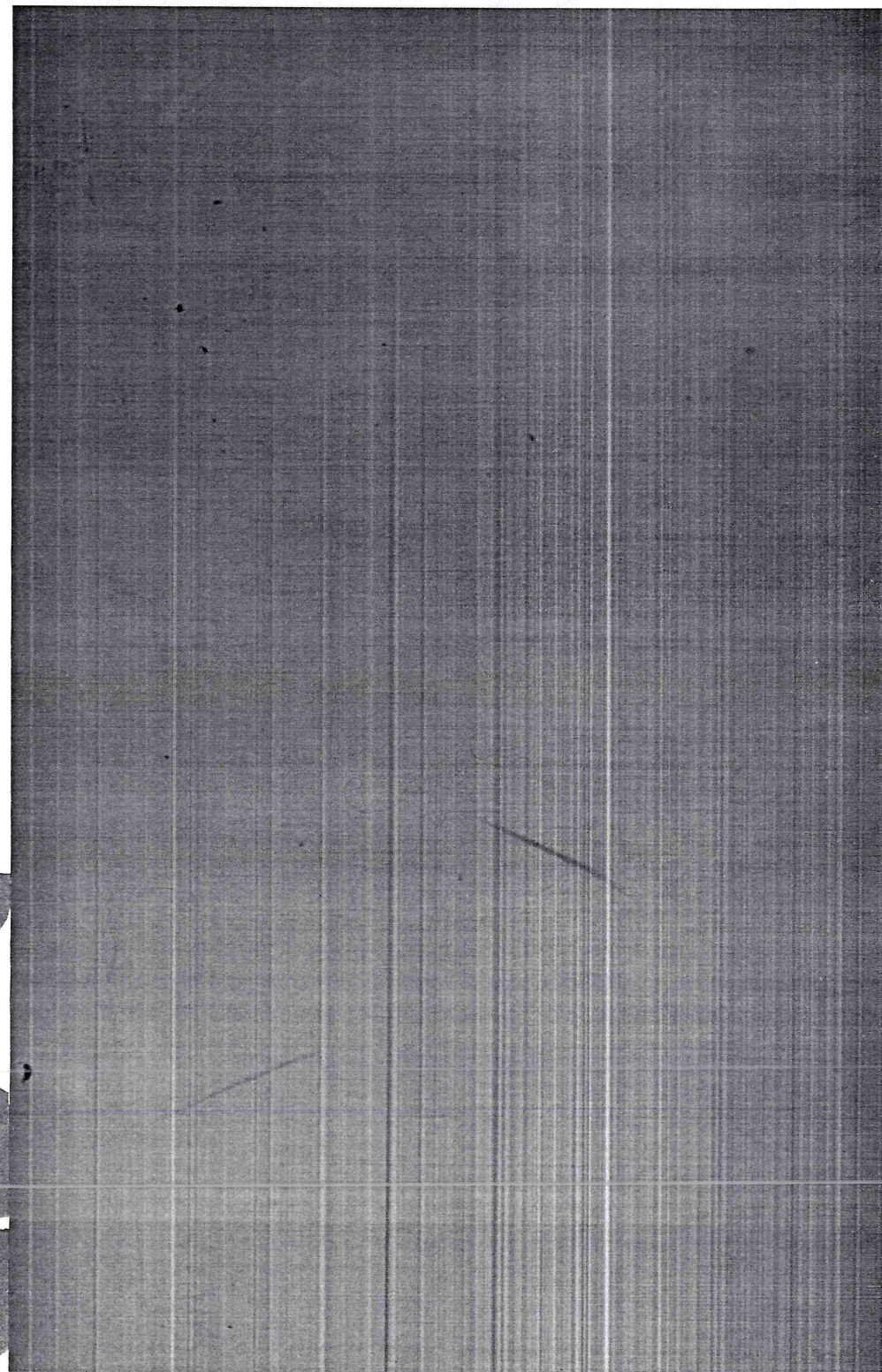
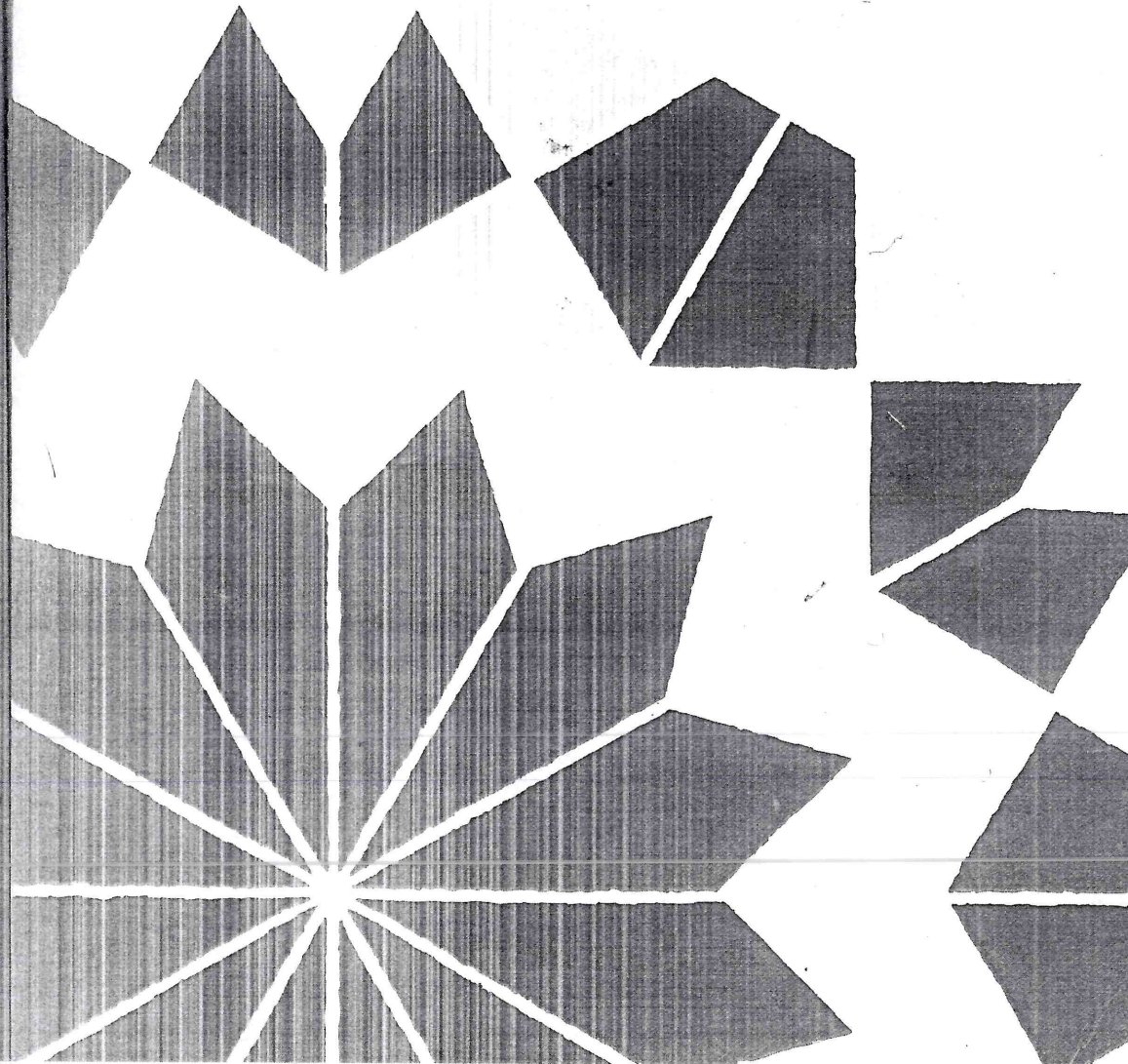


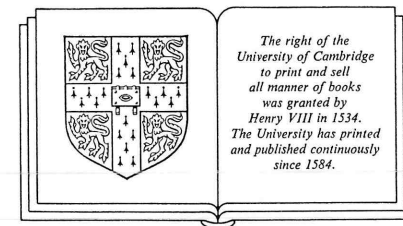
An Introduction to
**Medieval Islamic
Philosophy**



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Cambridge University Press

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

6 How to read Islamic philosophy

It might seem strange to have a discussion of how Islamic philosophy is to be interpreted which is over and above how the arguments which make up that philosophy are to be assessed. Is it not just a matter of looking at the arguments, picking out interesting points and judging the strength or otherwise of the reasoning process which they contain? Students of philosophy are accustomed to discussing philosophical passages almost as though they had just been produced and were without any tiresome interpretational difficulties. One might be asked to assess a particular argument in Plato, Kant or Aquinas without a great deal of knowledge of their circumstances and surroundings being thought relevant. And, although it might be difficult to work out what their argument was, since the language might be rather opaque to us now and the problems no longer especially interesting, we should not on the whole wonder whether their argument expressed their real views or whether they were trying to conceal those views by writing in a special way. Many interpreters of Islamic philosophy suggest that the approach which we should adopt to this form of writing is precisely that of seeking out what is hidden in the text by the author, and they put forward a dazzling variety of hermeneutic techniques which are supposed to help us in this. If they are right, then the approach which has been followed so far in this book might be regarded as naïve, since the arguments themselves have been taken rather at their face-value without any much more profound interpretative devices employed. It is important, therefore, to say something about how we should read Islamic philosophy before reaching a conclusion.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Plato. In his *Republic*, Plato advocated the use of a variety of devious methods to persuade ordinary people that they ought to behave in particular ways. He was not opposed to the use of occasional lies to deceive the enemy or the insane: they are 'useful...in the way of medicine...to be handled by no one but a physician' and the physician in the *polis* or state is the ruler (*Republic* 388), an analogy often used by Averroes too. Averroes claims in his *Commentary on Plato's 'Republic'* that 'the lie employed by the ruler towards the masses is right and proper for them; it is like medicine for illness' (I,xii,5). In fact, Averroes discusses these passages of Plato with apparent approval (*Comm.Pl.Rep.* 1,xvii,5-6; 1,xix,1). In his introduction to his translation of

the *Commentary*, Ralph Lerner claims that Averroes 'does not preclude the use of invented stories in the *sharī'a*'.¹ It would be remarkable were he to be right and Averroes was indeed an advocate of the idea that God set out to deceive his followers in his revelation. This is precisely the charge which the *falāsifa* were obliged to answer, especially after the attacks of Ghazali, which very much concerned Averroes. Yet do not such attacks have a point, given that the *falāsifa* did seem to support different approaches to different people, with some getting more in the way of truth than others? The distinction which they frequently made between what is hidden (*bāṭin*), and so available only to those capable of demonstrative reasoning, and what is open (*zāhir*), or on the surface, does indeed give rise to the idea that God's law embodies lies, and that the apparently orthodox pronouncements of the *falāsifa* themselves contain lies to conceal their real and highly irreligious views.

The root of the confusion is that commentators and the orthodox *fuqahā'* (jurists) tend to lump together all statements which are not designed to communicate the truth under the description of lies. Plato and Averroes were far more subtle in their approach. To a degree the confusion is understandable since the Greek term *pseudos* can mean 'fiction', 'lie' and 'error' in different contexts. Plato even refers to one of his myths at *Republic* 414C as a *pseudos* or tale. On what grounds might Averroes distinguish between these different senses of *pseudos*?

In the first place, he seems to accept that lies may be used for the benefit of the state by rulers who are aware that they are lies. Sometimes it is better to mislead someone or some group than to tell the truth. This type of lie should be distinguished from a story which expresses in an easily digestible form what could have been said without it. The Allegory of the Cave is a good example of such a story, as is the tale of the different metals in the souls of different classes in society. Averroes does not appear to object to these stories, except in so far as his comment that we could do without them goes, where 'we' refers to 'we philosophers'. Such stories should not appear in a philosophical work, argues Averroes, since they are more properly employed in presenting pictures to the masses who are unable to appreciate the force of rational argument. On the principle that philosophers should stick to demonstrative arguments, such stories should be abandoned, since they are used precisely because no argument can be given, in order to bring out a point which Plato feels he cannot establish more surely in another, more rational, way.

Why Averroes should accept these allegories as fit to be discussed, but at the same time reject the first book, the opening of the second book, and

¹ Ibn Rushd, *Averroes on Plato's 'Republic'*, trans. R. Lerner (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1974), p. xxvii.

the last book of the *Republic* for consisting 'only of dialectical arguments' (*Comm.Pl.Rep.* III,xxi,5) is indeed a puzzle. It may be that he objects to the dialogue form which Plato uses (and Farabi would be a precedent here, as we shall see), and the examples which Plato uses to suggest rather than demonstrate his conclusion – all methods suspect to an Aristotelian. But this general observation would not explain what Averroes finds so objectionable in the Myth of Er that not only does he refuse to discuss it but also says precisely what it is that he does not think worth discussing (*Comm.Pl.Rep.* III,xxi,3). A suggestion is that what is distinct about the Myth is that it offers a rival eschatology to Islam which includes enough similarity in doctrine about being rewarded or punished for what we do on earth in the after-life to be confused as more than just a myth. The stories about the cave and the metals are both obviously not supposed to describe anything which actually is the case, but the Myth of Er comes close enough to religious doctrine to be regarded as antipathetic to Islam. The Myth makes a claim which it represents as a myth, and which is similar to a claim made by Islam as an aspect of prophetically revealed truth, a claim about punishment and reward in the next life. So Averroes feels obliged to be scathing about the Myth in the *Republic* but not about all the stories which Plato uses. The Myth would actually be dangerous to Islam, whereas the other stories are merely superfluous to a rational explanation sought by the philosopher.

Why is Averroes so eager to condemn stories in general if he was prepared to accept so many provided by Plato? No doubt Ghazali is an important factor here. Ghazali had accused the *falāsifa* of attributing to the Prophet the will to seduce and confuse the masses by revealing what is not true and concealing what is true. This is his interpretation of the claim which the *falāsifa* sometimes made that the Prophet used the rhetorical method to speak to the masses in a way which they would understand, while he kept the truth for the *falāsifa*. The argument presented by the *falāsifa* claimed that this was done in the general interest, because the masses would not have understood any but rhetorical arguments and stories. In that case, the Prophet could not reveal the truth to them in any other form. Ghazali interprets this as meaning that the masses are lied to and that this is represented as acceptable because it is in the general interest. Although the *falāsifa* pretend to defend prophecy, he claimed that they in fact contradict its claims and degrade it to a medium of falsehood. He interprets every story, allegory and metaphor as a lie. Within the context of this sort of attack it becomes comprehensible why Averroes stresses his opposition to the use of stories if they mislead people concerning the nature of the truth. He tries to make clear throughout his work that his position is not that philosophers by demonstrative argument can

understand the truth, whereas the masses through rhetorical argument are misled in this regard. According to him, the philosophers and the masses both know the same things to be true; it is just that they know them in different ways.

Averroes' position would have been clearer had he pointed out directly that not every allegory or story is a lie. A lie is a statement which is designed to mislead people concerning the truth, but a story in the philosophical sense is merely a statement which is untrue, and patently so. A similar distinction is relevant to accounts of prophecy which stem from Farabi and which connect prophecy with imagination and creativity. When a *falāsifa* claims that accounts of prophecy are to be interpreted as accounts of creative imagination he is not claiming that those accounts are not true, in the sense that they are lies. It may well be that those accounts are not true but that they are constructed in such a way as to communicate the truth generally to the public. The orthodox opposition to philosophers such as Maimonides often criticized him for implying in his description of prophecy that the events described were not historically true, which runs totally counter to their presentation in scripture. This is to interpret every story which is not itself true as a lie, and so to represent Maimonides as claiming that reports of prophecy in scripture are lies! Yet, as we have seen, it is possible for a biblical or Koranic account to be a story and yet not a lie, and this sort of possibility is important for Averroes. Yet Averroes does sometimes speak with regret of the way in which Plato uses such stories – he suggests that they are often unnecessary to make Plato's point. It is worth noting how different Averroes' view here is from that of the philosopher who so heavily influenced all the *falāsifa*, Farabi.

In his *Agreement of the opinions of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle*, Farabi talks about Plato's style of writing, his use of myths, allegories and symbols to make his point instead of a clearer and more direct approach to such issues as would surely be possible. Farabi thinks that what is behind this technique is Plato's intention to reserve philosophy for those who are capable of doing it and who have the requisite merit to receive it. He refers to a letter from Plato to Aristotle in which the latter is blamed for writing in a clear and demonstrative form which could be understood more widely than the dialogue approach of Plato. The implication is that there is no value in popularizing philosophy. Aristotle replies that although his work is indeed less obscure than that of Plato, it is still presented in such a form as would prevent its being taken up by the masses who are incapable of really grasping it and who would otherwise misrepresent it. The desirability of obscurity in philosophy is something of a theme in Islamic philosophy, with the intended result that philosophy is reserved for the elect few and protected from the power of orthodox theologians and the rulers of states

unsympathetic to philosophy. Surely in his reply Aristotle is correct, namely, that it is very unlikely that the arguments which he uses will have much attraction for the masses. The same may not be said of some of the stories of Plato which are often designed to appeal to the masses as justifications of a policy which is in their objective interests but which they cannot understand as being such by demonstrative argument alone. Averroes does not really accept Farabi's account of why Plato wrote in such a form – the former thinks that that form of presentation is not appropriate to philosophy per se, although it is only actually to be condemned when it is put in a form which may seriously mislead by partially resembling the truth, like the Myth of Er.

This fascination, which is so common among the *falāsifa*, with different philosophical styles and techniques, and especially for what those different approaches may be regarded as concealing, is interesting. The *falāsifa* themselves speak of the importance of concealing dangerous doctrines and presenting their ideas in such a way that they will not disturb the faith of the masses or the suspicions of the theologians. Were we to ignore this aspect of their thought then we might well miss a great deal of significance. This fact has been taken very much to heart by many commentators on Islamic philosophy, and it has resulted in what I shall call the esoteric interpretation.

According to the esoteric interpretation, much more is required of the interpreter than just the ability to read the text and the capacity to deal with the philosophical points made in it. What is required is a key to understanding the peculiar way in which the text has been composed, and that key is to be found by paying attention to the way in which the text incorporates the conflict between religion and disbelief within a specific cultural and historical context. Now, the great merit of the esoteric interpretation is that it tries to place the text within the context from which it arose, since otherwise it is impossible to grasp what the purpose of the text is. The argument throughout this study is not opposed to the esoteric interpretation as such, but is rather opposed to an assumption which is crucial to it, namely, that the conflict between religion and philosophy is of overriding importance to the construction of Islamic philosophy and all the arguments within that philosophy.

The esoteric interpretation emphasizes two common features of Islamic philosophy. Firstly, it is well understood that the *falāsifa* were often operating in unsympathetic conditions and were obliged, out of prudential considerations, to represent their views as perfectly in order with the established beliefs of Islam. Secondly, these philosophers presented their views in such a way as to disguise their real opinions and intentions, so that any reader who wants to understand the text must pierce the outer

skin of orthodoxy to arrive at the kernel of philosophical argument. Since the text is riddled with all kinds of devices that are designed to mislead and pacify the ignorant but at the same time to encourage the wise to persist with the argument, any understanding of the text's real purpose involves understanding these devices and reading the text in accordance with an appreciation of their role. So the conclusion of the esoteric interpretation is that we must examine such texts with suspicion and ask ourselves what the author was really getting at; only then can we grasp what the author is about in his work. The esoteric interpretation thus provides a methodological paradigm in terms of which samples of philosophy are to be studied and analysed.

There is a good deal to be said for such a paradigm, since an important distinction has to be made between exoteric (*zāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) works. There are also works which fall between such clear cases, works that are exoterically orthodox and yet have features pointing to aspects of the argument that only those fit and proper to understand such philosophy would appreciate. In that case, the faith of the masses is not challenged while the wise elite is provided with an account, albeit disguised, that discusses the philosophical aspects of a certain problem. This strategy is apparently followed by God in his gift of the Koran, which is itself a representation of two doctrines, one exoteric and to be accepted by all believers, and one esoteric and available only to those capable of recognizing it.

Averroes rather neatly categorized the different kinds of texts involved in terms of different sorts of reasoning, each type being appropriate to a different group in society. So demonstrative reasoning is appropriate to a different group – philosophers – than dialectical reasoning, which is right for theologians. Rhetorical, sophistical and poetic formulations of an argument are designed for the masses. It is one of the excellences of Islam, according to Averroes in his *Decisive treatise on the harmony of religion and philosophy*, that it provides the possibility of assent to its doctrines for anyone, regardless of intelligence or social position. He severely criticized the mixing up of these different types of reasoning, arguing that it can result only in mystification and disbelief. Certain representations of one's views are appropriate for certain purposes; like tools they should be directed to an end rather than employed haphazardly. The trouble with writing a book is that it may end up in the hands of those for whom it is not intended and actually do them damage, in the sense of endangering their faith. It may, on the other hand, do the philosopher damage, in that its publication may lead to the popular, albeit erroneous, belief that he is advocating disbelief, or at the very least, heresy.

This caution towards writing does not provide grounds for caution

towards philosophy itself, though, since the philosopher can in conversation distinguish between those to whom it is worthwhile or safe to talk and those who should not be addressed on such issues. That is the problem with writing, it is indiscriminate and so unsatisfactory – a fact that explains the tendency of *falāsifa* like Maimonides to address their more controversial work to a specific individual who has reached a certain level of intellectual and ethical maturity. As Plato puts it: 'once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people and not address the wrong' (*Phaedrus* 275e, trans. R. Hackforth).

A point that the esoteric interpretation makes is that the *falāsifa* try in their written work to duplicate the sorts of controls and safeguards they could apply to their oral teaching. The *falāsifa* tried to write in such a way that whoever read them would find only what it was in his capacity to understand. An ordinary person would not find his faith threatened by reading even a specifically philosophical work, since the way in which it is written would put him off from continuing with it, while a philosopher would put up with the contradictions, repetitions and dryness of the text. This, it will be recalled, is how Aristotle is taken to have justified the clear presentation of his thought in his works – 'If I have written down these sciences and the wisdom contained in them, I have arranged them in such an order that only those qualified for them can attain them' (Farabi, *Agreement between Plato and Aristotle*, p. 85). But this strategy concerning the presentation of philosophical views to the public suggests a question: what really are the beliefs of the practitioners of this form of writing? Did the *falāsifa* set out to deceive people with their apparent orthodoxy and hidden heterodoxy?

The *falāsifa* themselves were very aware of this issue. At the beginning of his *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185) catalogued briefly the inconsistencies between the opinions expressed by the same author in different works in the case of Avicenna, Farabi and even Ghazali. He does this in such a way as to suggest that such comparisons were commonly made at the time. For example, he makes this observation about Farabi:

In the *Ideal Religion* he affirms that the souls of the wicked live on forever in infinite torments after death. But in his *Civil Politics* he says plainly that they dissolve into nothing and that only the perfected souls of the good achieve immortality. Finally in his commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, discussing human happiness, he says that it exists only in this life, and on the heels of that has words to the effect that all other claims are senseless ravings and old wives' tales. This makes mankind at large despair of God's mercy (p. 100).

Ibn Ṭufayl makes a good point here. There certainly does appear to be a marked distinction between the claims the *falāsifa* make in their popular works and the claims they make in works unlikely to have been of much interest to the general public. For example, Farabi's accounts of Plato and Aristotle in his more popular writings (like his *Agreement* and *The virtuous city*) present a different view of these thinkers, and one more in line with Islam, than those in the more specialized works on the Greeks like his *Philosophy of Plato*, *Philosophy of Aristotle* and *Attainment of happiness*.

One of the most distinguished of the supporters of the esoteric interpretation, Leo Strauss, has also remarked upon the fact that Farabi's *Summary of Plato's Laws* is markedly different from its supposed source, Plato, and imports all kinds of religious expressions and concerns which are entirely absent not just from Plato (as Farabi knew him) but from Farabi's own book *Philosophy of Plato* itself. Strauss has also emphasized the significance of the distinction between Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and his *Guide of the perplexed*, the former being a standard work of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the latter a discussion (according to Strauss, forbidden by the law) of how to explain difficult passages in the law to those confused by what they find in it. He spends a great deal of time in pointing to Maimonides' judicious and self-conscious use of contradiction to put off those not capable of appreciating his teaching. What all the contrasts are designed to show (and many more are available from the works of the *falāsifa*) is that we must approach this type of thought in a very special way, not just because it is concerned with problems that may be specifically medieval, but because the way in which it is written is intended to ensure (in so far as this is possible in a writing) that it will be read by only a certain type of reader. Unless we understand this basic fact about such writing, we shall not be able to enter into it but will be condemned to have only a superficial grasp of exactly what is happening when we confront such a text.

The esoteric interpretation is in fact a reaction against an older type of interpretation, according to which the *falāsifa* managed or thought they had managed, by and large, to reconcile Islam and philosophy, and their writings showed how this feat could be accomplished. This type of interpretation was itself a reaction to the earlier view (largely based on the nature of Averroism in medieval Christian Europe) that the *falāsifa* were rationalists who rejected the values and beliefs of the community of Islam in favour of what they had learnt from Aristotle and Greek logic. The esoteric interpretation rejects the position that the reconciliation was successfully carried out as a view that: 'was, in fact, propagated by the Muslim philosophers themselves in their effort to convince their fellow

Muslims that the teachings of philosophy did not contradict the revealed teaching, and that philosophic activity, far from undermining religion, was undertaken in defence of the faith'.²

It is significant that both the esoteric interpretation and previous types of interpretation all share a certain assumption – that the conflict between religion and philosophy, an aspect of the clash between belief and disbelief, is a constant theme and interest of the *falāsifa*. They are merely taken to differ in their answers to the question of how the *falāsifa* deal with this constant theme, whether by dissimulating their genuine anti-religious philosophical beliefs or by bringing their religious and philosophical beliefs into a genuine harmony. Often when there is a dispute in philosophy between two alternatives, both of which seem capable of reasoned support and argument, it is impossible to settle the dispute because it presupposes a common assumption which is false itself. The common assumption here is the idea that the conflict between belief and disbelief is a crucial theme of Islamic philosophy (all Islamic philosophy), and this common and often tacit presupposition deserves some critical attention.

It will be suggested here that there are aspects of *falsafa* which are not touched by this presupposition. We should re-examine the influence that Greek philosophy had on the Islamic philosophers. What the *falāsifa* learnt from the Greeks was not limited to a number of interesting doctrines which appear to be inconsistent with Islamic revelation, such as the eternity of the world or difficulties about corporeal immortality, and so on, although the opposition to *falsafa* often centres upon such issues. What was learnt from the Greeks was an entirely new way of thinking, a system of constructive logical thought which provided its users with great conceptual power. This capacity for logical thought was largely, but certainly not entirely, represented by Aristotle, which is why he fascinated the *falāsifa*, not because he supported theories of the eternity of the world or the impossibility of corporeal immortality. What made such awkward theories interesting was that Aristotle seemed to arrive at them using the principles of valid demonstrative reasoning, and so they presented a problem in so far as they were examples of respectable logical thinking that result in conclusions which are possibly opposed to aspects of Islamic teaching. The conflict between religion and philosophy in the medieval world is often represented as being a conflict between orthodoxy in religion and such issues as the age of the world and the nature of immortality, and that indeed is how it is represented in many of the discussions which touch directly on these issues. But Aristotle's thinking in these areas was felt to be so problematical by the *falāsifa* because it was based upon arguments which

they could accept as formally valid, and appeared to oppose what they accepted on the basis of revelation. What *specifically* interested the *falāsifa* was the form of the argument, not the conclusion or its premisses. In their works which are directed at other philosophers and not the general public they did not go in much for discussing Islam, *not* because they were not really devout Muslims, but because they were writing philosophy, and Islam is a religion and not a philosophy.

Of course, the obvious rejoinder in defence of previous interpretations of *falsafa* will point out that the *falāsifa* spent much time in apparently reconciling philosophy and religion. This does not show, though, that this conflict was of great importance to them *as philosophers*. To be sure, it was a problem which they discussed, and the editing and translating of *falsafa* has often concentrated upon such works, but it would be a mistake to conclude from this fact that such a theme was the major problem or interest for such thinkers. Works dealing with the reconciliation of philosophy and religion are frequently overshadowed in both size and importance by the expository commentaries and analyses of the Greek philosophers and logicians. The conflict between religion and philosophy did not arise for the Greeks in the form of an opposition between a revelation and a philosophy as it did for the *falāsifa*, and so there is very little discussion of this topic in their discussion of the works of the Greeks. In any case, did the *falāsifa* have anything to hide? The argument that religion and philosophy are radically different forms of knowledge is not to downgrade the former in favour of the latter. For example, Farabi claims that 'religion... is aimed at teaching the multitude theoretical and practical things which were deduced in philosophy through ways which facilitate the multitude's understanding of them, either through persuasion, or representation, or through both of them together'.³ Farabi's point is that religion cannot go against the demonstrative knowledge available through philosophy since religion is a reflection and more digestible formulation of that knowledge. Religion establishes its truth in a unique and non-philosophical way. Its truth is based upon revelation, whereas the truth of philosophy is based on demonstrative reasoning. In both cases the means of defence can be dialectical, but the means of gaining knowledge of more than just that one's opponent is mistaken are different. Yet it is a theme of *falsafa* that this difference does not imply that the answers must be reflections of the same truth, which is itself established in different ways.

In their enthusiasm to defend the esoteric interpretation of Islamic philosophy, some writers have even argued that it is important to relate what the *falāsifa* have to say in their technical works to the conflict between

² Fārābī, *Alfarabi's philosophy*, trans. M. Mahdi, p. 3.

³ Fārābī, *Book of letters*, ed. M. Mahdi, p. 131.

religion and philosophy. They argue that the apparently logical comments which the *falāsifa* make have an extra-logical reference and aim, so that in uncovering this reference we may discover what the work is 'really' about. We can examine a relatively uncomplicated example of the esoteric interpretation being applied to the relationship between demonstrative and dialectical reasoning in the work of Averroes.

In his *Short Commentary on Aristotle's 'Topics'*, Averroes correctly represents Aristotle's thesis on the distinction between two types of valid reasoning, one type which is called demonstrative and which is based upon true premisses, and the other type which is called dialectical and which is based upon merely probable premisses. Now, on the esoteric interpretation this discussion of Aristotle must be taken to conceal something because it fails to mention religion. In spite of this failure, Averroes is taken to refer to religion 'indirectly'. As Butterworth says in his account of the text: 'the whole presentation appears very arid, and one cannot help but wonder why Averroes would have been content to insist upon all these technical considerations, in order to make such a minor point. The answer is relatively simple: the tedious technical discussion is a screen for a more important substantive argument.'⁴ It may well be thought, though, that since Averroes was commenting on Aristotle, a writer not noted for his exciting style, it is hardly surprising that his discussion is rather dry. Of course, someone uninterested in logic might find such an argument 'very arid', 'minor' and 'tedious', all descriptions which are used by Butterworth. However, Averroes, like Aristotle, thought that the distinctions which can be made between demonstrative and dialectical reasoning are very important if we are to understand why and how different arguments work or are invalid. Like any other logical distinction, it is of great interest to the logician, and that in itself justifies the process of establishing logically the distinction.

Butterworth follows the esoteric interpretation in thinking that Averroes could not be really interested in this 'minor' point except for its usefulness in attacking the dialectical theologians by showing that they do not really know how to use dialectic. In his *Short Commentary on Aristotle's 'Topics'*, Averroes does not mention the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), which might be thought to present a problem for this interpretation. But no, this omission is 'masterfully subtle: rather than attack them openly here, he pretended to ignore them as though this were not the place to speak of them'.⁵ This is presumably the employment of 'Another device [which] consists in silence, i.e. the omission of something which only the learned,

⁴ C. Butterworth, *Averroes' three short commentaries on Aristotle's 'Topics', 'Rhetoric' and 'Poetics'* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1977), p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

or the learned who are able to understand of themselves, would miss.'⁶ Additionally, providing 'an attentive reading of the treatise... in order to uncover Averroes' teaching it is as important to ask about what is implied as to ask what is said'.⁷

Butterworth may well be right in thinking that Averroes' argument implies that the arguments of the so-called 'dialectical' theologians are invalid – that would be a reasonable application of a point made in a treatise on logic. Yet to present Averroes as interested in the logical point only to refute particular theological arguments is going too far. The theologians whom Averroes considers present arguments which in his view are invalid, but he does not conclude that there is anything invalid about dialectic itself just because it is sometimes incorrectly used. Butterworth claims that 'Averroes enabled the reader to call the whole activity of the dialectical theologian into question. If the art of dialectic cannot be used for most kinds of theoretical investigation, then it cannot support the complicated theological disputes characteristic of dialectic theology'.⁸ Yet what Averroes does in fact seek to show is that dialectic as an argument form may be invalidly used and that even if valid the conclusions are only as sound as the premisses, and the premisses may be untrue. There is nothing *wrong* with using dialectic. It may be successfully used in refuting the arguments of an opponent, as Averroes famously does in his attack on Ghazali's *The incoherence of the philosophers*, and we should then logically know that such an opponent's argument is invalid. But we will not know whether the premisses and conclusions of an argument are true. Such propositions cannot be proved dialectically. Averroes' point here may be illustrated, as so often, by Ghazali's stress upon the limitations inherent in the use of dialectic. According to Ghazali:

As for dialectic, it is the least useful for real guidance. For the real seeker of truth is not convinced by an argument based upon the assumptions of the opponent, which assumptions may not be true at all. As for the ordinary person, they are beyond his understanding, while the argumentative opponent, even when he is silenced, usually persists in his own beliefs and just thinks that he cannot defend his position, claiming that if only the founder of his school were alive and present, he would dispense with the dialectical theologians' arguments. However, most of what the dialectical theologians say in their arguments with other sects is just dialectic.⁹

⁶ L. Strauss, *Persecution and the art of writing* (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1952), p. 75.

⁷ Butterworth, *Short commentaries*, p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹ Ghazālī, *Mizān al 'Amal (Criterion of action)* (Cairo, 1912), p. 160. For a detailed account of how the term *jadāl* or dialectic was understood in Islamic philosophy, see J. Van Ess, 'The logical character of Islamic theology', in G. Grunebaum (ed.), *Logic in classical Islamic culture* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1970), pp. 21–50.

The point which Averroes is interested in making is that dialectic is limited in its possible application; it may refute the arguments of opponents, but cannot support one's own position in any stronger way than by refuting alternatives. As Ghazali points out, this does not provide a great deal of backing for one's own position, since both it and its negations may be based upon a false premiss.

Now, it is important here to get the order of priority right when discussing the relationship between Averroes' logical arguments and their theological application. The attack upon the *mutakallimūn* can be mounted because they often logically err in their applications of dialectic, and often try to use dialectic to establish as true the premisses of their arguments, something which dialectic is just not capable of doing. There is no necessity to approach Averroes' commentaries with suspicion and ask what is the significance of what is missing, or of what is implied as opposed to what is said. There is nothing to be uncovered, no mysterious forms of representation require interpretation. Averroes is merely presenting a commentary on Aristotle's logic, which is by no means a slavish adaptation of the Greek text, but which is entirely unenigmatic. It is written in a manner perfectly consistent with the standard form of philosophical logic of that period. The references to the *mutakallimūn* (not, it is worth noting, in the commentary on the *Topics*, but in the commentary on the *Rhetoric*) are merely contemporary illustrations of logical points which Aristotle made. But the esoteric interpretation assumes that the conflict between religion and philosophy must have been something uppermost in Averroes' mind even when 'apparently' commenting upon Aristotle's logic; even a commentary on logic must, it is felt, be a reflection of an obsession with such a conflict. Such a thesis is without foundation, and seeks to find what is not there and never was intended to be there.

It might be admitted in defence of the esoteric interpretation that it is not an appropriate method for dealing with logical works of *falsafa*. After all, there is little cause for dissimulation concerning logic, since it is hardly likely to be read or understood by non-philosophers, nor could it easily be thought to be antagonistic to Islam, or any other religious doctrine. Butterworth's application of the esoteric interpretation to logic could then be seen as over-enthusiastic. Logic merely deals with rules of reasoning and has nothing to do with religious doctrines. But the *falāsifa* did not restrict their interest in Greek philosophy to logic; they were interested in more sensitive areas in so far as religion is concerned, such as ethics, politics and metaphysics. Perhaps the esoteric interpretation is more successful in these areas in explaining what it is that the *falāsifa* are about and how they express themselves to their intended audience. This is, of course, to be expected; they were often careful not to appear to challenge the accepted

norms of Islam in their writings, and their works are often presented in such a way as to put off or placate the ignorant and orthodox non-philosophers while at the same time stimulating the interest of the philosophically minded.

A good example of how this is supposed to work can be found in Strauss' account of Farabi which is paradigmatic of the esoteric interpretation. According to Farabi, Plato presents his teaching 'by means of allusive, ambiguous, misleading and obscure speech'¹⁰ and was a master of dissimulation. He is famously supposed to have criticized Aristotle for the relative simplicity and clarity of his style which makes it open to anyone, as we have seen. The esoteric interpretation thinks that this discussion of dissimulation should alert interpreters of Farabi's writings to wonder what he is really getting at.

What strikes a reader of Farabi's *Summary* of Plato's *Laws* is how different that summary is from what it is supposed to summarize. It almost seems to be of a different book. It is even quite different from Farabi's own account of Plato and his philosophy, which discusses Plato without any special regard for religion in general or Islam in particular. But the *Summary* talks about God, *sharī'a*, the after-life and divine laws, managing not to mention the term 'philosophy' once. Strauss suggests that Farabi disguised his real opinions about Plato in the *Summary* by the use of non-committal expressions which signify neither agreement nor disagreement. Strauss catalogues some of the different ways in which Farabi refers to Plato's doctrines and claims that the different expressions used can be seen sometimes to express different shades of agreement or opinion concerning their importance. A tentative conclusion is made by Strauss:

Farabi may have rewritten the *Laws*, as it were, with a view to the situation that was created by the rise of Islam... He may have tried to preserve Plato's purpose by adapting the expression of that purpose to the new medium... he may have desired to ascribe his revised version of Plato's teaching to the dead Plato in order to protect that version, or the sciences generally speaking, especially by leaving open the question as to whether he agreed with everything his Plato taught and by failing to draw a precise line between his mere report and his independent exposition.¹¹

According to Strauss and the esoteric interpretation, then, Farabi must be up to something in his *Summary*; after all, 'Farabi agreed with Plato certainly to the extent that he, too, presented what he regarded as the truth by means of ambiguous, allusive, misleading, and obscure speech.'¹² Strauss himself makes many allusive and suggestive comments about what

¹⁰ L. Strauss, 'How Farabi read Plato's *Laws*', *Mélanges Louis Massignon* (Paris, Institut Français de Damas, 1957), p. 322.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 330-1.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 333.

that truth is from Farabi's point of view. The description which Strauss provides of the *Summary* succeeds in clouding it in the same sort of mystery and ambivalence which Strauss claims is integral to the work. But there is insufficient justification for such an approach to Farabi. The *falāsifa* were, it is true, often interested in dissimulating their genuine views, but the sort of strategy which Strauss' Farabi demands to be understood surely defies credibility. According to Strauss, to understand Farabi we are not only to have the *Summary* with us but also the original *Laws*; yet the former is meant only 'to be a help to him who desires to know [the *Laws*] and to be sufficient to him who cannot bear the toil of study and meditation'.¹³ The procedure which Strauss demands of the discriminating reader involves a good deal of ingenuity. The reader must compare and contrast chapter with chapter, noting what is added to the original and what is omitted from the original. Then he must pay close attention to the ways in which Farabi introduces his discussions of Plato – e.g. does he say that Plato mentioned a subject of exceeding usefulness,¹⁴ or does he say that Plato mentioned a useful subject?¹⁵ Strauss mentions all sorts of apparently irrelevant points, such as that at the beginning of the eighth chapter 'mentioning' is referred to five times and is contrasted with Plato's 'intimating' another aspect of the same subject in the beginning of the book.¹⁶ Strauss also points out that Farabi does not discuss some Platonic themes, that the *Summary* uses the personal pronoun unlike the *Philosophy of Plato*, and that the distribution of 'thens' in the *Summary* is uneven. The brilliance of Strauss' analysis is evident through the fact that he manages to take up all these points, and many more, and argue that Farabi was doing something very complicated and devious when he wrote the *Summary*. He does not feel able to come to any definite conclusion about what the *Summary* is about, and only asserts that although 'we would be foolish to claim that we are in a position to explain these difficulties... On the other hand, it cannot be denied that in reflecting for some time on writing like the *Summary*, one acquires a certain understanding of the manner in which such writings wish to be read.'¹⁷ Strauss is arguing that to understand the text completely we should have to be in the position of an original reader, and because our understanding of that point of view is necessarily limited, our comprehension of the text must be limited, too.

But, if the points which Strauss makes about the difficulties in reading the text are separately examined, they can be seen to be not difficulties at all, but rather normal ways of going about writing philosophy. The esoteric

interpretation concentrates upon the distinction between the real opinion of the author and what is offered merely as a sop to public opinion and its prejudices. Yet it might be suggested that the *falāsifa* present theories which they argue are true, or, at least, are interesting and relevant, and that the question of the precise authorship of such theories is not really important. Strauss is convinced that this is a question which does and must arise, and which demands an answer, and since the *failāsūf* is reluctant to provide the answer, his teaching must be obscured and hidden by means of the techniques we have already mentioned (and a good many more). This approach presupposes that it is normal for Islamic philosophers to differentiate exactly their views from the views of others with whom they are not clearly in dispute, and that when they discuss the works of others they must make clear which argument is original, which merely commentary, which application of the text is not to be found in the original, and so on. It will be urged here, though, that this presupposition fails and so there is no need to try to discover some subtle explanation for possible confusion between the *failāsūf*'s views and the Greek source.

If we think of *falsafa* as more like ordinary philosophy and less like esoteric literature, we can explain the 'techniques' which Strauss thinks the *falāsifa* employ in more conventional and less exciting ways. For example, the different ways in which Farabi refers to points which Plato makes may just be stylistic variations which indicate his opinions of the varying relevance, importance and truth of Plato's thought at different stages, rather than due to a 'hidden' meaning, or an obstacle in the way of unsympathetic comprehension of the real point. It is not important for Farabi as a philosopher to distinguish precisely where he diverges from Plato or what his opinion of Plato's various points are. The fact that the *Summary* and Plato's *Laws* (not to mention Farabi's *Philosophy of Plato*) are different from one another in important details has a simple explanation which Strauss himself provides – the *Summary* is not a representation of Plato's views, but rather an account of his art of *kalām*,¹⁸ his technique of defending the laws and religion. Farabi is showing how Plato would defend law within an Islamic context – hence the introduction of Islamic and religious topics foreign to the original *Laws* and *Philosophy of Plato*. No dissimulation is required here as an explanatory hypothesis. Farabi himself suggests that the *Summary* is more than just a commentary on Plato by his use of the personal pronoun and his use of specifically Islamic expressions like *sharī'a*; it is clear that he did not wish to represent Plato as a Muslim. The question is not whether Farabi used dissimulation (*taqiya*) in his writing. The answer is, of course, that he did. The question is whether

¹³ Fārābī, *Compendium legum Platonis*, ed. and trans. F. Gabrieli (London, The Warburg Institute, 1952), 4, 20–1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42, 20–1.

¹⁶ Strauss, 'How Farabi', p. 326.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 5; 21, 5; 27, 18; 32, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

it was used as frequently and in the ways that the esoteric interpretation considers to be the case. The best way to tackle this question is by looking at alternative accounts of works subjected to the esoteric interpretation to see if they are convincing. The evidences which Strauss selects in favour of the esoteric interpretation are not compelling and are perfectly capable of an alternative and less forced interpretation as aspects of a normal philosophical discussion.

But, it would no doubt be argued by an adherent of the esoteric interpretation that the account of the *Summary* as an ordinary philosophical work ignores the beginning of the book. Here, Farabi speaks at some length of a story about a city in which a holy ascetic is sought by the ruler with the intention of killing him. The holy man disguises himself as a drunken musician and safely passes through the gates of the city after telling the guards, perfectly truthfully, that he is the holy man for whom they are to keep a look out. Strauss takes the moral of this story to be that Farabi is prepared to tell the truth (i.e. present his opinions about the *Laws*) but only if he is able to disguise it in such a way that he will not suffer for it. The *falāsifa* were eager to avoid the fate of Socrates, who was put to death, according to them, for his failure to disguise his teaching adequately.¹⁹ But this story does not provide incontestable support for the esoteric interpretation. It may be interpreted in other ways. For example, it may be that Farabi wishes his readers to think that he has disguised his views, so that only those who are capable of understanding and appreciating his teaching will recognize that he has *not* disguised his views at all. Such an interpretation is not as fanciful as it sounds. After all, in the story the holy man misleads the guards by telling the truth and getting them to think that he is not telling the truth at all. Perhaps Farabi uses the story to get people to think that he is not telling the truth, while he is expressing his real opinions after all. In that case, Strauss would be in the position of the guards, in that he naïvely assumes that when he is thus presented with the truth, he is in fact presented with a disguise. Such an interpretation may seem over-subtle, but it is surely not more so than the lengths to which Strauss' use of the esoteric interpretation leads him.

A more plausible interpretation of the story is: Farabi is arguing that the philosophical complexity and difficulty of his book is such that it will prevent those who might dislike its opinions from understanding them. It is worth recalling that Farabi thought that Aristotle's style of philosophy was a form of dissimulation, in that it excludes those incapable of philosophy from grasping his teaching. Farabi did not suggest that this teaching needed to be hidden because it has features which make it

unwelcome to, say, a religion. His point is that those who are not able really to understand Aristotle might *think* that his philosophy is religiously suspect, and so persecute those who expound it. A deeper understanding of philosophy reveals that it is by no means antagonistic to religion. It may be that Farabi used his story of the holy ascetic to suggest that the appropriate way to write philosophy, if one is incapable of Platonic style, is the *grave et meditatum* approach favoured by Aristotle and himself. In that case, interpreting that sort of philosophy will call for no special skills at puzzle-solving that are not already required in the interpretation of *any* philosophical thought written in the Aristotelian manner.

The aim of this chapter is very limited. The argument has been that the esoteric interpretation should not be generally applied to all texts of *falsafa*. Are there not, though, some texts which do indeed call for this interpretative approach? Maimonides' *Guide of the perplexed* seems an ideal candidate. It is replete with contradictions, omissions and repetitions, and a whole gamut of confusing and obscuring techniques which Strauss catalogues in his introduction to the work.²⁰ But the *Guide of the perplexed* should not be regarded as a paradigm of *falsafa*. Strauss himself points out that 'the very existence of the *Guide* implies a conscious transgression of an unambiguous prohibition',²¹ i.e. not to explain the secrets of the Torah in a writing. To get around such an explicit law it is necessary to employ all sorts of complicated and powerful devices to ensure that only those fit to study the secrets can sift through the book and receive them. In Islam there is no such 'unambiguous prohibition', although many Muslims argued that both the use of analogy and interpretation with respect to the law should be carefully restricted. The *Guide of the perplexed* is, in many ways, a unique work. Strauss' approach to Maimonides leads him to discover dissimulation even where it is not present, or not present to the extent he expects. The *Guide of the perplexed* is a work whose whole rationale is the conflict between religion and philosophy, and it is unrealistic to expect it to serve as a reliable model of *falsafa* in general. It is always tempting to use the esoteric interpretation because it is so enjoyable to try to unravel the tricks and puzzles which the author allegedly sets the reader, and to display one's interpretative virtuosity to the full. It is worth fighting this temptation and directing effort rather to understanding the philosophical arguments themselves.

²⁰ L. Strauss, 'Literary character of the *Guide of the perplexed*', in his *Persecution and the art of writing*; and 'How to begin to study the *Guide of the perplexed*' in Maimonides, *Guide of the perplexed*, trans. Pines.

²¹ Strauss, 'Literary character', p. 48. But there are good grounds for thinking that on the contrary the question of permitting or prohibiting the study of philosophy arose only in the wake of the anti-Maimonides controversy.

¹⁹ Fārābī, *Alfarabi's philosophy*, trans. M. Mahdi, p. 66.

When we consider the *Guide of the perplexed* we should be careful before we accept that the contradictions in it are a useful means of interpretation. Contradictions can sometimes be interpreted merely as the combination of different views to inform the reader of the variety which exists. In the previous discussion of prophecy and the creation of the world, which Maimonides related to each other in the *Guide of the perplexed*, it was suggested that he might merely be setting out the different positions which could be taken up on both those topics. This interpretation would be regarded as terribly naïve by the esoteric interpretation. The latter would see the *Guide of the perplexed*, and much else, as replete with irony, in the sense in which an ironic claim is intended to get across not the proposition the writer makes but the very contradictory of this proposition. It is very difficult after all to detect irony when it is directed against one's own beliefs. One of the main signs of irony is contradiction; contradiction between various things that appear to be said in the dubious-looking passage and contradictions between this passage and what the writer repeatedly and characteristically says elsewhere. Socratic irony was specifically the pretence of ignorance, of the form saying that p ('I am ignorant') while meaning not p ('I am not ignorant at all'). Aristotle obviously thought that speaking ironically was no bad thing, since his notion of the *megalopsychos* – the 'great-souled' person and best of human beings – does so in speaking with the many (NE 1124b 30). No doubt there are contexts in which irony as an interpretative hypothesis works well, but it has been suggested here that the esoteric interpretation consistently overdoes it. Islamic philosophy may be regarded as perfectly ordinary philosophy in that irony is not generally revealing or important in working out what the actual argument being presented is. In any case, philosophers will be more interested in the validity of the arguments concerned rather than in the 'real' intentions of the disputants, this being an issue rather for historians who might well be more interested in the question of 'hidden meanings' than in the argument form itself. By all means let us look carefully at the style of Islamic philosophy, yet without forgetting that it is philosophy and that its interest lies in its arguments and not in its style.

The theme of this study has been the interest and power of the philosophical arguments which arose in the Islamic world in the Middle Ages. The structure of these arguments and the theoretical framework within which they arose are well worth examining for their philosophical rigour. To concentrate rather upon the supposedly devious intentions of the philosophers themselves is to imply that the arguments are of little value or significance as arguments. Now, there certainly is not just *one* way of

reading Islamic philosophy, but there is perhaps just one way in which such texts ought to be approached initially.

The first questions we should ask about a text of Islamic philosophy are philosophical questions, e.g. are the arguments valid? Do they cohere with other arguments produced by the author? Do they increase our understanding of the concepts involved? Are they interesting? If we cannot make any progress with these sorts of questions then it may well be appropriate to ask other kinds of questions about the way in which the text is written, and what the author may have tried to conceal. Throughout this *Introduction* it has been argued that we can make good philosophical sense of Islamic philosophy without asking these autobiographical and historical questions. The philosophical arguments are there to be analysed, and for that analysis we require nothing more than philosophical tools. If we concentrate upon the philosophical nature of the arguments we shall find many examples of intriguing and subtle reasoning.

Further reading

Since some of the Notes are rather technical and refer to works inaccessible to many readers, a brief guide to further reading might be helpful. Translations of some of the passages related to those referred to in the Notes will be found in the articles, as will some interesting arguments which extend those found in the book.

Part I Ghazali's attack on philosophy

Fakhry, M., 'The "antinomy" of the eternity of the world in Averroes, Maimonides and Aquinas', *Muséon*, LXVI (1953), pp. 139-55.

Goodman, L., 'Ghazali's argument from creation (1)', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2 (1971), pp. 67-85.

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'Ghazali and demonstrative science', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 3 (1965), pp. 183-204.

Part II Reason v. revelation in practical reasoning

Altmann, A., 'Maimonides' "four perfections"', *Israel Oriental Studies*, 2 (1972), pp. 15-24.

Fakhry, M., 'Al-Farabi and the reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 26 (1965), pp. 469-78. Summary of Farabi's *Agreement of the opinions of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle*.

Hourani, G., 'Ghazali on the ethics of action', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 96 (1976), pp. 69-88.

'Islamic and non-Islamic origins of Mu'tazilite ethical rationalism', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 7 (1976), pp. 56-87.

Leaman, O., 'Does the interpretation of Islamic philosophy rest on a mistake?', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 12 (1980), pp. 525-38.

'Ibn Bājja on society and philosophy', *Der Islam*, 57 (1980), pp. 109-19.

'Ibn Rushd on happiness and philosophy', *Studia Islamica*, LII (1980), pp. 167-81.

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Rosenthal, E., *Political thought in medieval Islam* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958).

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Ibn Ṭufayl, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, trans. L. Goodman (New York, Twayne, 1972).

Introductions to Islamic philosophy

Two very useful books are:

Fakhry, M., *A history of Islamic philosophy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1970).

Watt, W., *Islamic philosophy and theology* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1962).

Useful articles and translations

Lerner, R. and Mahdi, M. (eds.), *Medieval political philosophy: a sourcebook* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1972).

Morewedge, P. (ed.), *Islamic philosophical theology* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1979).

(ed.), *Islamic philosophy and mysticism* (New York, Caravan Books, 1981).

For Arabic readers

Fārābī, *Jam' bayna ra'yay al-hakimain Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa Aristūṭālīs*, ed. A. Nader (Beirut, Imprimerie Catholique, 1960).

Rāzī, K. *lawāmi' al-bayyināt fil-asmā: wal-ṣifāt* (Cairo, al-Sharqīyya, 1914).

Recent work

A critical survey of recent work on Islamic philosophy is provided by:

Butterworth, C., 'The study of Arabic philosophy today', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* XVII (1983), pp. 8-24; 161-77.