
Adamson’s book is part of the series *Great Medieval Thinkers*, which aims at providing substantial introductions to medieval thinkers. Adamson’s book fits that remit perfectly while also providing a useful account of most recent scholarship on al-Kindī.

The two opening chapters place al-Kindī in context, which is that of the massive translation effort under the ‘Abbāsids. Chapter I is devoted to al-Kindī’s life and encyclopaedic interests. What is especially worthwhile in it is Adamson’s attempt to establish a relative chronology of al-Kindī’s writings: the philosophical works “dominated by concern with Neoplatonic metaphysics and psychology, the eternity of the world and a cosmology deriving from Aristotelian sources” (p. 11) seem to be earlier than the more technical treatises “dominated by their use of complex geometrical demonstrations and mathematics” (p. 11). In Chapter II Adamson considers al-Kindī within the tradition of the falsafa. He has the great advantage of having come first: the first philosopher in the Arabic tradition, and the first to engage with earlier Greek philosophical and scientific wisdom, seeing it as a field of knowledge competing with the traditional Islamic sciences. For al-Kindī the philosophy of the Greeks is a “collective enterprise” (p. 22) aiming at reaching the true nature of things before moving to the True First Cause. The same, he claims, is true of Arabic philosophy. This is the reason why al-Kindī’s main treatise, *On First Philosophy*, can be considered “an attempt to use philosophy to prove the central truths of Islamic theological dogma” (p. 25): God is one, creator and providence. Philosophical and prophetic knowledge have access to the same truths, but while the former requires study, effort and time, the latter only God’s will. Al-Kindī’s project is speculative theology as the theology of the Mu’tazilites of his times, but the materials used are different: al-Kindī makes use of “Greek philosophical texts for supporting positions within Muslim theology” (p. 25).

Adamson seeks to identify these materials, paying more attention to al-Kindī’s philosophical theses and arguments than to his sources and fortune. Adamson, however, is fully aware that “it is often in interpreting his sources or trying to reconcile sources that al-Kindī’s creativity emerges” (p. 29). Adamson’s focus is on the structure, methodology and epistemological premises that guide al-Kindī’s philosophical research. He maintains this focus especially through the analysis of al-Kindī’s *On the Quantity of Aristotle’s Books*. Al-Kindī’s method is mathematical in the sense of being axiomatic rather than logically demonstrative, probably because of his lack of knowledge of the *Posterior Analytics*. The hierarchy of the sciences up to the first, metaphysics (or theology), is determined by the eminence
of their respective objects. The sciences propaedeutic to theoretical knowledge are the mathematical ones—arithmetic, geometry, harmonics and astronomy—which study various kinds of quantity and quality and their modes of inherence in sensible objects. Logic teaches how to express the truths of the theoretical science, which consists in the inquiry into three different objects: bodies, souls and the divine. In other writings al-Kindī does not hold consistently to this threefold division and points to mathematics as the second object of theoretical inquiry.

Chapters III-IV are devoted to the two best known topics of al-Kindī’s philosophy: the denial of the eternity of the world and the ineffability of God, the true One, the unique cause of the oneness and “being” of all things, and transcending every description. In the treatise On the true Agent, God as Creator bears a direct causal relationship only to the first creature, the heavens, which then pass on the causal action of God to everything else. Al-Kindī seems to have in mind the Aristotelian chain of movers up to the Unmoved Mover of the Physics, as well as the causality through intermediaries of the One in the Arabic Plotinus and Proclus. Adamson rightly raises the following problem: how does al-Kindī’s description of creation as God’s bringing being from non-being fit in with this model of God’s action through intermediary causes? The idea is that for al-Kindī the process of generation and corruption is distinct from the process of granting and removing being: the first is accomplished by intermediary causes, the second by God alone. As he writes: “It would seem that God does indeed have an immediate relationship with every created thing. For He gives each thing its being. But on the other hand, He gives only being. Other, intermediary, causes must be invoked to explain the features of each thing that make it the sort of thing that it is” (p. 69). Adamson observes that al-Kindī is not unambiguous in his theory of creation, because sometime he seems to affirm that God creates a being, a substance with its own characters.

The problem of creation involves the doctrine of the physical cosmos with temporal duration, to which al-Kindī devotes four treatises that are likely to form a series: On the Quiddity of What Cannot Be Finite, and What is said to Have Infinity, On the Oneness of God and the Finiteness of the Body of the World, On the First Philosophy, and finally Explaining the Finiteness of the Body of the World. Al-Kindī’s arguments, as shown by H. A. Davidson (Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy, 1987), strongly depend on Philoponus’ criticisms of Aristotle’s position on the eternity of the world. In Philoponus’ opinion “God can bring a moving world into being ex nihilo, and time along with it” (p. 83) and “God can, and will, override the world’s nature to give it eternal existence ex parte post” (p. 82). Adamson goes into the details of al-Kindī’s arguments and notes that he uses an axiomatic style. Thus he proves by reductio the impossibility of an infinite magnitude with all its predicates (time, motion, composition) once we identify magnitude with the body of the world;
he proves that an infinite period of time cannot elapse between any given past moment and the present; he proves the impossibility of the actual infinity that would follow from the eternity of the world, so that the conclusion imposes itself that the world is in no sense an actual infinite. Only God is not subject to time, because He is the cause of time, so He is the truly eternal because He is actually infinite and transcendent. His eternity is much more than lasting for an indefinite future. Adamson convincingly inscribes al-Kindī's denial of the eternity of the world and of anything other than God into the contemporary debate on the Koran’s createdness, as sustained by Mu’tazilites.

A broad chapter is devoted to al-Kindī’s psychology, discussing the nature of soul, the four-fold taxonomy of intellect (the First Intellect and the three different states of human intellect: potential, dispositional and actual), and the phenomena of memory and imagination defined as the faculty intermediate between sensation and intellect, the seal of prophetic dreams. Adamson pays particular attention to two problems that have been deeply discussed in the tradition of the falsafa: how does the immaterial soul relate to the material body? Is our knowledge of material objects related to our knowledge of immaterial objects and, if so, how? Concerning the first question, in the Discourse of the Soul, al-Kindī seems to state that there are psychic powers or faculties or activities, which are not essential to the soul and are realized through and in the body, but that soul as such is an intellective, simple and incorporeal substance that can, after death, exist without the body. This view justifies al-Kindī’s ethical intellectualism: he upholds the ascetic Neoplatonic way of life of turning away from the physical world in order to achieve contemplation of the intelligibles, and knowledge of the true nature of one’s soul and of God. Concerning the second problem, Adamson takes the reference text to be the treatise On Intellect based on some Greek interpretations on Aristotle De Anima III.4-5, possibly Philoponus’ commentary. He does not venture to say that Philoponus is the direct source of al-Kindī, as was advanced by J. Jolivet (L’Intellect selon Kindī, 1971), and suggests as a source of al-Kindī’s ideas a lost text, which he does not identify, deriving from Ammonius’ school. According to Adamson, this lost work, which includes elements from Philoponus’ interpretation while departing form it on certain points, forms part of the background of al-Kindī’s ideas. While any attempt at reconstructing lost and unidentifiable intermediate sources is vastly stimulating, the result must yet remain speculative.

In al-Kindī’s epistemology, which Adamson describes as “bifurcated” (p. 143), our knowledge of physical objects is unrelated to that of immaterial and intelligible objects: “we receive them from the first intellect, which is not God, but which is transcendent above us” (p. 127). The role of sensation is thus minimized, although not denied: one cannot have intellectual knowledge of sense particulars as such, since they are infinite and in constant change, but only of universals. The role of sensation is limited to that of prompting “the soul to uncover the intelli-
gibles that are already within it by remanding it of those intelligibles” (p. 133).
To this doctrine is related the theory of recollection, exposed by al-Kindī in the
treatise On Recollection that has been discovered by G. Endress (Al-Kindī’s Theory
of Anamnesis: A New Text and Its Implication, 1986; Al-Kindī über die Wiedererinnerung der Seele; 1994). After the death of body, soul will remember nothing
about sensible objects grasped by corporeal organs; it will have neither sense
organs nor imagination: “…the soul remembers only intelligibles from before it
entered the body, because there is nothing else to remember. Now when we rec-
ollect these intelligibles we do not realize we are remembering, but think we are
learning them for the first time” (p. 132).

Al-Kindī recognizes “no firm dividing line between science and philosophy”
(p. 160). This idea guides the chapter that Adamson devotes to the sciences
(medicine and optics) in Adamson’s interpretation, and especially applies to the
role of mathematics in al-Kindī’s methodology of philosophy and science: empirical
observation only checks that the rules of arithmetic, geometry, and harmon-
ics govern the physical and psychological phenomena and the structure of the
cosmos. As far as cosmology is concerned, Adamson notes that al-Kindī makes
extensive use of Aristotle’s On the Heavens, Physics and Meteorology, follows them
as well as Alexander of Aphrodisis’s Quaestiones and De Providentia in his account
of how God causes the motion on the heavens and how the heavenly motions
conserves the original created mixture of elements which enter into the composi-
tion of bodies from the lowest in complexity to man. For Al-Kindī the heavens
are the cause of all sublunar phenomena and events: his trust in astral predic-
dion, divine providence and universal causal determinism (as stated in On Rays, a
work considered authentic by Adamson) stems from this view.

The book ends with notes, a comprehensive bibliography and an index of
names and terms. It gives a useful description of al-Kindī’s thought and doct-
trines, and provides the lines of recent research on this important philosopher. It
may be regretted that Adamson has not developed further his Chapter VII on
science as well as the original points of his own study of al-Kindī, such as the
chronology of his writings, the methodology and epistemological premises that
guided his philosophical research, or the authorship of De Radis. These slight res-
ervations notwithstanding, Adamson succeeds in showing that al-Kindī has sen-
sible things to say to us, and that he is a figure with whom we should engage
intellectually in the present.

Cecilia Martini Bonadeo
Department of Philosophy
University of Padova
ceciliam@libero.it