Islam

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Islamic studies are currently experiencing a revival of interest in what is sometimes called post-classical period of philosophy in the Islamic world. It has been suggested at least as early as 2002, when Dimitri Gutas's article "The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy" came out,¹ that philosophy in the Islamic world reached a new period of prosperity after the death of Avicenna (d. 1037). This view is opposed to the traditional prejudice that Abū Ḥamid al-Ġazālī's (d. 1111) alleged attack against philosophical teachings has put an end to philosophy in the Islamic world. The results of the revived interest in post-classical philosophy in the Islamic world can be already observed in the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*.² More than two thirds of the book are devoted to the post-classical period. One can also mention a number of ongoing international projects with a focus on post-classical philosophy in the Islamic world: *Epistemic Transitions in Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science* at the University of Jyväskylä,³ *Post-Classical Islamic Philosophy Initiative* at McGill University,⁴ and *The Heirs of Avicenna: Philosophy in the Islamic East from the 12th to the 13th Century* at the LMU Munich.⁵

The Creation of Philosophical Tradition: Biography and the Reception of Avicenna's Philosophy from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century A.D. (henceforth "CPT") contributes to this new trend in studies on philosophy in the Islamic world. The author, Ahmed H. al-Rahim, clearly opposes what he calls "Orientalist" neglect of post-Avicennian

philosophy in the Islamic East. In his view, the mistake of "Orientalist scholarship" was rooted in devaluing the merit of the dominant philosophical genres of the post-classical period, such as commentaries and compendia (1–3). CPT suggests reassessing "philosophical, religious, and scholastic context in which Avicenna's works were taught and studied" (3). The aim of the book is a reconstruction of the lives and works of post-Avicennian philosophers from the eleventh to the fourteenth century CE, based on a critical reading of prosopographies and biobibliographies (4–6).

When we want to extract historically reliable information from prosopographies and biobibliographies, we need to "deconstruct" them by identifying literary *topoi*. CPT devotes most of the first section (Introduction) and large parts of the second section to this central task. The first phenomenon that CPT addresses is the creation of fictional personal connections between prominent philosophers and theologians of the post-classical period. This phenomenon is reflected in fictional teacher-student *isnāds* and the "meeting of great minds" *topos*. CPT associates this phenomenon with "establishing the philosophical authority" of later philosophers and "presenting necessary links in a chain of transmission" (22–23). In the second section, speaking of Bar Hebraeus's attempt to make almost all thirteenth century influential philosophers students of Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210), CPT adds to the list of reasons behind the falsification of personal connections the idea of determining the philosophical authority of an earlier philosopher, by demonstrating his influence on the later tradition (118). CPT suggests a parallel between establishing chains of transmissions in post-classical philosophy in the Islamic world and the chains of transmissions of *ḥadīths* (135). This parallel helps explain another phenomenon on which CPT focuses in the Introduction: accusations of immoral behaviour (such as playing chess) and even abandoning the Šāfi'ī Sunnī creed against philosophers and theologians associated with "foreign sciences." This is parallel to "the genre of either despairing or declaring trustworthy the moral character of individual *ḥadīth* transmitters," according to CPT (34). In this context, CPT argues that later Twelver Šī'ī biographers welcomed those "traditionalists'" allegations of abandoning Sunnī creed by prominent post-Avicennian philosophers as revealing their true hidden Šī'ī identity (34–36).

The rest (and the core part) of the book is devoted to biobibliographical presentations of a number of important figures in the post-Avicennian tradition of philosophy in the Islamic world. In every section, CPT provides a critical summary of the biographical information, found in prosopographies and biobibliographies and presents a list of preserved works, their manuscripts, editions, and transla-

1 Gutas, Dimitri, "The Heritage of Avicenna: The Golden Age of Arabic Philosophy 1000–ca. 1350," in: J. Janssens and D. De Smet (eds.), *Avicenna and His Heritage*, Leuven 2002, 81–97.

2 El-Rouayheb, Khaled and Schmidtke, Sabina (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, Oxford 2017.

3 <https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/yfi/en/research/projects/political-institutions/epistemic-transitions-in-islamic-philosophy-theology-and-science> [26 May 2020].

4 <https://islamsci.mcgill.ca/RASI/pipdi.html> [26 May 2020].

5 https://www.philosophie.uni-muenchen.de/lehreinheiten/philosophie_6/dfg-funded-project_2016-19/index.html [26 May 2020].

tions. The basis of the information is the aforementioned analysis of *topoi* but also, to a large extent, modern scholarship. The result of this study is a collection of primary and secondary sources on lives and works of certain philosophers and theologians of the post-classical period of Islamic philosophy.

The apparent scholarly merit of CPT is that it provides a helpful summary of biobibliographical information on post-classical philosophy in the Islamic world. Despite that merit, CPT is not free from certain shortcomings in exposition.

The main problem that immediately strikes the reader when he/she looks at the table of contents and continues to haunt him/her throughout the book, is the choice of personalities addressed in the section 2.2: “Post-Avicennian Scholars.” Regrettably, the author never explains his reasoning behind that choice. In the preface, he states that the subject of CPT are “Avicenna’s immediate disciples and the following generations of philosophers who created the Avicennian philosophical heritage” (xi). The author certainly cannot mean that he included all post-Avicennian philosophers and theologians. If he means all most influential post-Avicennian scholars, the reader may wonder about the absence of distinct entries on Faḥr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 1210) and Šihāb ad-Dīn as-Suhrawardī (d. 1191), whose central role for the formation of post-Avicennian tradition is beyond any doubt. The absence of the same two figures rules out the criterion of being the most commented or the most commonly read authors of the period. If the author means to include all Avicennians, that is, Avicennist philosophers of the period, one wonders about the absence of an entry on Naṣīr ad-Dīn aṭ-Ṭūsī (d. 1274). If, however, the choice of personalities is grounded in the philological aim of the book, that is, the “deconstruction” of the genre of prosopographies and biobibliographies, the reader may wonder about the presence of the section on al-Ġazālī (68–80). In that section, the author deviates from the subject of prosopographies and biobibliographies and focuses on showing that al-Ġazālī’s “appropriation and naturalization” of Avicenna’s philosophy contributed to advancing the study of Avicenna’s logic and philosophy within the Sunnī *madrasa* tradition. The argument of the section is convincing (even if not novel for modern scholarship on al-Ġazālī), but it falls out of the philological project of CPT.

A careful reader would notice another possible criterion for CPT’s choice of post-Avicennian philosophers: being a Šāfi’ī Sunnī scholar. Establishing Šāfi’ī Sunnī contribution to the “triumph of Avicennism” in the post-classical period (contrary to the ‘pre-Golden Age’ prejudice), clearly is among the goals of CPT. This goal explains both the presence of the section on al-Ġazālī and CPT’s criti-

cism of the allegations of Šī’ism concerning, for instance, at-Tustarī (127) and at-Taḥṭānī (137). CPT certainly is both convincing and right about the significance of Šāfi’ī Sunnī scholars for the dissemination of Avicennian philosophy. It is however unfortunate that the author is not explicit about his focus on the Šāfi’ī Sunnī tradition in the introduction to the book. This omission may give readers the wrong impression that all important post-Avicennian scholars were Šāfi’ī Sunnis.

Another shortcoming of CPT concerns its merit as a reference work. References (bibliography and footnotes) occupy at least one third of the printed text. Nevertheless, at several occasions, CPT makes problematic claims without providing any primary or secondary sources in support of it. For instance, CPT claims that Avicenna “appropriated the themes, problems, and technical language of theology and Šūfism” for the sake of “popularizing his brand of Peripateticism” (25). Given how hard it is to imagine Avicenna as a populariser of philosophy, that claim cannot be made casually without any significant evidence for it. Likewise, CPT’s suggestion that Bahmanyār represents “an intermediate Peripateticism” between Avicenna and the Baġdād school is quite problematic, but the book does not provide sufficient evidence to support it (60). Last but not least, CPT claims that al-Ġuwaynī’s “use of Avicennian philosophical concepts and terminology has been well established”, however neither the quantity nor the content of the referred secondary sources justify that claim (70).

Regardless of these two shortcomings, CPT is a valuable philological study of post-classical prosopographies and biobibliographies. It will surely become a reference work for the next generation of scholars working in that field. Given its clear and succinct manner of exposition, CPT may be used by researchers at any stage of their academic career.