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Nietzsche and the *Falāsifa*

Abstract: Despite the fact that very few works on Nietzsche and the Islamic tradition have appeared until recently, Peter Groff contends that comparative work on Nietzsche and philosophical traditions beyond the bounds of Europe raises possibilities for productive cross-cultural dialogues. Toward this, he engages Nietzsche with specific Islamic philosophers of the classical period rather than Islam itself. Groff examines Nietzsche's understanding of Islam and its relevance to his critique of Christianity and European modernity. While Nietzsche had little, if any, familiarity with the *falāsifa*, Groff notes their intellectual relatedness, particularly their notions of perfectionism and philosophy as a way of life.

Orient and Occident are chalk-lines drawn before us to fool our timidity. (Nietzsche, SE 1)

In the winter of 1881, Nietzsche wrote to his friend Peter Gast, "Ask my old comrade Gersdorff whether he would like to go with me for one or two years to Tunis [...] I want to live among Muslims for a good long time, especially where their faith is strongest: in this way I expect to sharpen my judgment and my eye for everything European."¹ In spite of Nietzsche's newly-established nomadic way of life, this trip was not to be; indeed, Nietzsche never managed to venture beyond the bounds of Europe – at least not physically.² But the attempt to escape the familiar and unquestioned, to wander both historically and culturally beyond the landscape of modern Christian European concepts and values, played a pivotal role in his experimental philosophy. An autobiographical note from 1885 captures this strategy nicely:

¹ Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, 13 March 1881, KGB III/1, No. 88. For a discussion of the mood and impulse behind the missive, see Safranski 2002, p. 219. All Nietzsche texts cited by abbreviation of title in English. I use Walter Kaufmann's translations for Penguin/Vintage and R. J. Hollingdale's translations for Cambridge University Press, with occasional emendations in favor of greater literalness. Translations of passages from Nietzsche's notebooks (KSA, followed by division, volume and fragment number) and correspondence (KGB, followed by volume and letter number) are my own.

² On this point see AOM 223, a passage in which self-knowledge eventually points towards a kind of "universal knowledge" which Nietzsche associates with the prospect of a free-spirited, self-determining future humanity. Cf. HH I 616 on the importance of temporal-historical wandering, by imaginatively feeling one's way into a past era.

A great, ever greater liberation [*Loslösung*], an arbitrary going-into-the-foreign, an ‘estrangement’ [*Entfremdung*], a chill, a disillusionment – in those years, this alone and nothing more was what I required. I tested everything to which my heart had attached itself up to that time, I turned around the best and most beloved things and saw their back sides for myself, I did the contrary with everything on which the human art of slandering and maligning has exercised itself. At that time I walked about among many things that until then had remained foreign, with a curiosity that was careful and even affectionate, I learned more easily – how to experience our time and everything ‘modern.’ (KSA 11, 40[65])³

In a subsequent note from the same period (Aug.–Sept. 1885), he gives himself the imperative “to become step by step more extensive [*umfänglicher werden*], more supra-national [*übernationaler*], more European, more supra-European [*übereuropäischer*], more Oriental [*morgenländischer*] ...” (KSA 11, 41[7]).⁴ This intellectual wandering and expansion – towards Southern and Eastern horizons – was at times accompanied by sickness, but ultimately pointed towards a greater health, a freedom of the spirit, even the recuperation of a kind of nobility.⁵ It afforded him the pathos of distance, the luxury of looking down upon Europe from afar and from above. In a subsequent letter to Paul Deussen, he describes this standpoint as his “‘supra-European eye’,”⁶ elsewhere, he speaks more radically of an “Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye” (BGE 56)⁷ and of the need to “think *more*

3 For an illuminating discussion of this moment in terms of Nietzsche’s “experimental philosophy” see Gerhardt 1998, p. 82.

4 Unless otherwise noted, the German term rendered by “Oriental” is *morgenländisch*. This note, which begins by discussing the possibility of retrieving the Dionysian experience of the Greeks, concludes in a curious way that arguably undermines the apparent drift towards globalism: “... finally *more Greek* – because the Greeks were the first major binding and synthesis of everything Oriental – : and thus the *beginning* of the European soul, the discovery of *our* ‘new world’: – who knows what one who lives according to such imperatives may one day encounter? Perhaps that – *a new day!*”

5 On the origins of this shift, see D’Iorio 2016.

6 Letter to Paul Deussen, 3 January 1888, KGB III/5, No. 969. See also KSA 11, 35[9], where he characterizes “supra-European” thinking as a preparation for becoming “masters of the earth” (*die Herren der Erde*) and the “legislator of the future” (*der Gesetzgeber der Zukunft*).

7 The perspective described here “has looked down, down into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking – beyond good and evil and no longer, like the Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell of delusion and morality.” Such a vision may lead one to the “opposite ideal” of world affirmation. For an excellent discussion of this pivotal passage, see Lampert 2004, pp. 116–122. On the perspective that “look[s] down,” see BGE 30; despite its implied critique of Schopenhauer as exemplifying a world-denying and presumably exoteric standpoint Nietzsche elsewhere describes him as “perhaps the best educated German, with a European horizon: there are even moments where he looks with Oriental eyes” (KSA 11, 34[150]).

orientally [*orientalischer*] about philosophy and knowledge,” to attain an “*Oriental overview of Europe*” (KSA 11, 26[317]).⁸

1 Beyond Europe: Nietzsche’s Engagement with Eastern Traditions

Nietzsche’s curiosity with the East is well-known. The category itself evokes the heady promise but also the excesses and shortcomings of nineteenth-century Orientalism.⁹ Standing on the other side of the twentieth century, his evocations of the *Orient* and *Morgenland* may at times seem outdated, clichéd, monolithic and deceptively homogeneous, presuming as they do to encompass a diverse variety of peoples and lands: Turkish, Arab, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and so forth.¹⁰ But Nietzsche was more sensitive than most to the irreducible multiplicities so often masked by convenient unities, and as Thomas Brobjer has shown, his familiarity with Eastern philosophical and religious traditions was actually broader and in some respects deeper than is usually assumed

8 Cf. Nietzsche’s half-joking self-congratulatory description of Zarathustra as “the deepest and brightest, most southern and most Oriental book that there is” in his Letter to Marie Köckert, Mid-Feb. 1885 (KGB III/3, No. 574). In Z IV Daughters 1, Zarathustra juxtaposes “good, clear, Oriental air” (from “another blue realm of heaven, in which no clouds and no thoughts hovered”) with “damp and cloudy heavy-hearted [*schwermüthigen*] old Europe.”

9 The formative study of this topic is Schwab 1984 (originally published in 1950 as *La Renaissance orientale*). Said 1978 is of course the classic critique of the discipline as inextricably bound up with Western imperialism, although it does not examine the German tradition and only touches upon Nietzsche in passing. Influential as this groundbreaking study has been, subsequent scholarship on the topic has endeavored to present a more nuanced and even-handed account (see e. g. Clarke 1997 and Irwin 2006). For an excellent collection of articles on European philosophers’ historical fascination with and indebtedness to Asian traditions, see Macfie (ed.) 2003; the volume reprints Sprung 1991 and Brobjer 1998.

10 Large 2013 provides a complex, agonistic portrait of this problem. Despite the objectifying fantasies in which Nietzsche sometimes indulges, Large argues that his Orientalism is nonetheless an “uncommon” one (p. 179), because his evaluation of the Orient is generally positive and employed as a means by which to critique the failings of European culture. At the same time, it is “contradictory” because the positive category of the “Oriental” is still defined reactively in opposition to Europe, which retains a primacy in his hermeneutic scheme (p. 186). Yet Nietzsche “reverses the received evaluation of the Europe-Orient distinction only in turn to deconstruct the opposition itself, so that even while he remains within the overall framework of an Orientalist discourse, this discourse is necessarily qualified, and ultimately undermined, in a manner which tempers the undeniable grossness of the stereotypes on which Nietzsche is otherwise trading” (p. 203, cf. p. 179).

(Brobjer 2005).¹¹ In any case, Nietzsche's experimental engagements with unfamiliar ways of seeing, evaluating and living gave him the means to re-experience his own tradition in a new light – “to sharpen [his] judgment and [his] eye for everything European,” as he put it in the letter to Gast. It was a way of exposing the hidden provinciality of modern European thought and questioning its most deeply-rooted assumptions, of opening up the possibility of a less cramped and myopic worldview – and arguably even initiating a genuinely pluralistic global dialogue.

He has, as a result of this, become a patron saint of sorts to the field of comparative philosophy.¹² And his cross-cultural hermeneutic has itself given rise to a considerable body of scholarship that might be divided roughly into three overlapping but nonetheless distinguishable categories: (1) studies that examine Nietzsche's reading, knowledge and strategic appropriation of the Asian traditions he discusses, (2) studies that examine his subsequent reception and influence on those traditions, and (3) studies that, in the spirit of his own itinerant philosophical explorations, set him up in dialogue with select thinkers from these traditions – thinkers who he himself never read and who themselves had not had the chance to read him, but who retroactively have turned out to be edifying Nietzschean interlocutors.

It was really only in the early 1990s that comparative scholarship on Nietzsche first reached critical mass, with the publication of Graham Parkes' pioneering anthology on *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Parkes 1991).¹³ Since then, there has been a surge of studies on Nietzsche and various non-Western thinkers and traditions. However, the emphasis so far has primarily been on India, China and Japan, with an almost exclusive focus on Buddhist, Hindu, Daoist and Confucian traditions;¹⁴ very little work has been done on Nietzsche and the Islamic tradition.¹⁵ This is a remarkable fact, not only because of Nietzsche's own obvi-

11 For a more critical view on this question, see Sprung 1991.

12 On Nietzsche's transcultural hermeneutic and its pertinence for subsequent comparative approaches to philosophy, see Scheiffle 1991 and Figl 1991. For two useful overviews of the history of comparative philosophy, see Clarke 1997 as well as Kirloskar-Steinbach, Ramana, and Maffie 2014. For an excellent recent methodological discussion of the comparative project, see Chakrabarti and Weber 2016.

13 The major book-length study prior to Parkes' anthology is Mistry 1981.

14 It would be beyond the scope of this discussion to attempt to catalogue the totality of comparative work done so far on Nietzsche. Studies of Nietzsche and various non-Western thinkers can be found scattered throughout a wide range of journals and edited volumes on comparative philosophy.

15 See below for discussion of relevant scholarship on the Islamic tradition. To frame the point in geographico-cultural (rather than religio-philosophical) terms, it may be argued that in con-

ous interest in that tradition – there are well over a hundred references to Islam and Islamic cultures strewn throughout his published works, notebooks and letters – but because the prospect of establishing a cross-cultural dialogue between Nietzsche and Islam is itself exciting and promising.

2 Nietzsche's Islam

Some important work has already been done on this front. The main thrust of it has focused on Nietzsche's knowledge and understanding of Islam. Andrea Orsucci was the first to track down many of Nietzsche's Orientalist sources (e. g., William Gifford Palgrave, Julius Wellhausen, Julius Lippert, etc.) and show the extent to which his views were influenced by them (Orsucci 1996).¹⁶ Ian Almond, Gary Shapiro and Duncan Large have in various ways expanded upon this task, in some cases identifying additional sources, but focusing primarily on Nietzsche's understanding of Islam and the strategic role it plays in his writings.¹⁷

A curious picture emerges when we piece together these scattered fragments. Given Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God and his relentless polemics against Christianity, one might expect him to be comparably unsympathetic towards the last great monotheistic religion. And Nietzsche does of course have some critical things to say, for instance, about the exploitation of the concepts of immortality, judgment and the afterlife in Islam as a kind of metaphysical

temporary Nietzsche studies Nietzsche's interest in the Arab, Turkish and Persian worlds has taken a back seat to his interest in South and East Asia. On Nietzsche's interest in Iran, see Schwab 1984, pp. 435–437, as well as Ashouri 2010.

16 Orsucci's study does not set out to focus specifically on Islam itself, but nonetheless provides an invaluable discussion of some of the sources of Nietzsche's knowledge of Islam (see esp. chap. IX, 318–340). Brobjer's otherwise excellent work unfortunately omits Nietzsche's engagement with Islam; see Brobjer 2004 and 2008. This is perhaps unsurprising though, given that Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, etc., are typically viewed as 'philosophies' as much as religions, while Islam (along with Judaism and Christianity) tends to be categorized first and foremost (if not exclusively) as a religion. Of course, one finds important philosophical activity within each of these religious traditions, but this tends not to be the focus of Nietzsche's actual remarks on Islam.

17 Almond 2003 extends Said's Foucauldian critique of Orientalism, providing useful overviews of Nietzsche's remarks about Islam, emphasizing the limited extent of his understanding and the strategic ways in which he used this knowledge. Shapiro 2008 attends to Nietzsche's sources and understanding as well, focusing in particular on his fascination with the Ismā'īlī assassins, but uses such considerations as a springboard for broader reflections on the U. S.'s 2003 invasion of Iraq. On Large 2013, see n. 10.

penal institution.¹⁸ But he sees such details as peripheral corruptions inherited from Christianity.¹⁹ On the whole, in fact, Nietzsche's presentation of Islam is surprisingly affirmative. I will not attempt here to document the various passages from Nietzsche's corpus celebrating the virtues, accomplishments and overall healthiness of Islam, as this has already been done admirably.²⁰ Suffice it to say that he sees the so-called "Lawbook of Muhammad" (*das Gesetzbuch Muhammeds*) as exemplifying a "yea-saying Semitic religion," on a par with his beloved *Lawbook of Manu* (itself supposedly the paradigm of a yea-saying *Aryan* religion).²¹

However, we must bear in mind that at the end of the day Nietzsche's interest in Islam is primarily instrumental: it is first and foremost a means by which to problematize and unsettle the complacent dogmatism of modern Christian Europe. Ian Almond sums this up nicely by pointing out that

Nietzsche's positive remarks concerning Islam usually fall into four related categories: Islam's 'unenlightened' condition with regard to women and social inequality, its perceived 'manliness', its non-judgmentalism and its affirmative character... In all these remarks, a certain comparative tone is forever present, as if Islam were a kind of mirror in which the decadent, short-sighted European might finally glimpse the true condition of his decay. (Almond 2003, p. 46)²²

Put simply, Nietzsche is less interested in Islam as an object of understanding in its own right than as a temporary ally in his fight against Christianity and European modernity, a provisional alternative perspective that can help to show the optionality and contingency of that worldview. As the old maxim has it, "the

18 See KSA 13, 14[204] and A 42. Other ostensibly critical observations about Islam, e. g., its use of energy-monopolizing prayer rituals (GS 128) and other kinds of deception or manipulation (A 55) are acknowledged by Nietzsche as (1) common to most religions and (2) wise and necessary policies for dealing with the vulgar multitude.

19 As Orsucci points out, Nietzsche adopts this idea from Julius Wellhausen; the passages from the *Nachlass* and the *Antichrist* mentioned above are in fact cribbed from Wellhausen 1884, vol. 3, p. 209f. (see Orsucci 1996, pp. 339–340). Cf. Almond, who emphasizes the way in which Nietzsche adopts and inverts European orientalist assumptions here (i. e., that Christianity is the *font et origo* of Islam), and in doing so implies the existence of an Ur-Islam presumably uncorrupted by the "womanish" metaphysics of Christianity (Almond 2003, p. 53).

20 For this, see Almond 2003, *passim*.

21 KSA 13, 14[195], but cf. Brobjer 2004, pp. 17–18.

22 Almond describes Nietzsche's Islam as "ultimately vacuous": it first and foremost serves a "combative, antagonistic function ... but never emerges as an object of interest in itself" (Almond 2003, p. 51). On this point, cf. Large 2013, p. 186.

enemy of my enemy is my friend.”²³ This should come as no surprise, though, given what has been said so far: Nietzsche’s hermeneutic incursions into foreign traditions are primarily for the sake of cultivating a greater autonomy from the unconscious constraints of his own European lineage, and thus improving his *own* self-understanding and prospects for life. But then, one would hardly turn to Nietzsche for a defense of the value of disinterested knowledge.²⁴

3 Nietzschean Dialogues with the *Falāsifa*

So, where do we go from here? Nietzsche scholars haven’t confined themselves to reconstructing his knowledge of Buddhism or Hinduism or Confucianism – why then should we content ourselves with just reconstructing Nietzsche’s understanding of Islam? Why not delve into Nietzsche’s reception and influence within the Islamic tradition? And further: why not engage in the hermeneutic project of comparative philosophy? Having mentioned the desirability of establishing a dialogue between Nietzsche and Islam, I now need to back-peddle a bit, because I am not sure what it would mean to cultivate a dialogue between a particular thinker and an entire tradition – especially one as long-standing, widespread, decentralized and heterogeneous as Islam. We can look at how Nietzsche selectively understood and used Islam. We can look at how subsequent thinkers in the Islamic tradition understood and used Nietzsche.²⁵ We can even employ Nietzschean optics in the interests of contemporary world-political concerns, e. g., to problematize post-9/11 discourses about the supposedly essential conflict between Islam and the West (Shapiro 2008), or to challenge naïve Islamist myths about the origin and soul of Islam, in order to reconstruct a more nuanced

²³ Almond takes this as the sub-title of his article; interestingly, a variant of the phrase can be traced back to Kautilya’s *Arthaśāstra* (c. 100 BCE–100 CE), an Indian treatise on material advantage, politics, economics and war. See *Arthaśāstra* 2012, pp. 120–122.

²⁴ In spite of his occasional celebration of “*life as a means to knowledge*” (GS 324, cf. Letter to Otto Eiser, early Jan. 1880, KGB III/1, No. 3), Nietzsche rejects the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, just as he rejects the idealistic credo *art pour l’art*. The notion that knowledge is an end in itself (and thus an absolute value) rather than ultimately answerable to life is a remnant of the ascetic ideal, a project that Nietzsche both inherits and subverts.

²⁵ See e. g. Issami 2016 and Hanssen 2017. On the progressive translation of Nietzsche’s texts into Arabic, Persian and Turkish see respectively, Mosbah 2006, Ashouri 2006, and Arouba 2010.

and flexible understanding of its identity (Jackson 2007).²⁶ My own predilections, however, are somewhat different.

At the end of the day, Nietzsche conceived of himself first and foremost as a *philosopher*. That was for him, as we know, a privileged and honorific title.²⁷ So it seems to me that if one wants to cultivate a dialogue between Nietzsche and particular voices within the Islamic tradition, the most appropriate and interesting thing to do would be to set him up in conversation with other actual philosophers. And the Islamic tradition has produced an impressive lineage of philosophers: figures like al-Kindī, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufayl, Ibn Rushd and so forth. This is just the tip of the iceberg in the so-called ‘classical’ period (9th–12th c. CE); the list goes on and on. Such figures have typically been omitted from Eurocentric histories of philosophy in the West or at most relegated to a footnote or short chapter, although this is thankfully starting to change.²⁸ Nietzsche himself, unfortunately, had no familiarity with these thinkers: he never mentions any of them, no works by or about them can be found in his personal library or list of readings, and there’s little reason to think that he might even have encountered their ideas indirectly.²⁹ Why then attempt to establish a conversation with them retroactively, as it were?

First, let me say that an exclusive obsession with concrete historical transmission is the death of comparative philosophy. There has to be some play there, some flexibility, some imaginative openness; otherwise all we are left with is philological spadework, which is of course necessary and interesting, but no substitute for philosophy itself. Nietzsche had no familiarity with Confu-

26 Jackson’s book is an ambitious, though not entirely successful attempt to reconceive the nature of modern Islamic identity through the lens of Nietzsche’s thought. For an analysis of its shortcomings, see Groff 2010.

27 On this, see part six of BGE (“We Scholars”), which attempts to disentangle the notion of the philosopher from a host of modern corruptions and recuperate its world-historical significance. For a rich and thoughtful consideration of this question, see Lampert 2018.

28 The most obvious single instance of this – apart from the recent proliferation of new translations and studies of Islamic philosophical figures, movements and traditions – is Peter Adamson’s groundbreaking podcast series “History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps” (<https://www.historyofphilosophy.net/>), subsequently available in print form Oxford University Press (Adamson 2016).

29 See Campioni, D’Iorio, Fornari, Fronterotta, and Orsucci 2003, as well as Brobjer 2004 and 2008. If there were any Islamic philosopher he might have been familiar with, it would have been the twelfth-century Andalusian Ibn Ṭufayl, whose philosophical tale *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* was translated into Hebrew, Latin, Dutch, English, German, French, Spanish and Russian. The text impressed a wide range of European philosophers and scientists – Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Newton, Rousseau, and Kant, to name but a few – arguably serving as a vital source for the nascent scientific revolution and Enlightenment.

cius, or with the Chinese Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, or the Indian Madhyamika Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, or Zen master Dōgen, but this doesn't mean their thoughts don't resonate and spark in edifying ways.³⁰ It is no surprise, then, that interesting comparative work has been done on them. I would suggest that philosophers like al-Kindī, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī and so forth hold out a similar promise. What would they have to say to one another? Cross-cultural and historical conversation, like any genuine dialogue, requires a fusion of horizons, which itself presupposes that the interlocutors' philosophical worldviews are not hermetically sealed off from one another. What might Nietzsche and the Islamic philosophers have in common? What concerns or commitments might they share, which could provide the thin end of the wedge in opening up a worthwhile philosophical dialogue?

One obvious thing they share is a common intellectual heritage: an extensive knowledge of, and appreciation for, the insights of classical Greek and Hellenistic thought. This is particularly the case with regard to the early *falāsifa*.³¹ Nietzsche and the *falāsifa* were careful students of the ancients, the former through his background in philology, the latter through the great Graeco-Arabic translation project and the many commentaries that accompanied it (Gutas 1998). Moreover, their engagement with Greek thought was neither passive nor merely a matter of historical interest; for them, it was vital and directly pertinent to their lived experience of the world. Nietzsche and the *falāsifa* put the insights of the ancients to work in bold new ways: they appropriated, transformed and

30 As Brobjer notes, Nietzsche acquired copies of the *Great Learning* (then traditionally attributed to Confucius), and Laozi's *Daodejing*, but seems not to have read either. Compared to his interest in and knowledge of Indian philosophy (due in part to his friend, the great Indologist Paul Deussen), Nietzsche's familiarity with Chinese and Japanese philosophy was minimal. See Brobjer 2004, pp. 10, 19 (n. 6) and 20 (n. 29–30).

31 *Falāsifa* (sing: *faylasūf*, “philosopher”) is derived from the Arabic *falsafa*, a loan word drawn from the Greek *philosophia*. In the classical period, it generally indicated philosophers who were indebted to or allied themselves in some way with ancient Greek thought. A broader – and more indigenous term – for philosophy within the Islamic tradition is *ḥikma* (“wisdom”), often used side by side with *falsafa* during the classical period and with even greater frequency after that. *Ḥikma* casts a wider epistemic net than *falāsifa*, encompassing not just the rational argumentation, conceptual analysis and demonstrative proofs traditionally associated with the Greek-influenced philosophers, but other ostensive sources of knowledge: divine revelation and its exegesis, prophecy, traditions, dialectical speculative theology, authoritative esoteric teachings, intuitive insights, mystical experience, spiritual exercises and ethical self-cultivation. Some of these resources (esp. spiritual exercises and self-cultivation) were in fact central to the activity of the *falāsifa* as well. I emphasize the *falāsifa* in particular here because of their explicit appropriation and reinterpretation of Greek thought. For a useful overview of the parameters of philosophy in the Islamic tradition, see Nasr 1996a and 1996b, as well as Peters 1996.

reanimated Greek ideas in new contexts and towards new ends that their progenitors would scarcely have recognized. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their reinterpretations and repurposings often diverge radically and at times even become antipodes of a sort.

A few areas of intersection warrant mentioning. First, Nietzsche shares with the *falāsifa* an older, more traditional conception of philosophy as a ‘way of life’ (*bios*) or ‘art of living’ (*technē tou biou*). This notion, which Pierre Hadot in particular has helped to recuperate, was common to most ancient Greek and Hellenistic thinkers, who saw their task not simply as the discovery or construction of a system of true propositions, but more fundamentally, the transformation of one’s experience of the world, indeed, the shaping and cultivation of one’s self, through various kinds of *askēsis* or spiritual practices (Hadot 1995 and 2002).³² Setting Nietzsche up in dialogue with thinkers like al-Kindī or al-Rāzī or Ibn Ṭufayl, we can see the various ways in which such practices might be reconceived within new horizons, with radically different conceptions of flourishing. For the latter, this self-sculpting activity reveals or recuperates essential structures of the self ultimately rooted in the deeper reality of God – structures that have been obscured by confused, incoherent beliefs, unruly passions, unexamined inherited customs and inadequately reflective habitual practices. For Nietzsche, of course, there is ultimately no essential self to return to, but one can discover to a greater or lesser extent one’s “granite of spiritual fate” (BGE 231) produced by the contingencies of natural history, and experiment with different forms of aesthetic self-cultivation to complement or at least work around it, occasionally expanding the boundaries of human perfectibility.³³

This project points towards a second theme that runs throughout the classical period of Islamic philosophy and perhaps less obviously, if no less importantly, through Nietzsche’s corpus: the Platonic conception of philosophy as “becoming like God so far as it is possible” (*homoīōsis theōi kata to dunaton*).³⁴ This takes various forms in the Islamic tradition. One might undertake the imitation of God (*tashabbuh bi allāh*) by knowing the truth, cultivating or perfecting one’s character and doing good (in this respect there is some resonance with the Sūfī project of bringing one’s character traits into accord with those of God). Or one might attempt to imitate God in political terms, by (1) acquiring a theoretical

³² For a reading of classical Islamic philosophy along these lines, see Azadpur 2011, esp. pp. 3–19. On this theme in Nietzsche, see Hutter 2005, Ure 2008, Hutter and Friedland (2013), and Ansell-Pearson 2014.

³³ On this, see Groff 2004 and 2014a.

³⁴ See Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b–c; cf. *Symposium* 207e–209e, *Republic* 500c and 501b, and *Ti-maeus* 90a–d. For an excellent discussion of this ideal, see Sedley 1999.

knowledge of God and the world, (2) constructing an ideal state as the counterpart of the universe, and (3) imitating the actions of God by endeavoring to establish the state within it as a spatio-temporal phenomenon, taking into consideration the prevailing cultural-historic conditions and constraints. One even finds what might be characterized as a natural scientific interpretation of this ideal, in which the philosopher imitates the Creator by acquiring the science of generation and ultimately learns how to produce minerals, plants, animals, and even an artificial human being.³⁵ The imitation of God may seem like an archaic irrelevancy for a thinker like Nietzsche, but I would suggest that its echoes nonetheless resonate through his thought in fascinating ways in the wake of the death of God – not only in his experimental notions of self-cultivation (the attempt to recuperate and redeem the blind, aleatory workings of nature) but in his ambition to shape the future of humanity (the cultivation of “higher types” based on the various “lucky strikes” (*Glücksfälle*) strewn through humanity’s past).³⁶

This in turn points towards a third and final zone of intersection: the appropriation of the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-ruler (Rep. 473d). Nietzsche shares with a number of thinkers in this tradition a commitment to the ideal coincidence of political power and philosophical wisdom.³⁷ It is a commonplace to emphasize the anti-Platonic elements of Nietzsche’s thought, and certainly this is correct as regards his overturning of metaphysics, but in terms of his political philosophy, Nietzsche is a card-carrying Platonist.³⁸ Genuine philosophers are for him “commanders and legislators” who create values and are uniquely responsible for shaping the future of humanity (BGE 211) – one condition for which is the ability to think, at least temporarily, in a “supra-European” way (KSA 11, 35[9]).³⁹ Having on various occasions drawn approving comparisons between the nomothetic ambitions of Plato and Muhammad as lawgivers,⁴⁰ Nietzsche might have been curious to discover that he had an important prede-

35 On the appropriation of *homoīōsis theōi* in the Islamic philosophical tradition see Berman 1961 and Druart 1993, esp. 336–344.

36 See Groff 2004 (p. 147), 2014a (p. 989) and 2014b.

37 On the influence of Platonic political philosophy within the Islamic philosophical tradition, see Rosenthal 1961, esp. pp. 113–223.

38 On Nietzsche as Platonic political philosopher, see Strauss 1983, Picht 1988 (esp. pp. 226–241), Lampert 1993 and 2018, Rosen 1995, McIntyre 1997, Hutter 2005 and Groff 2006.

39 Cf. BGE 203, as well as Z II *Stillest Hour*; for illuminating early drafts of BGE 211, see KSA 11, 26[407] and KSA 11, 38[13]. Such philosophical legislators may even disseminate noble myths and religions as tools for the cultivation of different types (see e. g. BGE 61–62).

40 D 496; KSA 11, 26[407] and KSA 11, 38[13]; cf. KSA 9, 11[19]. Interestingly, Nietzsche even sees Muhammad as part of his own “lineage” (*Herkunft*) (KSA 9, 15[17]).

cessor in this respect: al-Fārābī, who first adapted, extended and transformed Plato's political teaching to accommodate the new realities of Islam, linking it to the revealed religious law and the phenomenon of prophecy.⁴¹ For al-Fārābī, the true philosopher must not only be a ruler, prince and legislator, but a spiritual leader.⁴² That is, he must be capable of taking complex philosophical truths and conveying them to the multitude through colorful images and persuasive mythopoetic speech. This is in fact the role of religion according to him: an 'image' of philosophy, it nonetheless performs a certain surrogate soteriological function, providing true belief and thus happiness to the many, according to their hierarchical natural capacity.⁴³

This suggests a number of potential points of entry for a series of cross-cultural dialogues between Nietzsche and Islamic philosophers.⁴⁴ I can of course only gesture towards what I see as potential resonances here. For real proof, one would need to dive into the more fine-grained nuances of their texts. Reading Nietzsche's middle period works like *Daybreak* or the *Gay Science* side by side with al-Rāzī's *Book of the Philosophical Life*, or *Zarathustra* alongside Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, or *Beyond Good and Evil* next to al-Fārābī's *Attainment of Happiness* is both enlivening and provides a transformed understanding of Nietzsche's thought, while showing him to have many more at least partially kindred spirits within the tradition to converse with. It also reveals the philosophical tradition out of which Nietzsche emerges to be broader and more heterogeneous than generally understood. If Nietzsche's historical engagement with Islam ultimately turned out to be something of a disappointment – more of a monologue than a genuine dialogue – I suspect that a conversation with the *falāsifa* would turn out quite differently.⁴⁵

41 On al-Fārābī's influential reimagining of Platonic political philosophy, the definitive study is Mahdi 2001.

42 See Alfarabi 2001, §§37–64. The Platonic notion of the philosopher-king was in various ways taken up by subsequent Islamicate philosophers in the Andalusian tradition such as Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Rushd.

43 For a comparison with Nietzsche, see Groff 2006.

44 Other possible points of comparative examination are (1) the appropriation of Neoplatonic apophatic strategies (the *via negativa*) in approaching God and nature, (2) the Platonic tension between philosophy and the city, and (3) 'naturalistic' explanations of religious phenomena (prophecy, revelation, immortality, etc.). On the first two areas of intersection, see Groff 2015 and 2016.

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