Introduction

This volume sheds vital new light on the middle period of medieval Arabic philosophy and Islamic theology.¹ Traditional, nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of this period have advocated a narrative in which Ash'arī theologians launched an offensive against philosophy, resulting in its decline in later Islamic culture, or at least in Sunnism.² The *loci classicus* of this offensive are considered to be al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) comprehensive commentary on Avicenna's (d. 428/1037) *al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (*Pointers and Reminders*), which are often interpreted as implementing the same basic agenda: to undermine the philosophical tradition of Neoplatonised Aristotelianism in defence of a theological orthodoxy. It is now becoming increasingly evident that this reading is reductive and simplistic, and that to gain a sounder and more critical understanding of intellectual activity in this pivotal period further empirical investigation is needed. To this end, an urgent desideratum is to redress the orphaned status of the illustrious 'classics' of our traditional canon, such as the two texts just mentioned, by 'repopulating' the interim gaps. Key to this contextualisation is the exploring of 'twilight' sources, by which I mean sources that attest intellectual tensions, often expressed dialectically, between established thought systems and nascent trends, and hence reveal gradual shifts within their milieu and epoch, which at times lead up to a more definitive turn.

In the major shifts that were taking place during the twelfth century, particularly in the interim decades separating al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī, one of the most important transitional sources is Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mas'ūdī's *al-Mabāḥith wa-l-Shukūk 'alā kitāb al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt* (*Investigations and Objections on the Pointers and Reminders*, henceforth the *Shukūk*), as I argued when I first brought this source to light.³ Al-Mas'ūdī's philosophical activity had remained obscure for centuries, though in his lifetime he appears to have been a prominent figure in the East.⁴ His *Shukūk*, the earliest extant commentary on Avi-

1 By the middle period, I refer here to the transitional, late classical and early post-classical phase, stretching roughly from the late eleventh century and into the fourteenth century.

2 For a critique of the scholarly trends that underpin this narrative, see Gutas, 'The Study of Arabic Philosophy'.

3 Shihadeh, 'From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī', 148 ff.

4 Previously, he received occasional mention as an astronomer, but many secondary sources

cenna's *Ishārāt*, should be classed as an aporetic commentary, that is to say, a commentary which targets one or more works of an earlier authoritative figure with the exclusive purpose of raising problems, or objections, on selected points therein. In the fifteen sections of this text, the author raises philosophical complaints against an array of discussions on physics and metaphysics in the *Ishārāt*, and he frequently submits and defends alternative views of his own. The discussions display the influence of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut* and Abū l-Barakāt al-Baghdādī's (d. before 560/1164–1165) *Mu'tabar*, two sources that al-Mas'ūdī cites and praises highly.

While al-Mas'ūdī's text was probably not the first commentary to be written on the *Ishārāt*, it is the earliest historically significant commentary. It provoked the commentator's younger contemporary Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī to compose a dedicated response, *Jawābāt al-masā'il al-bukhārīyya* (*Response to the [Philosophical] Problems from Bukhara*)—thus titled because al-Mas'ūdī at the time was based in the city. The *Jawābāt*, as I showed elsewhere, is most probably al-Rāzī's earliest extant philosophical work, and it was followed approximately a decade later by his well-known full commentary on the *Ishārāt*, which inaugurated the long and venerable commentarial tradition on this Avicennan text.⁵ Later on, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) had access to al-Rāzī's *Jawābāt*, and through it to al-Mas'ūdī's objections, both of which get cited in his own commentary on the *Ishārāt*.⁶ However, being an aporetic commentary, as opposed to an exegetical one, al-Mas'ūdī's *Shukūk* bears an almost accidental affinity to this later commentarial tradition, for despite having the same target text, in terms of form and objectives it genealogically belongs to the genre of aporias, which includes such texts as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's (d. 313/925) aporias on Galen and Ibn al-Haytham's (d. ca. 430/1039) aporias on Ptolemy.

In two main respects, however, the interest of al-Mas'ūdī's *Shukūk* goes well beyond its marking the nascence of the commentarial tradition on Avicenna. Foremost is the vital insight that, when read in context, the text affords us into the development of philosophy and rational theology in the East during

conflated him with the twelfth-century astrologer Ṣāḥir al-Dīn Abū l-Maḥmūd Muḥammad ibn Mas'ūd ibn Muḥammad al-Ghaznawī, author of *Kifāyat al-tā'lim fī ṣinā'at al-tanjīm*. On this confusion, see Āl Dāwūd, '*Jahān-i dānish*'.

- 5 On al-Rāzī's *Jawābāt* and *Sharḥ*, see, respectively, Shihadeh, 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Response', 2–3; 'Al-Rāzī's *Sharḥ*'. On the early tradition of commentaries on the *Ishārāt*, see Wisnovsky, 'Avicennism and Exegetical Practice'.
- 6 Al-Ṭūsī, *Hall*, 2, 189–190; 2, 354; 2, 366. In a further discussion, he appears to refer to al-Mas'ūdī as 'one objector', without naming him (*Hall*, 3, 10), although Badr al-Dīn al-Tustarī reports that Afḍal al-Dīn al-Kāshī (d. 610/1213–1214) is intended (*Muḥākamāt*, f. 51^a).

the twelfth century. It throws light on the dialectical milieu within which this development unfolded, and provides major new evidence attesting the rise of a counter-Avicennan current, a rather inhomogeneous movement whose terms of reference were borrowed, first and foremost, from both al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut* and Abū l-Barakāt's critical engagement with Avicennan philosophy. Within this current, al-Mas'ūdī represents a 'softer', more philosophically involved trend, whereas his colleague Ibn Ghaylān al-Balkhī (d. ca. 590/1194) advocates a 'harder', more strident line.⁷ Yet even though the *Shukūk* is not injected with the religious polemic characteristic of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut* and Ibn Ghaylān's refutations of Avicenna, most of the metaphysical problems in the book, in particular those bearing on theological themes, exhibit underlying commitments and motives that are best described as theological, as the present study will reveal. This counter-Avicennan current stood in contrast to mainstream, traditional Avicennism, which elaborated Avicennan philosophy and defended it against its critics, especially Abū l-Barakāt. A key feature of al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn Ghaylān, as representatives of the counter-Avicennan current, is that while they engaged dialectically with Avicennan philosophy, each in his own distinctive way, they did not construct a coherent alternative system—a feature that, to an extent, also characterises large areas of al-Ghazālī's theological thinking. As such, they are symptomatic of an intermediate transitional phase, in which an established thought system undergoes criticism and some novel and inchoate ideas are mooted, but a new, fully fledged system has yet to take shape.

In comes Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who—as he tells us in his autobiographical collection of debates he had with some contemporaries in the East, the *Munāẓarāt*—interacts personally with al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn Ghaylān.⁸ It is almost certain that he also interacts with traditional Avicennists.⁹ He is highly critical of both sides, or 'parties' (*farīqayn*): of counter-Avicennists in view of their preoccupation with the raising of objections (*i'tirād*) against Avicennan philosophy while showing little interest, in his assessment, in more constructive, systematic inquiry, and of traditional Avicennists for their uncritical following (*taqlīd*) and entrenched support of philosophical authority, a thor-

7 On Ibn Ghaylān, see Shihadeh, 'Post-Ghazālīan Critic'. I am careful to use 'counter-Avicennan', rather than 'anti-Avicennan', as the latter implies sweeping, even absolute, opposition to Avicennan philosophy, which is certainly not true of al-Mas'ūdī, nor even of Ibn Ghaylān. I also use 'current', rather than 'school', as the latter suggests a higher degree of doctrinal and methodical coherence and group identity.

8 Shihadeh, 'From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī', 157 ff.; 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Response', introduction.

9 For some evidence, see Shihadeh, 'Avicenna's Corporeal Form', 383.

oughly unphilosophic attitude.¹⁰ In response, he develops his own analytical and dialectical method, which is both critical but at the same time systematic and constructive. Without a doubt, therefore, his influential philosophical and theological synthesis is the end product of this dialectical milieu. In other words, without the dialectical milieu just described—specifically, without al-Mas‘ūdī and the current he represented—there would have been no Fakhr al-Dīn.

The *Shukūk* is also of great interest on account of its philosophical content and the later reception of the aporias it raises. The text itself appears to have had limited circulation in post-Rāzian philosophy. Al-Ṭūsī, as noted, had access to it, probably only through al-Rāzī’s *Jawābāt*, while Badr al-Dīn al-Tustarī (d. 732/1332), who wrote a text ‘adjudicating’ between al-Rāzī’s and al-Ṭūsī’s full commentaries on the *Ishārāt*, appears to have had access to both al-Mas‘ūdī’s *Shukūk* and al-Rāzī’s *Jawābāt*.¹¹ One extant manuscript copy of the *Shukūk* had Mullā Ṣadrā al-Shīrāzī (d. 1050/1640) among its owners, though whether or not it had an impact on him is yet to be seen.¹² What is no less important is the later history of the problems. For not only does he write a dedicated response, the *Jawābāt*, al-Rāzī also discusses some of al-Mas‘ūdī’s puzzles, without identifying their source, in his *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and other philosophical works, through which they find their way into the later tradition of commentaries on the *Ishārāt* and the wider Arabic philosophical tradition. Although outside the *Jawābāt* and the *Munāẓarāt*, as far as I am aware, al-Mas‘ūdī is never mentioned by name in any of al-Rāzī’s works, it is nevertheless possible to identify some of the problems originally raised by him. For example, the problem discussed in Section 1 of the *Shukūk*, as I show elsewhere, is treated in al-Rāzī’s *Sharḥ al-Ishārāt* and other works.¹³ Another example can be found in the course of the discussion of the nature of vision in al-Rāzī’s highly influential philosophical work the *Mabāḥith*: he quotes a lengthy passage from the *Shukūk*, introduced by ‘The proponents of extramission argue’, along with an illustrative diagram, and concludes by writing, ‘This discussion was set out by an eminent contemporary (*aḥad fuḍalā’ al-zamān*), and we have reproduced it here verbatim’.¹⁴ It will take several studies to assess the full extent of al-Rāzī’s reception of the contents of the *Shukūk*, but the bottom line is that if a puzzle

10 Shihadeh, ‘From al-Ghazālī to al-Rāzī’, 170; ‘Al-Rāzī’s *Sharḥ*’; al-Rāzī, *Mabāḥith*, 1, 3–4.

11 For instance, al-Tustarī, *Muḥākamāt*, ff. 7^a; 51^b (where both texts are cited).

12 See p. 172 below.

13 Shihadeh, ‘Al-Rāzī’s *Sharḥ*’; ‘Avicenna’s Corporeal Form’.

14 Al-Rāzī, *Mabāḥith*, 2, 315–317; cf. *Shukūk*, 225–227.

is treated in this work, our default assumption should be that it is attested, in some form or other, in corresponding discussions in al-Rāzī's works.

The present volume includes four in-depth case studies covering five sections of the *Shukūk*, all treating metaphysical problems. Our focused probings are motivated first and foremost by the inherent philosophical interest of each of these problems, and secondarily by what they reveal to us concerning the author's 'agenda', sources and *modus operandi* in the *Shukūk*. Each case study, therefore, is more or less a self-contained investigation, not only of al-Mas'ūdī and his text, but also of the earlier debate at its background, starting with Avicenna and then turning, as relevant, to other thinkers and schools of thought, above all al-Ghazālī and Abū l-Barakāt. At several points in this exploration, we shall reinterpret these earlier sources in ways that diverge from current readings.

Our first two case studies focus on al-Mas'ūdī's treatment of two principal themes in Avicenna's metaphysics, namely efficient causation and potentiality. The overall thrust of al-Mas'ūdī's criticism in both cases is to counter some of the underpinnings of Avicenna's eternalist cosmology, and to provide the groundwork for a creationist philosophy, that is, a philosophical cosmogony according to which the world came to be in time, *ex nihilo*. The first case study, in Chapter 3, examines Section 9 of the *Shukūk*, which treats an aspect of Avicenna's theories of efficient causality and the existence of things possible of existence, particularly the problem of whether an originated thing depends on its agent for the full duration of its continued existence or only at the point of its coming-to-be. Attacking the case that Avicenna makes for the former position, al-Mas'ūdī works out a unique defence for the latter position. Chapter 4 then examines Sections 10 and 14 of the *Shukūk*, in the first of which al-Mas'ūdī targets Avicenna's theory of the ontology of possibility, specifically his contention that before a thing comes to be, its possibility must obtain in a substrate.

In our third and fourth case studies, we turn to comparatively narrower problems treated in the *Shukūk*. Chapter 5 examines al-Mas'ūdī's refutation of Avicenna's proof from possibility for the existence of the Necessary of Existence through Itself. He argues that, considered in itself, the proof is unsound, and moreover that a premise from which it starts is inconsistent with other views held by Avicenna. Finally, in Chapter 6, we turn to Section 1 of the *Shukūk*, in which al-Mas'ūdī raises a complaint against the strand of hylomorphism advocated by Avicenna, as represented by his proof of prime matter, and champions the competing hylomorphism of Abū l-Barakāt.

In the first place, however, we need to introduce the author and the text, and this we shall do in the first two chapters, respectively. We proceed, in

Chapter 1, by contextualising al-Mas‘ūdī’s philosophical thinking and we then attempt to raise him from obscurity by piecing together the fragmentary data available to us to reconstruct his biography and oeuvre, to the extent possible, and by mining another philosophical work of his for evidence of theological commitments. I argue that while such evidence is ample, in the final analysis the man remains quite elusive. In Chapter 2, we hone in on the *Shukūk* as we overview the contents of our text and explore its overall motives and *modus operandi*, partly on the basis of the case studies just outlined.