Please note: I do not allow the use of notebook computers in the classrooms.

Our department offers two courses on medieval philosophy. The one has ‘early’ and the other has ‘late’ in the title. ‘Early’ and ‘late’ are relative terms. But this is an ‘early’ course; and, we will count as ‘late’ the philosophy of the Latin West, including that of Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham and the European Christian scholastics more generally. That means we will exclude their philosophy from our reading this winter, leaving it for some version of the ‘late’ course in our medieval sequence, so that we may concentrate on the earlier philosophers without whom Christian scholasticism would have been impossible – at least in the form it was to take in the thirteenth century CE and thereafter. Our focus will be on philosophy written in Arabic in the Islamic world from roughly the ninth century to the twelfth century CE. (Note, however, that it would be a mistake to infer from this way of chopping up times and places that the twelfth century was the end of interesting philosophy written in Arabic.)

Philosophy in the Islamic world began in part as a response to a concerted effort, starting at the end of the eighth century CE, to translate works of Greek civilization into Arabic (often by way of Syriac). Plato’s Republic and Laws, along with paraphrases of most of his other dialogues, were rendered into Arabic. So too pretty much the entire Aristotelian corpus; so too important works of Greek Neoplatonism, like the Enneads of Plotinus (under the mistaken title the Theology of Aristotle), that were to be very influential among the philosophers writing in Arabic. The very task of translating these (and other) works initiated significant philosophical activity. Translation is never a simple matter of reaching for an equivalent, or near equivalent, term in the target language for a term in the text you want to translate. It requires an understanding of the text in the original; it also requires an understanding of the discipline of which the text is a specimen. You cannot translate philosophical texts if you cannot do philosophy. In the nature of the case, the Arabic translation movement itself involved and subsequently inspired sustained reflection on the aims and strategies of the Greek philosophers. In the course of doing so, it had to come up with a whole technical vocabulary for philosophical discussion in Arabic: including the word ‘falsafah’ ( الفلسفة) and ‘faylasouf’ (فيلسوف) for ‘philosophy’ and ‘philosopher’ respectively. Thanks to the translation movement and the reflection it initiated and inspired, there emerged in the Islamic world a picture of philosophy as a discipline based on reason unaided by revelation. This discipline claimed to give accounts of the general principles governing bodies insofar as they are capable of motion and rest, the structure and causes of the physical world as a whole, the principles of living things, the nature of souls (rational and otherwise), and the nature of the divine. (It also offered to weigh in on ethics and politics.) It claimed, moreover, to give accounts of all these things in a way transparent to critical scrutiny. It could do this, because it included logic, an account of truth, predication, definition and inference.

It would be a mistake to assume that all of the people who contributed to the philosophical tradition we will be studying this winter were Muslims. Many were Christians and Jews. But, in the historical and intellectual context of interest to us, Muslims took great interest in philosophy and played a significant role in its elaboration. Perhaps the thing to say about their interest is this.

Stating the essential elements of the religion known by the Arabic word ‘Islam’ is fairly simple. It requires the acknowledgement of, and submission to, the one, single God already acknowledged by the prophets Abraham, Moses and Jesus. His last and greatest prophet was Muhammed (d.632 CE) to whom he revealed the Qur’an. The one, single God created the world and humanity. He will end the world and resist us on the day of judgement, punishing disobedience with hell and rewarding submission with paradise. But however simple it may be to lay out the essential elements of Islam, it is very complicated to work out what it implies, not only with respect to how Muslims ought to live their lives as individual Muslims and as members of the community of Muslims, but also with respect to how they should understand what they believe as Muslims. To give a very simple example, Islam says that there is no thing like the one, single God. Is it therefore a mistake to ascribe to God any of the attributes we ascribe to creatures? Even attributes like justice, knowledge and mercy – attributes ascribed to God in the Qur’an? Or should we ascribe justice, knowledge and mercy to God, but not to any of his creatures – not even to the people we may have commonly believed to be just, knowing or merciful? Or should we infer instead that God has justice, knowledge and mercy, but it is unlike that of the people we commonly believe to be just, knowing or merciful? (If that’s the case, what would that mean?) Or is there some other solution to this problem?

Muslims developed over time a number of different disciplines to work out the implications of Islam. Some of these disciplines – like Kalâm and Sufism – addressed the conceptual questions. But as the texts of Greek civilization became available to readers of Arabic, it was natural for interested Muslims to wonder whether philosophy could contribute answers to these questions, whether it might do so better than the indigenous Islamic disciplines, or whether it could be expected to get everything wrong. There was a great deal of debate about these fundamental questions. Of course, the only way to address them was to engage with philosophy to see what it had to offer. That engagement yielded results that were historically significant to both Islam and philosophy (both within and without the Islamic world). Our project for the term is to explore just some of these results.

I propose, therefore, the following itinerary. The course will be broken down into six units of two to three weeks each (we will no doubt linger a longer on some things than others).
Unit One: We will start with a look at some of the Greek philosophical texts most significant for philosophy in the Islamic world: selections from Plato’s *Timaeus*, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and Plotinus’ *Enneads*.

Unit Two: We will then read some selected texts of, and testimonials about, ‘Kalâm’ – the indigenous Islamic discipline (sometimes referred to as ‘theology’) whose mission was (and is) to articulate the fundamental principles of Islamic belief. This will give us a picture of one of philosophy’s most significant competitors within the Islamic world.

Unit Three: Then we will see how a philosopher tries to show that philosophy does a better job than Kalâm: our readings will be chiefly from Farabi’s work *Opinions of the People of the Perfect City*. After that, we will read selections from Ibn Sinâ’s *Healing* and *Salvation*, both from the metaphysics and the psychology.

Unit Four: Then we will read works by a powerful critic of the philosophers, Abû Ḥâmid al-Ghazâlî. We will read his intellectual autobiography: *Deliverance from Error* and selections from his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. (I should add that, by reading the *Deliverance from Error* we can talk about what Sufism might or might not be and its relation to ‘falsafah’. In general, the interest of this work is that offers Ghazâlî’s assessment of kalâm, sufism, philosophy and also Ismaili claims that the hidden Imâm is the infallible authority.)

Unit Five: Then we will see how a philosopher might reply to Ghazâlî’s attack by reading selections from Ibn Rushd’s *Incoherence of the Incoherence*. If there is time remaining, we will take a look at other sorts of criticisms levelled at specific aspects of Ibn Sinâ’s philosophy.

Unit Six: Other stuff, if we have time. Philosophers and philosophically minded people were interested in many other topics besides the ones we will be discussing in the first five units. Time permitting, we will consider other topics, e.g. music and/or mathematics. TBA

How much of all of this we cover will depend on the pace of classroom discussion.

I will make our readings available as PDF files. Since I do not allow the use of laptops in class, you will be expected to **print out** these readings. **You are also required to have the readings with you during class.**

Students who take this course will be expected to keep up with a series of difficult readings. They will be expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings constructively. 10% of the final grade will be for constructive participation in classroom discussion (and hence being properly prepared for such discussion by really doing the readings.) It is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for getting any credit for this component of the grade that students attend class regularly. In fact, it is a necessary condition for passing the course that students attend the class regularly. Attendance will be taken: students will sign a sheet. A significant pattern of unexplained absenteism will mean you fail the course. 25% will be for a short paper due some time during the term. 40% will be for a final paper due on the last day of our class. 25% will be for a final, closed-book exam. McGill University does not tolerate plagiarism. It is your responsibility to acquaint yourself with the university’s policy on academic integrity. Go to the following link if you have any questions: [https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating](https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/integrity/cheating). Tout(e) étudiant(e) à McGill a le droit de soumettre ses travaux en français si elle (il) le désire: [https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/course/french](https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/course/french)