In his seminal 1988 study, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, Dimitri Gutas discusses an apparently inexplicable passage in Avicenna’s autobiography. In this passage, Avicenna says that he was unable to understand Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, despite repeated re-readings, until he read al-Fārābī’s treatise on the aims of the *Metaphysics* – a treatise that strikes the modern reader as cursory and even banal.¹ Gutas suggests that the reason the treatise was so helpful to Avicenna was al-Fārābī’s claim that the *Metaphysics* primarily deals with being as such, rather than God and the other immaterial principles.² Of course the *Metaphysics* does discuss God, because God is the first principle of being. But it is not a work of theology. Why might Avicenna have found this remark to be such a revelation? Gutas’ answer is that Avicenna had previously tried to understand the *Metaphysics* first and foremost as a work of theology, because of his exposure to a tradition of thought prominent in the Eastern part of the ‘Abbāsid empire, a tradition that can be traced back to the 9th century thinker al-Kindī.

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¹ This is to assume that the text we have, entitled ‘Fī l-‘aqād al-hakīm, is the one referred to by Avicenna. For the text see al-Fārābī, *Rasā’il, Da’īra al-Ma’ārif al-Umānīyya*, Hyderabad 1926, no. 2; also F. Dieterici, *Alfarabis philosophische Abhandlungen aus Londoner, Leidener und Berliner Handschriften*, I–II, Brill, Leiden 1890–1892, for an edition and German translation. It is translated into English in D. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition. Introduction to reading Avicenna’s philosophical works*, Brill, Leiden 1988 (Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 4), p. 240–2.

² See Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 248–9. The relevant passage in al-Fārābī reads: «For most people prematurely imagine that the meaning and contents of this book are a discussion of the Creator, be He praised and exalted, and the intellect, the soul, and other things related to these, and [they imagine also] that the science of metaphysics and of God’s unity (ta’wīd) are essentially (bi-‘aynihi) one and the same. Therefore we find that most who study it become confused and lose their way, since we find that most of what is actually said in [the *Metaphysics*] has nothing to do with this purpose [sc. discussing God, intellect, etc.]. Rather what is specifically said about this purpose is only to be found in the eleventh treatise, which is given the symbol Lām [i.e. Lambda]». 
I believe that Gutas was right to point to the significance of a group of philosophers who are the intellectual heirs of al-Kindī, and that he was right to contrast them to the Peripatetic movement taking place in Baghdad in the 10th century. I propose calling them collectively the “Kindian tradition”. The most obvious thinkers to include in this tradition are students who were taught by al-Kindī, or students of his students. We have information about two students of al-Kindī himself. The first is Āḥmad b. al-Ṭayyīb al-Saraḥṣī (born 218–222/833–837, died 286/899), a prolific author many of whose works have titles identical to works by al-Kindī. The second is Abū Zayd al-Balḥī (died at an advanced age in 322/934), who is the main conduit for Kindian thought to the second generation of Kindians. Unfortunately almost nothing of the philosophical works by al-Saraḥṣī or Abū Zayd has been preserved, but what we do know of their thought confirms some degree of adherence to al-Kindī’s general philosophical approach. Another associate of al-Kindī’s was the famous astrologer Abū Mašar al-Balḥī, whose Great Introduction to Astrology is influenced by al-Kindī’s cosmology. In the second generation the most significant figure is Abū l-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Āmīrī (died 381/992), a student of Abū Zayd and the author of numerous extant works in philosophy. Abū Zayd was also the teacher of the mysterious Ibn Farīgūn, whom we know only as the author of a fascinating text entitled Ğawāmi‘ al-‘ulūm (Compendium of the Sciences), which employs branch diagrams to divide

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3 This expression is intended to indicate not so much a body of shared philosophical doctrines – though it is possible to find doctrines that run through most of the authors in question, especially Neoplatonic metaphysical doctrines – as an overall approach to philosophy and a certain type of engagement with a range of other disciplines, as will be explained in what follows.

4 On al-Saraḥṣī see F. Rosenthal, Ahmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḥṣī, American Oriental Society, New Haven 1943 (American Oriental Series, 43), which collects all the extant testimonia and fragments.

