AN INTRODUCTION TO
ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

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Based on the Works of Murtada Mutahhari

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Professor Murtada Mutahhari (1920-1979) was an outstanding scholar, specializing in Islamic philosophy, theology, mysticism, jurisprudence, history, and sciences of tradition and exegesis of the Qur'an. He was a rare example of an author with vast and comprehensive knowledge of religious sciences and related intellectual disciplines, instances of whom are rare today, compared to pre-modern times. He was born in Fariman, eastern Iran and studied in Qum, where the Shi'a seminary schools were at the height of success and prosperity. He studied philosophy under Imam Khomeini and 'Allamah Tabataba'i, a prominent Shi'a scholar, considered to be one of the few founders of the philosophical schools. He moved, after graduation, to the capital Tehran, to engage in academic activities as professor of philosophy at the newly founded Tehran Divinity College at Tehran University, as well as the Marvi and Sipahsalar seminary schools.

At the same time, he also pursued cultural, religious, and political engagements as an orator, columnist, and coordinator of intellectual theoretical endeavours. This was undertaken jointly with Iranian Muslim intelligentsia and clergy to plan a religious political system as an alternative to both the ruling Pahlavi monarchy and to Marxist socialism and communism, which was at that time highly attractive to Iranian radical political activists. He left numerous valuable works, now printed as a comprehensive collection in the Persian language. Many of his books have already been translated into various modern languages.

This present book is a selection of major philosophical issues now studied under the subject matter of Islamic philosophy in Iran. It gives an overall view of Islamic philosophy using fairly simple language, yet an analytical and argumentative method, albeit very briefly. The selection is from lectures delivered or papers written by Mutahhari. His lucid, easygoing style is kept intact in the selection. As the author notes,

the source is the original Persian publication whose title translates as *The Collection of Professor Mutahhari's works (Majmu'ih Athar Ustad Mutahhari)*, which is referred to in the notes occasionally. Since the said collection is not available in English, the notes are of little use to English readers, hence their omission in this translation.

In translating, I have tried to retain the simplicity of language professor Mutahhari is so famous for, despite the difficulties involved in translating a philosophical text from the Islamic tradition and Persian language into English. In doing so, I have used terms previously coined in English for concepts in Islamic Philosophy wherever I could not find a specific term. In other instances, new and equivalent words have been introduced. In any case, philosophical and theological technical terms are highlighted in the main text, defined in the notes whenever necessary and their origins are given. Therefore, the notes belong to the translator. While the original title of this book chosen by the author would best be translated as *An Introduction to Philosophy*, it was modified to *An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, in order to better conform to its content and distinguish it from other philosophical trends for English readers.

We would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Jeannie Fatimeh Graham in her graceful and thorough editing of this translation.

HUSSEIN VALEH
Tehran, 10 April 2011

PREFACE

In the Name of God

Mutahhari believes that in philosophy, it is often more difficult to construe problems properly than to construct arguments in order to prove one's claim. Theorems of Euclidean geometry, in contrast, are easier to understand than to prove. Naturally, Mutahhari aimed at clarity of philosophical problems in the first place. Attaching great significance to stating philosophical problems clearly and accurately at the outset, he usually took up the assumptions of arguments one by one, clarifying them in minute details as much as required, thereby providing the reader with a fluent and extensive exposition of philosophical subjects in a method best described as logical and highly beneficial for beginners. Yet, none of his books were meant to be textbooks. I decided therefore, to compile a textbook entitled *An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* on the basis of his philosophical works that were already in print in the Persian language under the title of *Daramadi bar Falsafih Islami,* so that lovers of philosophy would have the opportunity to commence with an accessible text from a versed philosopher, written in relatively simple, but sufficiently expository language.

This book contains an introduction and eleven parts. The introduction includes three chapters, which serve to set the scene. The first part deals with the concept of existence in two chapters. The second part discusses the reality of existence in two chapters. In the third part, nonexistence is dealt with, again in two chapters. The fourth part contains four chapters on perception. The fifth part relates to modalities and covers three chapters. In the sixth part, causality is discussed in seven chapters. Categories are explained in the five chapters comprising the seventh part. The eighth part, which contains three chapters, is dedicated to the study of motion. Divine essence is discussed in the

ninth part, which includes three chapters. The tenth part, with its two chapters, deals with Divine attributes and the final part, which includes four chapters, focuses on Divine deeds.

This book is based on Mutahhari's works. It is not his writing. That is, I have made changes wherever necessary. My interference includes arrangement of parts and chapters, selection of topics and titles, omission of certain issues and summarization of others, changing the tone from oral to written locution, and editing. Nevertheless, I have tried my best to maintain the content of Mutahhari's lectures and writings. The reader may rest assured that what he reads is Mutahhari's version of Islamic philosophy. I have rephrased his remarks in different places. The content belongs to professor Mutahhari and the presentation is mine.

Those who study this book as a textbook and those who read through it, contemplate on it and compare it with the original source are kindly requested to offer feedback, which will certainly be considered in future reprints of the book.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Muhammad Mutahhari, Dr. Ahmad Ahmadi (who read through the entire book and took the trouble to edit it), Agha Masud Naqilu, Agha Mas'ud Yusifi, and Agha Muhammad Asghari who carried out the typing and proofreading.

And the final words: praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds and His blessings upon the Prophet Muhammad (S) and his progeny.

ABD AL-RASSUL OBUDIYYAT
Qum, 4 August 2008

INTRODUCTION

1

THE TERM 'PHILOSOPHY'

1.1. On the Greek Term *Philosophia*

There is a consensus among all the scholars of the ancient and modern Greek language and thought that the term 'philosophy' originates from the Greek root *philosophia* that combines the two parts *philo* meaning 'to love' and *sophia* meaning 'knowledge', combined to mean 'loving knowledge'. This term was coined as *falsafah* in the Arabic infinitive, meaning 'to philosophize'. Socrates and Plato are referred to as 'philosophers', derived from the Greek *philosophos*, meaning lovers of knowledge.

In pre-Socratean Greece, there lived a group of thinkers who named themselves *sophist*, meaning 'knowledgeable'. They held that man is the criterion for truth, hence their use of fallacies in discourse and arguments. Thus, the term 'sophist' gradually acquired a new meaning: elaborate fraud and deception. This new meaning is now represented by the Arabic term *safsatah*, coined as a translation from the Greek word.

Socrates shunned the title *sophist* or 'knowledgeable' out of modesty and perhaps also out of fear of identification with the sophists and chose instead, the title 'philosopher', introducing himself as a lover of knowledge. Gradually, the word 'philosopher' too, underwent a change of meaning, to convey 'knowledgeable' and the term 'philosophy' became synonymous with 'knowledge'. In this latter sense, the word philosopher was neither applied to anyone before Socrates, nor to anyone immediately after him. It is said that Aristotle also did not use this term. The exact meaning of the term 'philosophy' was not defined at that time. It was much later that 'philosophy' and 'philosopher' became common currency in everyday language.

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1.2 The Term *Falsafah* in the Muslim World

Muslims borrowed this term from the Greek, Arabized it, and covered its meaning with an oriental gloss, signifying intellectual science (or theoretical and speculative knowledge). It is no longer used to refer to any specific discipline. Rather, it is used to identify a particular category of knowledge and distinguish it from another, labelled 'transmission-based science'. The latter category includes lexicography, grammar, syntax, inflection, prosody, rhetoric, semantics, hermeneutics, jurisprudence, and methodology and logic of jurisprudence. With its wide-range of implications, the word *faylasuf* referred to an expert in all branches of theoretical and speculative sciences, including theology, mathematics, natural philosophy, politics, ethics, and home economics.

When explaining the Aristotelian division of the sciences, Muslims used the word *falsafah* or *hikmah* (i.e. wisdom) and divided it into two branches: the theoretical and the practical. Theoretical philosophy, according to them, studies things as they are. Practical philosophy studies human behaviour as it should be. The former includes three areas: metaphysics or the highest branch of philosophy, mathematics or mid-level philosophy, and natural philosophy or the lowest branch of philosophy.

Metaphysics consists of two parts: general matters or general theology, and special theology. Mathematics includes four divisions: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Natural philosophy has many sub-divisions. Practical philosophy includes three spheres: ethics, home administration (or economics), and politics. A perfect philosopher is the one who masters all of these.

1.3. The Genuine Philosophy

According to Muslim philosophers, metaphysics, also referred to as 'the foremost branch of philosophy', 'the highest branch of philosophy', 'the highest branch of science', 'general science', and 'theology', is the most important of all branches of philosophy for three reasons. Firstly, it is more demonstrable than other sciences and enjoys more certitude when compared to them. Secondly, it is the queen of sciences, and is sovereign over them, since they depend on it, yet it does not depend on them. Thirdly, it is the most general and comprehensive of all sciences. Hence, in their view, it is the genuine branch of philosophy. Sometimes, though

not very often, they use the term 'philosophy' therefore, to mean metaphysics alone. Consequently, the term 'philosophy' acquired two distinct uses among early philosophers. On the one hand it referred to intellectual science in general and on the other hand it signified 'the foremost branch of philosophy', as a branch of theoretical philosophy. The former usage was more common than the latter.

We can conclude that the early philosophers, in one way, used the term 'philosophy' as a general term, rather than the name for a certain discipline and hence provided no specific definition for it. Since 'philosophy', in its commoner usage, denoted any knowledge that was not based on transmission, 'philosopher' signified a person who had mastered all of the intellectual sciences. Thus, they stated that 'philosophy is the vehicle for the perfection of man's soul, both theoretically and practically.' So, if we consider the term 'philosophy' in this sense, we need not give a definition for it. However, the second usage of the term requires a definition. 'Philosophy' understood as the genuine philosophy and the highest branch of science or primary philosophy, is defined in terms of knowing the characteristics of beings as such, as opposed to knowing beings as determinate entities like bodies, quantities, qualities, plants, humans, etc.

This definition needs further explanation. The information we have of things can be classified into two categories. In one category, what we know relates to a particular species or type of being. It includes the properties, characteristics, or qualities peculiar to a particular entity. For example, we know that numbers, dimensions, plants, or human bodies have certain properties. What we know of numbers constitutes the body of arithmetic. What we know of dimensions falls under geometry. Our knowledge of the human body and plants is medicine and botany respectively. Likewise, we study the properties of certain types of objects in geology, mineralogy, biology, psychology, sociology, nuclear physics, and the like. But, there is another category of information we have of things, which relates not to being, because it belongs to a certain type, but because it exists. This information constitutes the science of philosophy. It is in this sense that we shall use the term 'philosophy' from this point onwards.

1.4. Metaphysics

As we mentioned earlier, the term 'philosophy' is sometimes used

synonymously with 'metaphysics'. This has led to a historical confusion we ought to dispel. Aristotle was the first author to realize that there are a number of issues, which relate to no particular field of study, yet somehow encompass all sciences whether natural, mathematical, ethical, social or logical. Therefore, they need to be collated within a specific discipline. Perhaps he also noted that the subject matter of such a discipline must be 'existence' or 'being', for it was this element that identified these issues as one subject. Nevertheless, he did not choose a name for that discipline. When his works were posthumously compiled in a collection, the section containing this study just happened to come after the section devoted to physics. Not yet having been named, that part was then subsequently referred to as metaphysics, meaning 'after physics'. Later on, that section gradually came to be known as metaphysics. Arab translators translated that name literally into the Arabic phrase *ma ba'd al-tabi'ah*. Gradually, the story relating to this naming sank into oblivion and some readers of Aristotle and some scholars began to think that the name alluded to issues discussed within this discipline, or at least to some of them, for example that God and incorporeal intellects relate to what lies outside the world of nature. Therefore, certain intellectual scholars like Avicenna questioned the naming, asking why the discipline was not named 'before physics', as its subject matter takes precedence over physics, because God, for whose sake the name is given to the discipline, is prior to nature.

This lingual confusion was to later result in a conceptual confusion and mistranslation, deceiving some Western authors, who mistook 'metaphysics' to mean 'ultra-physical'. They wrongly assumed that the subject matter of this discipline, related exclusively to what lay beyond or outside the realm of nature, hence their definition of metaphysics as 'the science solely related to the study of God and nonmaterial beings'. As we have seen however, metaphysics does in fact address issues that are relevant to being in general, whether natural or otherwise.

1.5. Separation of Science from Philosophy
Another confusion common nowadays, especially among dogmatic followers of Western thinkers in the Orient, underpins the notorious myth of the separation of science from philosophy. The diachronic change of the lexical meaning of a conventional term has been misconstrued as a historical change of mainstream philosophical

thought. As we have already seen, the term 'philosophy' underwent a change in meaning. It was once used to mean intellectual knowledge, as opposed to those sciences that relied on transmission as their source. In this sense, it covered all speculative thought and was used not as a proper name, but as a general name. In the modern age however, this meaning has been replaced by what is understood by the word 'metaphysics'. In the new sense, philosophy includes logic, aesthetics, metaphysics, and the like. This change of meaning of the term 'philosophy' has been misunderstood as an historical fact of a split of sciences such as mathematics and physics from the one comprehensive discipline that once included them alongside theology, metaphysics, and all other branches. This confusion is no less pronounced than the one produced in the following hypothetical situation. Suppose the term 'body' that today signifies the human body as opposed to the human soul, was at some point in time coined to specifically mean only that part of the body from the shoulders to the toes. Then, consider that someone may suppose that since the word 'body' no longer includes a person's head, as it used to when it signified the whole human body, that people must, at some time have been beheaded! Another example is the word *Fars*, an earlier name for 'Iran'. Today, it refers only to a province in Iran. It is therefore, by no means reasonable, to conclude that other provinces have been separated from the country.

The so-called separation of the sciences from philosophy is no more sound a story than the disintegration of Iran or decapitation of people under those hypothetical circumstances. The only difference is in the reason; the sciences have never been a part of philosophy.

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ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

2.1. Islamic Schools of Thought before Sadr al-Muta'allihin

Among philosophical trends in the Muslim world before Sadr al-Muta'allihin, four schools are prominent. This categorization does not include non-philosophical currents, such as those in the spheres of jurisprudence, exegesis of the Qur'an, literature, tradition, politics, or ethics. Under the influence of the teachings of Islam, all of the four schools are tinged with the spirit of Islamic culture that sets them apart from their counterparts in the non-Muslim world. The four schools are the peripatetic, the illuminative, the mystical, and the theological.

2.1.1. The Peripatetic School of Philosophy

This school has many followers. The majority of Muslim philosophers belong to this school, among them Kindi, Farabi, Avicenna, Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, Mir Damad, Averroes and Avempace of Andalusia, to name but a few of the prominent figures. The most prominent representative of this school is Avicenna. Avicenna's works such as *Shifa'* (*The Book of Healing*), *Isharat* (*Remarks and Admonitions*), *Najat* (*The Book of Salvation*), *Danishnamih-yi 'Ala'i* (*The Book of Scientific Knowledge*), *al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ad*, *Ta'liqat*, *Mubahathat* (*Discussions*), and *'Uyun al-Hikmah* are all within the realm of peripatetic philosophy. This school relies only on reason and proof as the source of knowledge.

2.1.2. The Illuminative School of Philosophy

This school is not as popular as the previous one. It was revived by Shaykh al-Ishraq (Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi), considered as its perfect representative, who wrote several books in the Arabic language,

including *Hikmat al-Ishraq* (*The Philosophy of Illumination*), *Talwihat* (*Intimations*), *Mutarihat* (*Havens*), *Muqawimat* (*Oppositions*), and *Hayakal al-Nur* (*The Temples of Light*). He also wrote several papers in Persian such as *Avaz-i Par-i Jabra'il* (*The Chant of the Wing of Gabriel*) and *'Aql-i Surkh* (*The Red Intellect*). Among the renowned followers of this school are Qutb al-Din Shirazi and Shahrzuri. Holding that not all truths are explored by reason and argumentation, this school acknowledges two sources of knowledge: rational demonstration and self-mortification or purification of the soul.

2.1.3. The Mystical School

The aim of this school is the arriving at and union with the truth, rather than the exploring of it, and it renders the method of rational argumentation as unreliable, considering advocates of reason total failures. The true method according to this school therefore, is purification of the soul through the spiritual journey to God and acquisition of proximity to Him.

There are many who follow this school. Numerous great mystics have emerged in the Muslim world, such as Bayazid of Bastam, Hallaj, Shibli, Junayd of Baghdad, Zunun of Egypt, Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr, Khwajah 'Abd Allah Ansari, Abu Talib of Mecca, Abu Nasr Siraj, Abu al-Qasim Qushayri, Muhy al-Din ibn 'Arabi of Andalus, Ibn Farid of Egypt, Mawlawi, and Khwajah Hafiz of Shiraz. The most prominent figure among Muslim mystics and the first to write on theoretical mysticism, subsequently having a profound influence upon all his successors was Muhy al-Din ibn 'Arabi.

This school shares with the school of Ishraq the emphasis on the purification of the soul, but diverges from it on two points: the means and the end. For mystics, argumentation is of little use, whilst the school of Ishraq combines rational argumentation with mystical revelation as two consistent methods. For mysticism, the end is union with the truth, whilst for Ishraq philosophers, it is only an exploration of the truth.

2.1.4. The School of Theology

Like peripatetic philosophers, theologians rely on rational argumentation as the source of knowledge in theology as a discipline. But they begin their theoretical discourse from a set of axioms somehow different from those of philosophers. Theologians, especially the

Mu'tazilites, start from 'good and bad' as their fundamental axiom. The Ash'arites divorce themselves from their rival trend, the Mu'tazilites, who derive their axiom from pure reason, based on Divine Law. Mu'tazilites infer a number of theorems like 'the Law of Grace' and 'the obligation on the part of God to do what is best' from that axiom. Philosophers, however, construe 'bad and good' in terms of conventional human principles agreed upon by people and referred to in logic as 'received premises' or 'self-evident judgments of practical reason' at most. Such premises cannot be used as proof. They are useful merely for debate. Philosophers therefore, label theology as a dialectical discipline, rather than one constructed from proof.

Theologians also differ from philosophers in another respect. While philosophical discourse recognizes no prejudice and targets no pre-meditated end, a theologian is dedicated to defending a religious faith. In the Muslim world, there are three major theological trends: the Mu'tazilites, the Ash'arites and the Shi'a. We cannot explain these schools in detail here for want of space. So, we will just glance at some of the important figures from each school. Among the Mu'tazilites, Abu al-Huzayl 'Allaf, Nazzam, Jahiz, Abu 'Ubaydah Mu'ammar ibn Muthanna in the second and third centuries (8th - 9th centuries CE), Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar of the fourth century, and Zamakhshari of the sixth century are prominent. Abu al-Hasan Ash'ari, who passed away in year 330 of the Islamic lunar calendar (9th century CE), is the head of the Ash'arite school. Qadi Abu Bakr Baqillani, Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni, Ghazali, and Fakhr al-Din Razi also belong to this trend.

The Shi'a trend in theology has figures like Hisham ibn Hakam, who was a pupil of Imam Sadiq (A); the Nawbakhti family, a famous Shi'a dynasty; Shaykh Mufid; Sayyid Murtada 'Alam al-Huda; and Khwajah Nasir al-Din Tusi, who is a perfect representative of Shi'a theology. He was, in addition, a mathematician and a philosopher and left several works such as *Tajrid al-'Aqa'id* (*Abstract of Theology*), which is a classical textbook on theology. Subsequently, theology in the Shi'a world moved towards metaphysics.

2.2. Transcendental Philosophy

The four aforementioned trends of speculative thought in the Muslim world finally found culmination in the philosophical school called transcendental philosophy. This was founded by Sadr al-Muta'allihin,

who lived in the 16th century. Although this term had been used earlier by Avicenna in his book *Isharat (Remarks and Admonitions)*, it was Sadr al-Muta'allihin who first selected it as the name for his school.

Sadr al-Muta'allihin's philosophical school resembles the Ishraq School methodologically, in that it combines rational reasoning with mystical revelation, but it differs from it with regards to axioms and theorems. Many problems inherited from the aforementioned philosophical schools and unresolved disagreements between philosophers and mystics or philosophers and theologians were finally settled by the new school. In fact, Sadr al-Muta'allihin's school inherits insights from earlier trends of thought in the Muslim world, yet stands on its own feet as an independent coherent philosophical system, rather than a mere amalgam.

Sadr al-Muta'allihin wrote several books, mainly on philosophy. These include *al-Asfar al-Arba'ah (The Four Journeys)*, *al-Shawahid al-Rububiyyah (Divine Proofs)*, *al-Mabda' wa al-Ma'ad (The Beginning and the End)*, *'Arshiyah, al-Masha'ir,* and *Sharh-i Hidayah Athiriyyah.* His followers include Haj Mulla Hadi Sabzivari, the author of *Sharh-i Manzumah,* a textbook on philosophy taught in seminary schools along with the *Asfar* by Sadr al-Muta'allihin, the *Isharat* and *Shifa'* by Avicenna, and *Hikmat al-Ishraq* by Shaykh al-Ishraq.

One novelty of Sadr al-Muta'allihin's work is that he sorted the different levels of philosophical learning into four stages. This was essentially an intellectual enterprise based on the mystics' stages of spiritual journey and development.

1. The journey from the creation to the Creator, where the traveller leaves the plane of nature behind and passes through various ultra-natural worlds arriving in the vicinity of the unveiled Holy Essence of God.
2. The journey by Him within the Holy Essence, which is accomplished after the first stage and begins by the pupil exploring the Divine Names, Attributes, and Aspects of Perfection.
3. The journey by Him from God to creation, where the traveller, without separation from God, returns to the world and to people, since he is now able to see the manifestation of God in everything.
4. The journey within creation, where the mystic then assumes the role of leadership and helps people to find the path to God.

According to this categorization, as a type of mental exercise aimed

at perfection, philosophising follows four stages, parallel to the four aforementioned stages of mystical development. First, the general issues of metaphysics are taught, as basics for monotheism. This corresponds to the first stage of the mystical journey, since it constitutes our point of departure in our mental movement towards God. Second comes theology and issues related to God and His Attributes. This corresponds to the second stage. The third level of philosophical investigation addresses the actions of God, i.e. the worlds of existence. And finally, the soul and resurrection are dealt with, paralleling the fourth stage. Sadr al-Muta'allihin has thus arranged his magnum opus *Asfar* in this manner. He describes the peripatetic and illuminative schools of philosophy, which are common currency in philosophical circles, as common philosophy or the philosophy of common man.