own development of scholasticism and the methodologies of philosophy that are so familiar to us today.

Yet to think that Islamic philosophy is limited to the composition of scholastic works is to miss the full force of philosophical thinking in the Islamic world. In its purest form, philosophy is “the love of wisdom” (*philo-sophia*, the Greek root of the Arabic *falsafa*), at once both a propelling desire and utmost goal. Philosophers of the Islamic world widely recognized that the inquiry into the nature of existence, and the expression of what one discovers in the course of that pursuit, does not occur solely through the performance of logic and analogy. As Plotinus conveyed through the Arabic translation of his *Enneads*, known in the Islamic world as the *Theology of Aristotle*, the true philosopher is one who has “become accustomed to knowing things through the vision of the mind (*naẓar al-ʿaql*), not by logic (*manṭiq*) and analogy (*qiyās*).”<sup>1</sup>

As classical philosophy (*falsafa*) – already robustly incorporating Neoplatonism – became entangled with Islamic theology and Sufism, philosophers increasingly understood knowledge to be both discursive and visionary, formed through intellectual pursuit as well as spiritual practice. Hints of experimentation with different methodologies of inquiry and forms of expression developed into robust traditions which scholars are only beginning to mine – poetry and narratives circulating beyond the already vastly underexplored archives of philosophical treatises.

Certainly, the functions of poetry are recognizable across human cultures. As Oludamini Ogunnaike remarks, poetry defamiliarizes the familiar and inspires awe of that which exceeds explanation. It both expresses the encounter with the ineffable and allows for its perception.<sup>2</sup> While these functions of poetry are seemingly universal, Islam formed a particularly fertile ground for poetic expression. Emblematic of the value of oratory art in Arabic culture is the belief that the Prophet Muhammad's primary miracle was the Qur'an itself (*iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*), an oral text so transcendent that it could not have been formed by the human mind. The striking verses (*āyāt*) of the Qur'an are themselves considered to be signs (*āyāt*) of the Creator. It is not just the content of the Qur'an but also its form that is miraculous, an awe-inspiring expression of truth channeled through the reciter, a living vessel of the Qur'an. Indeed, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty,” remarked the Prophet. And it was

<sup>1</sup> Badawī (ed.), *Aflūṭīn ʿinda al-ʿarab*, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Ogunnaike, “The Logic of the Birds.”

beauty itself that signaled, for the classical Muslim philosophers, a greater harmony that characterizes the ordered creation emanating from the Necessarily Existent.<sup>3</sup>

It was well understood that the human being – mind and spirit, body and soul – functioned as a complex creature, attuned not only to rationalist argumentation, but also – and all the more – to the sway of wonder. The wondrous and the wonderful, the awe-inspiring and the perplexing, served as gateways to greater insights. The Islamic philosophers followed the impulse of the Greeks, who deemed wonder at the cosmos the first step in philosophy, as well as the Qur'an, which portrays contemplation of the signs of creation as leading, inevitably, to appreciation for the Creator.<sup>4</sup> Wonder was theorized and instrumentalized; it was poetry's unique capacity for "make-believe" (*takhyīl*), the philosophers argued, that allowed it to produce an emotional reaction in the listener, inspiring wonder, pleasure, and, thus, immediate assent through the imagination.<sup>5</sup>

And so, the greatest philosophers were also poets and storytellers, guiding and expressing not only in the form of traditional treatises but also through similes, rhyme structures, and narratives.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Sīnā, well known for his extensive philosophical corpus, also wrote visionary treatises and poetry. Two of these narratives (*Ḥayy b. Yaqzān* and *Risālat al-ṭayr*) sparked narrative traditions that echoed throughout the Islamic world, including the works of Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical novel, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, which inspired the philosophies of such thinkers as John Locke and Daniel Defoe through translation in Europe, and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's poetic masterpiece, *The Conference of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*). Ibn al-'Arabī's philosophical mysticism includes prose that reads as Aristotelian commentary alongside succinct poems highlighting his key philosophical concepts through mystical metaphors.<sup>7</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī penned a panegyric poem written in Persian in praise of logic, physics, and metaphysics, alongside his many philosophical prose treatises.<sup>8</sup> Poetry and narrative, employed both for this-worldly and otherworldly purposes, are fundamental yet understudied aspects of the long history of Islamic philosophy.

3 See for instance the treatments of beauty in al-Fārābī's *The Virtuous City* (*al-Madīna al-fāḍila*) and Ibn Sīnā's *Treatise on Love* (*Risāla fī l-'ishq*).

4 Zadeh, *Wonders and Rarities*, pp. 4–5.

5 Harb, *Arabic Poetics*, pp. 75–134.

6 For an analysis of Ibn Sīnā's use of simile in his allegorical treatises, see for instance Jacobsen Ben Hammed, "Ethics and Aesthetics," pp. 127–45.

7 See Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyya*; Sartell, "Mystical Philosophy."

8 See Pourjavady, *Dū mujaddid*, pp. 551–64; Jacobsen Ben Hammed, "Philosophical Poetry and Courtly Appeal," pp. 14–42.

This special issue takes seriously the various forms through which Islamic philosophy functioned as a living textual and communal tradition, including narratives, poetry, and the recordings of visionary states. It is a recognition that these forms, while not the primary methodology of philosophy in Islam, were an indispensable component of the tradition's complex and variegated development in the classical and post-classical contexts. The conference and current special issue reflect an insistence that these forms be given significant consideration as particular vehicles for philosophic expression that are inextricably tied to their content, forming an "organic connection" that cannot be summarized or replaced.<sup>9</sup> As Michael Sells remarks, "Poetry, drama – almost any form of art – risks being trivialized when its meaning is defined and paraphrased discursively."<sup>10</sup> The attempt to approach and express the ineffable requires what Cyril Uy likens to "Sufi free jazz," a play of the mind and heart with intensity, frequency, pronouncement, and silence, the ideal methodology of which is not dialectical reasoning but rather artistic expression.<sup>11</sup>

### Expressions and Experiences of Islamic Philosophy

This particular collection of papers highlights such artistic expression across the spectrum of Islamic philosophy, reaching across disciplinary boundaries to engage questions on how Islamic philosophy was practiced "in conversation" – between scholars, with various audiences, and with different disciplines, approaches, and rhetoric. Together, these papers discuss the ways in which forms of philosophy, including story-telling, poetry, cosmology, and more, uncover the affective nature and purpose of philosophy.

The first grouping of papers considers intersections of philosophy and mysticism – philosophy through dreams, lettrism, and other ways of knowing. We first focus the philosophical-mystical lens on dreams and visions in **Oludamini Ogunnaike's** "Dreaming Sufism in the Sokoto Caliphate: Dreams and Knowledge in the Works of Shaykh Dan Tafa." In this article, Ogunnaike considers the theorization of dreams within the 19th-century Muslim West African milieu. He contextualizes dream theorization within Sufi mysticism, occult sciences, and philosophical discourse. Ogunnaike's analysis of Dan Tafa's thought highlights the relevance of dream interpretation in West African

9 Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 4.

10 Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, p. 4.

11 See Uy, "Prayer, Deconstruction, and Boundless Play." A version of this article was presented in a workshop at our "Forms and Functions of Islamic Philosophy" conference.

Sufi traditions and shows the ways in which dreams map onto questions of cosmology and the self.

**Elizabeth Sartell's** "Lettrism as Implicit Philosophy in 10th-century Jewish and Muslim Creation Theories" takes up the question of cosmology through another lens: lettrism. By looking at two Islamicate treatises on the science of letters (*'ilm al-hurūf*) by Ibn Masarra and Sa'adia Gaon, Sartell argues that mystical linguistics is co-constructive with philosophical concepts of language and matter. She suggests that we might think in terms of "implicit philosophy" – highlighting the ways in which philosophy may be re-imagined within mystical frameworks of language, and how those mystical texts and commentaries produce a new path for philosophical thinking on primordial matter and the elements of creation.

One theme emerging through both Ogunnaike and Sartell's works is the symbolic form (both metaphorical and ontological) in mystical-philosophical treatises. The relationship between symbolism, poetry, and meaning is further explored through several articles focused on other representational forms of philosophy – through poetry, metaphorical narrative, and literary form. The metaphorical presentation of philosophy is highlighted in **Jeson Ng's** "*Mathal* and *majāz* as Method in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*." Ibn Ṭufayl's allegorical narrative reveals an Andalusian philosophy that correlates with the Andalusian Sufi practice of *i'tibār* (contemplation) – also seen in Ibn Masarra's thought – as the means of connection between the seen and the unseen worlds. Ng reads Ibn Ṭufayl's narrative through its employment of metaphorical and figurative speech, arguing that these rhetorical devices allow Ibn Ṭufayl to impart a philosophical-religious-contemplative knowledge beyond the limitations of human language.

Poetry, like allegorical narrative, attempts to create ways of knowing beyond the constrictions of explicit language. **Fateme Montazeri's** contribution examines this use of poetry through the work of Ḥāfiẓ. **Fateme Montazeri's** "Covering Flaws: Intellectual Debates over the Poetry of Ḥāfiẓ" focuses on one particular poem from Ḥāfiẓ as an example of the "aesthetic paradigm of poeticity in the Islamicate world." Putting Ḥāfiẓ's poetry and subsequent commentaries on his poetry in conversation, Montazeri argues that philosophy may be employed in the service of poetic hermeneutics – that philosophical concepts and reasoning function at times to solve the poetic complexities of mystical metaphorical worldviews. These philosophical commentaries on poetry integrate clarity with ambiguity, blurring the boundaries between philosophical and poetic truths and ways of knowing.

Such blurring of boundaries seems to be a common theme among our papers – Ḥāfiẓ integrates poetry and philosophy in new ways, Ibn Ṭufayl creates

a new philosophical-religious mode of contemplation, Ibn Masarra and Sa'adia Gaon create a new mystical-philosophical linguistics of creation, and Shaykh Dan Tafa opens up a mode of dream interpretation between philosophy, occult, mysticism, and exegesis. This boundary-blurring lens continues in **Cédric Molino-Machetto's** "Epistemic Ambivalence in an Islamic Context: A Dual Regime of Truth in Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddima*," which brings philosophy into yet another disciplinary genre: theology. Molino-Machetto suggests that Ibn Khaldūn's political-historical epistemology should be read through a philosophical interpretation of Ash'arite theology. Complicating the tired binary of philosophy vs. orthodoxy, Molino-Machetto argues that it is Ash'arite theology which allows Ibn Khaldūn to adhere to empiricism in historiography, as all knowledge must be grounded not in universal essences but rather, first and foremost, in observation.

Our papers work together to bring to the forefront another crucial theme: the embodied integration of emotion and cognition through experiences of wonder. Poetry, dreams and visions, and mystical contemplation are all art forms that seek to create an experience of wonder or bewilderment in the listener/reader/viewer. This affective way of knowing opens up new ways of understanding intellectual philosophical knowledge at the same time as it goes beyond the limitations of human cognition. The core *experience* of philosophy is highlighted in this special issue, which encompasses philosophy through dreams, lettrism, allegorical narrative, music, and poetry – thus widening the scope of Islamic *falsafa* to include philosophy through affective forms rather than through purely demonstrative discourse.

Through this collection of papers, a wide range of dynamic forms and integrative functions of Islamic philosophy are put on display: the epistemological work of symbolism, the creative work of cosmology, the hyphenated nature of *falsafa*, and the affective embodied experience of philosophy. It is our hope that these papers ignite further scholarship into the natures and aims of Islamic philosophy "in conversation."

### Future Conversations and Directions

The entries in this special edition are selected from the 2021 conference, "Forms and Functions of Islamic Philosophy," hosted through Bard College. The conference was organized as an extension of the Islamic Philosophy in Conversation Working Group, founded in 2019 by Drs. Shatha Almutawa, Elizabeth Sartell, and Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed as a way to support women and minoritized scholars in our field of Islamic Philosophy. Moved by our own experiences, and by the evident paucity of scholarship written by women in our field, we cited

in our grant applications the lack of representation of female scholars in major handbooks on Islamic philosophy and theology. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (2008) includes fifteen entries, only one of which is written by a woman. Similarly, *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (2005) includes nineteen entries with three written by female scholars. The Oxford series fares marginally better, with its handbook on Islamic theology (2016) boasting thirty-seven contributors, ten of whom are women, and its handbook on Islamic philosophy (2016) comprising twenty-eight contributors, seven of whom are women.

Major conferences also reflect this deep imbalance. Of thirteen participants at a 2019 conference at the University of Birmingham on Islamic philosophy and mysticism (“Sufism and Philosophy: Historical Interactions and Crosspollinations”), for instance, only three were female scholars. At the American Society of Islamic Philosophy and Theology (ASIPT)’s fourth annual conference, held in 2022 through the support of Harvard University and Brandeis University and through the funding of the Templeton Foundation, less than one-third of the participants were women. The imbalance in the roundtable discussion sessions was particular stark; each roundtable involved the participation of nearly twenty expert discussants, yet only two of these participants were women. The stark ratio may well have affected future iterations of the conference; in 2023, ASIPT ran with presentations from thirty-six male scholars, and only seven female scholars; and in 2024, the conference included thirty-eight male and seven female participants.<sup>12</sup>

These concerning trends regarding the representation of women in the convening of conferences and publications on Islamic philosophy hold for scholars of color (both within and outside North American contexts) as well. As just one example, the 2016 *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy* referenced above includes the authorship of seven female scholars (25%), and only five scholars located at academic institutions outside of the North American and European academies (18%). Here, however, ASIPT fares much better; about half of the participants at the 2024 ASIPT conference were scholars from non-US and non-European institutions or contexts. As Kecia Ali points out, “gender balance cannot be the only consideration in assessing inclusion. It’s not a victory if anthologies are full of white North American and European cis women.”<sup>13</sup>

12 Since first penning this introduction, Kecia Ali published *The Woman Question in Islamic Studies*, which laid bare the full range of exclusionary practices that are employed against female scholars of Islamic Studies. In her book, Ali analyzes not only the deep imbalance of male to female scholarship included in anthologies, edited volumes, and conferences (noting however that the gender makeup of editorial teams is a decisive factor), but also exclusionary citation and pedagogical practices.

13 Ali, “No Manthology is An Island.”

Oludamini Ogunnaike reminds us that there is a need to diversify the voices of both the “menu” and the “seats at the table” within Islamic Studies more broadly.<sup>14</sup> For example, there is a movement to re-center the peripheries within Islamic Studies: Edward E. Curtis IV reads Islam as Black history, and Kayla Renée Wheeler’s Black Islam Syllabus project seeks an inclusive approach to the study of Islam by highlighting the voices of Black Muslims in America and globally.<sup>15</sup> Oludamini Ogunnaike’s work calls for the decolonialization of Africana religious traditions, while Ayodeji Ogunnaike reflects on re-centering the tradition of African geomancy.<sup>16</sup> Nassef Manabilang Adiong highlights the contradiction of referring to Muslim societies in Southeast Asia as “the periphery of the Muslim world even though it has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world,” as Jaclyn Michael and Verena Meyer work to “reorient Islamic Studies” through an integration of the historical and contemporary significance of Asian Islamic histories and practices.<sup>17</sup> Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst points out that such re-centering of the peripheries is necessary in Islamic Studies faculty positions as well as in scholarship.<sup>18</sup> In so doing, these scholars and others interrupt the paradigm of Islamic Studies that primarily encompasses Arab or Middle Eastern expressions and traditions.<sup>19</sup>

This call to action holds in both Islamic Studies more broadly as well as within the field of Islamic philosophy in particular. Expanding the “menu” of Islamic philosophy means opening the doors to the study of Islamic philosophical traditions in geographic areas often considered to be the periphery of Islam, including African, Asian, and Latin American contexts. Additionally, it is just as important to expand the “seats at the table” of Islamic philosophy. This requires supporting the scholarship and academic thriving of scholars of color (especially Black and Indigenous scholars), both within American and international contexts, as well as LGBTQIA+ scholars, and scholars who belong to other groups that continue to be minoritized or have been historically excluded from the academy.

The Islamic Philosophy in Conversation Working Group was founded with a focus on this latter intent (expanding “seats at the table”) by creating

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14 Ogunnaike, “Expanding the Menu or Seats at the Table?”

15 Curtis, “Black History, Islam, and the Future of the Humanities Beyond White Supremacy;” Wheeler, “Black Islam Syllabus.”

16 Ogunnaike, “Theory to Theoria and Back Again and Beyond;” Ogunnaike, “The Dynamic Spread of Geomancy in Africa.”

17 Adiong, “Redefining Center and Periphery in Islam;” Michael and Meyer, “Reorienting Islamic Studies in Asia” (special issue).

18 Morgenstein Fuerst, “Job Ads Don’t Add Up.”

19 On the paradigm and boundaries of Islamic Studies scholarship, see: Morgenstein Fuerst and Ayubi, “Shifting Boundaries.”



an intentional, inclusive, supportive, and collaborative space for women and minoritized scholars in our field. We invited a range of scholars to join, focusing particularly on early career women scholars and scholars of color. In our first years, we supported one another through workshopping a paper every other month, and hosting panels discussing major milestones in career development (such as work-life balance, publishing a first book, and writing grant applications). In 2021, we held the virtual conference “Forms and Functions of Islamic Philosophy” through the support of Bard College. We aimed for our conference to include diversity across rank, race and ethnicity, gender, and geography, as well as in topic and methodological approaches to the conference theme. We then formed the panels and format with the same goal of supporting the work of early career female, minoritized, and historically-excluded scholars.

Shatha, Elizabeth, and Nora discussed ways to format the conference such that it could serve as a site for collective collaboration and mentorship. The conference consisted not only of traditional panels, but also of closed sessions that workshopped pre-circulated papers in preparation for publication by early career female scholars and scholars of color. We facilitated an editor’s discussion of the book publication process, created space for informal gatherings, and paired the keynote lecture with a discussion of a primary source text to allow all participants an engaging entry-point into the keynote discussion. Despite the (pandemic-necessitated) virtual format, our presenters formed strong connections built on their mutual intellectual interests and continued to support each other’s work well past the date of the conference. This special edition represents the proceeds from what was, at the time, an exceptionally collaborative and fruitful conference with early career scholars presenting not only from the United States but also France, Serbia, Germany, India, and Iran.

The inaugural “Forms and Functions of Islamic Philosophy” conference is only the beginning. We are planning future conferences of similar format, which will highlight the exciting work of underrepresented scholars in our field. Our Working Group will hold the next conference in April 2025 at the University of California, Berkeley, focused on “Presents and Futures of Islamic Philosophy,” and we aim to expand our work in 2028 to the Kutubna Cultural Center in Dubai. Through such international collaborations, we look forward to continuing conversations among texts and among scholars, centering mentorship for and building supportive community among early career scholars of color, women and nonbinary scholars, and other historically-excluded scholars in our discipline. These scholars’ perspectives and interventions are crucial to creating an understanding of the field of Islamic philosophy that encompasses affective experience as well as demonstrative discourse, that blurs the boundaries between philosophy-mysticism-occult-religion, and that encompasses

the work of philosophy done through poetry and dreams as well as through commentaries and discursive texts.

By focusing the lens on Islamic philosophy as a tradition that necessarily includes lived experience as well as intellectual reasoning, our collection recognizes the ways in which *doing* philosophy is, in part, *living* philosophy – both in community and in conversation with other texts and thinkers, and in the finding and making meaning of one’s own experiences. To support and uplift the work of scholars who have too often and for too long been systematically excluded is, ultimately, to enrich our field with the insights and skill sets of an increasingly diverse community of scholars. It is thus with great excitement that we present to you the first installment of what we hope will be many special issues, representing the ever-growing, and ever-richer, “table” of the study of Islamic philosophy.

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