

ETHICS AND CULTURE (HUM 103)

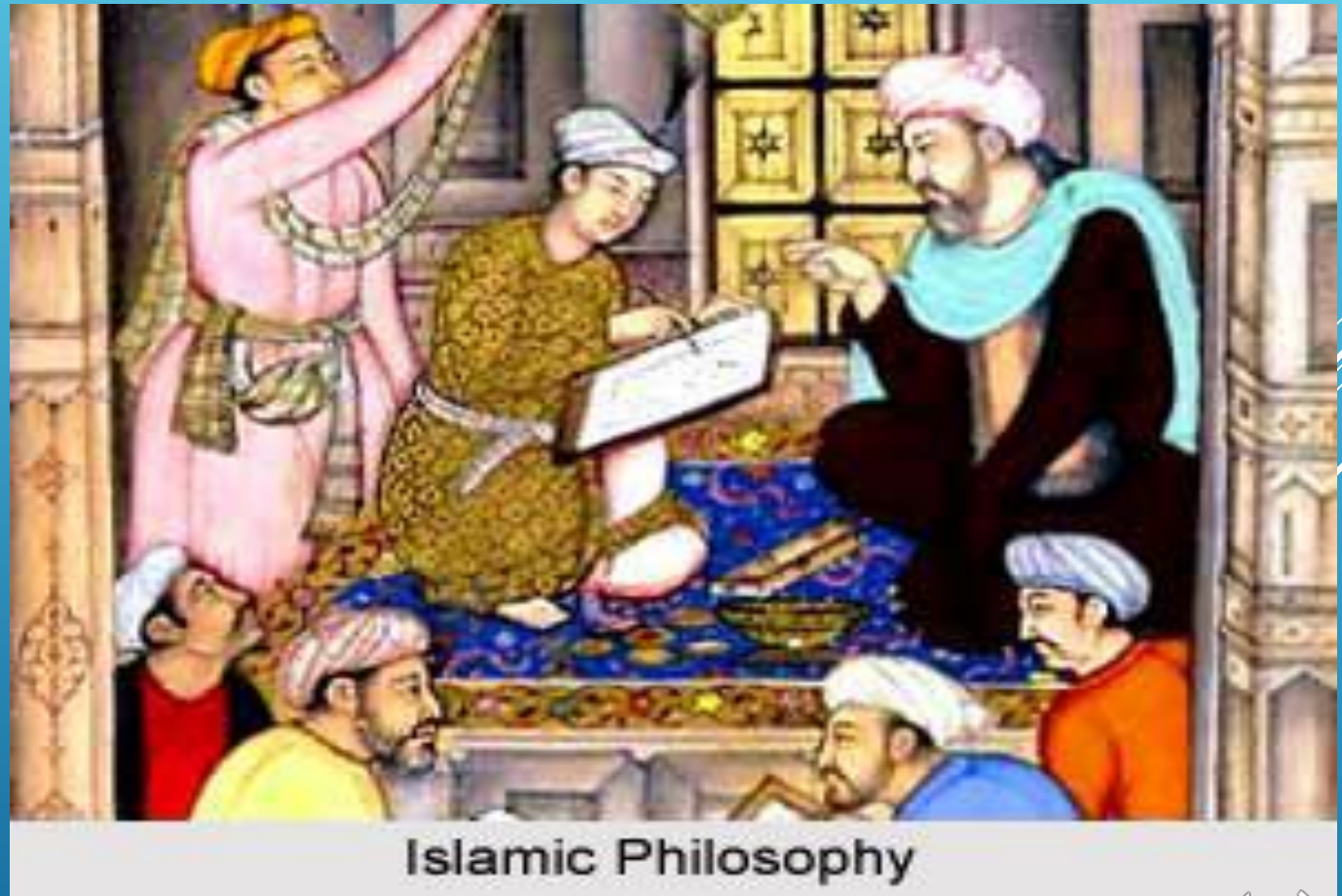
ETHICAL THOUGHT IN CLASSICAL  
ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY RIAZ P KHAN



# Early Classical Islamic Philosophers

- ❖ Al-Kindi (c. 800–870 CE)
- ❖ Al-Fārābī (c. 870–950)
- ❖ Ibn Sina (980–1037)
- ❖ Ibn Rushd (1126—1198)





Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishāq as-Sabbāh al-Kindi (Alkindus)  
(c. 800–870 CE)



# ‘Philosopher of the Arabs’

- ❖ Also known by his Latin name (Alkindus); regarded as the ‘father of Arab philosophy’
- ❖ The Kindi Circle: Translations of Greek works into Arabic
- ❖ Greek influence: Aristotle, Neoplatonism
- ❖ Legacy: Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, Roger Bacon, and others
- ❖ Areas of study: Philosophy, Islamic theology, Logic, Ethics, Politics, Psychology, Cosmology, Astrology, Mathematics, Science
- ❖ Some Key Works: *On First Philosophy; On the Intellect; Dispelling Sorrow; Discourse on the Soul; On the Proximate Agent Cause of Generation*





- ❖ *On First Philosophy*: argues that the world is not eternal, and that God is simply One
  - First part includes exhortation to readers to honor Greek philosophical wisdom
- ❖ *On the Intellect*: regarded as the first treatise in Arabic to include a taxonomy of the types of intellect (recurs in writings of Alfarabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd)
  - ❖ The rational soul as the true “self” or “essence” – only part of us that survives the death of the body
- ❖ The *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim mentions many works by him on ethics and politics
- ❖ *On Dispelling Sorrows*: only significant surviving work on ethics
  - ❖ Consists of practical advice, maxims, and anecdotes that one may bear in mind when afflicted with sorrow
  - ❖ Wealth and physical goods are transitory, subject to corruption, and can be taken away
  - ❖ We should value things that are stable and enduring and that cannot be taken away from us
  - ❖ These are things in now-familiar “world of the intellect”
  - ❖ Directing one’s desires solely towards ‘intelligible things’ makes one invulnerable to sorrow
  - ❖ Sadness is thus always needless
  - ❖ The anecdotes and practical “remedies” in the text are intended to enable us to accept this conclusion





Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al Fārābī (Alpharabius)  
(c. 870-950 CE)



# The ‘Second Teacher’

- ❖ Known as the “Second Teacher” or “Second Master” (*al-mu‘allim al-thānī*), after Aristotle who was known as the ‘First Teacher’ in classical Arabic tradition.
- ❖ Main influences: Aristotle, Plato, Ptolemy, Al-Kindi
- ❖ Areas of Study: Logic, Philosophy, Metaphysics, Ethics, Natural Philosophy, Political philosophy, philosophical psychology and epistemology.
- ❖ Legacy: Influenced Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Maimonides, and others
- ❖ Key works: *The Principle of the Beings (The Political Regime)*; *The Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City*; *The Treatise on the Intellect*; *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle*; *The Attainment of Happiness*; *Book on the Conditions of Certitude*, and many others



# The Soul and its Faculties

- ❖ The basic and lowest faculty: Nutrition
- ❖ The perfect and highest faculty: The rational or intellective faculty
- ❖ The ruling and subordinated organ: The ruling organ in the human body is the heart; the brain is a secondary ruling organ and all the other organs and limbs are subordinated to the brain.
- ❖ Cognition: The rational faculty is essential for cognition: human cognition is characterized not by the mere attainment of sensible forms but, rather, by the attainment of the *intelligible*.





# The Concept of Happiness

- ❖ Happiness consists in (as-perfect-as-possible) assimilation of the human soul to the active intellect, whose unique activity is thinking.
- ❖ Happiness in the strict sense of the word (i.e., as the concomitant of the highest human perfection) is ultimate felicity.
- ❖ Al-Farabi's ultimate state of happiness is one that is associated with the afterlife.



# Alfarabi's Ideal City/Society

- ❖ Ideal state is ruled by the Prophet who is the philosopher-king, lawgiver and imam
- ❖ Three types of perfect human societies
  - ❖ Largest Societies: The Association of many nations
  - ❖ Medium Societies: The Nation
  - ❖ Smallest Societies: The City
- ❖ Virtuous City based on Islamic philosophy
- ❖ In contrast: (1) Ignorant City; (2) Immoral City; (3) Erring City; (4) Weeds in the Virtuous City
- ❖ Two kinds of rulership: (1) Virtuous rulership; (2) Ignorant rulership
- ❖ Two faculties of the virtuous royal craft: (1) the faculty for general rules (2) the faculty that man achieves through long practice





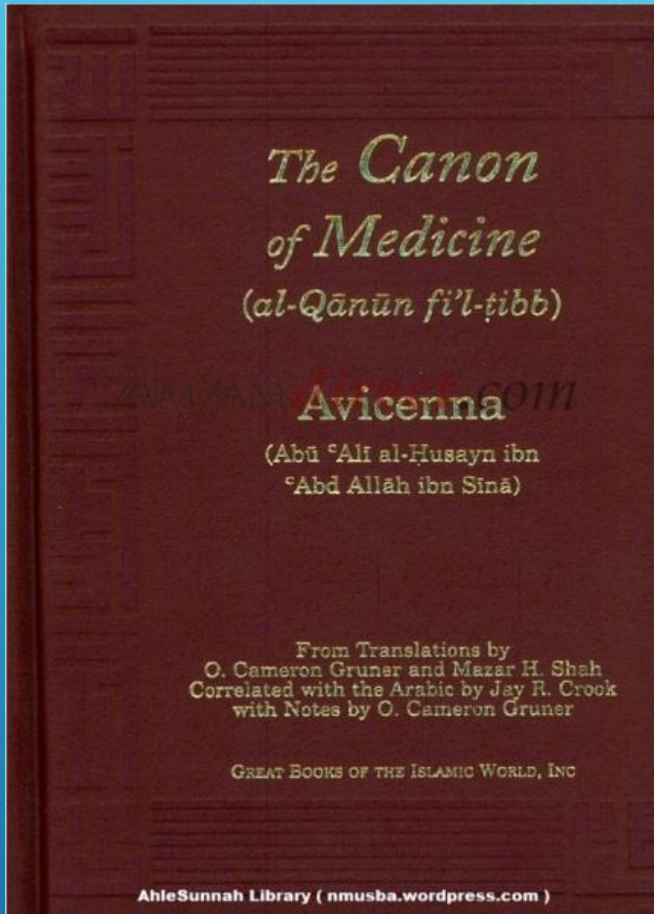
Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abdillāh ibn Sīnā (Avicenna)  
(980-1037)



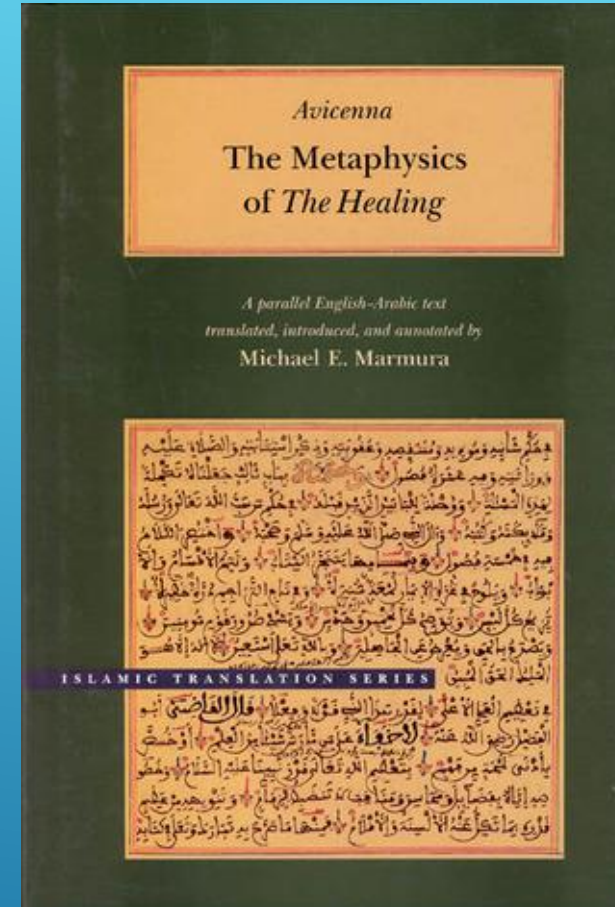
# The Father of Modern Medicine

- ❖ Ibn Sina also known by his Latin name as Avicenna, was one of the most eminent scientists and philosophers in the 10th and 11th centuries.
- ❖ Widely viewed as ‘the father of modern medicine’
- ❖ **Areas of study:** Medicine, Philosophy, Science, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, poetry and politics
- ❖ **Influences:** Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Aristotle and so on.
- ❖ **Legacy:** Al Biruni, Omar Khayyam, Ibn Rushd, Thomas Aquinas, and others
- ❖ In particular, his medical works and practices had profound and lasting impact on the medical profession and practices in both Asia and Europe





*The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb)*



*The Book of Healing (Kitāb al-Shifā)*





# Ibn Sina's ethical approach

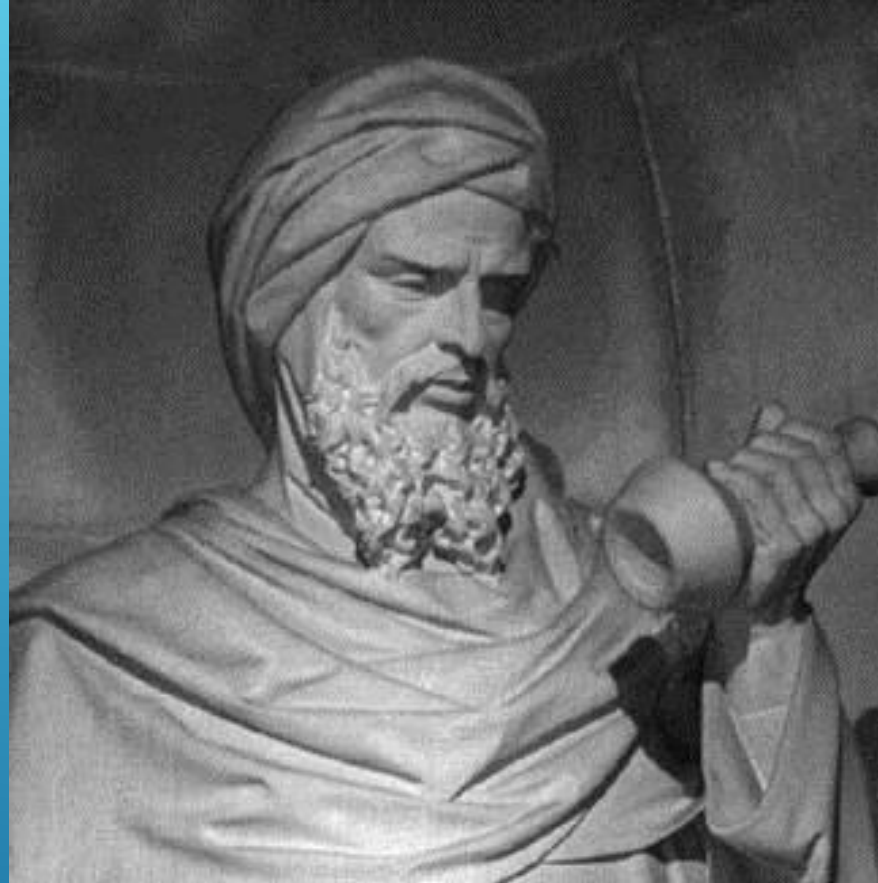
- ❖ Concept of happiness
- ❖ The life of the rational soul
- ❖ Harmonious relationship with nature



# Holistic Approach to Medicine

- ❖ Ibn Sina's views of medicine treats the individual as a whole, an approach that today we would call "holistic"
- ❖ He does not see the individual as being constituted of separate parts, or as a complicated mechanism
- ❖ Nor did not make a strict distinction between mind and body
- ❖ Psychosomatic illness was a disease just like any other
- ❖ In clinical work, love was viewed as a pathological state, like melancholia or epilepsy
- ❖ Ethics is an integral part of medicine.
- ❖ Aim of ethics of science is the integration of ethics with scientific practice.





Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Rushd (Averroes)  
(1126-1198)



# ‘The Commentator’

- ❖ Known in the West as ‘Averroes’ and as the ‘Commentator’
- ❖ Areas of Study: Islamic jurisprudence and theology, medicine, eloquence, poetry, physic, literature, and philosophy
- ❖ Influences: Aristotle, Plato, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Ghazali
- ❖ Legacy: Thomas Aquinas, Maimonides, Siger of Brabant, Averroism
- ❖ Key works: *Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s works* (“Topics,” “Rhetoric,” “Poetics,”); *Middle Commentary on Nichomachean Ethics*; *The Incoherence of Coherence* (*Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*); *Decisive Treatise on the Agreement Between Religious Law and Philosophy* (*Fasl al-Maqāl*); *Examination of the Methods of Proof Concerning the Doctrines of Religions*, and others



# Natural Philosophy and Ethics

- ❖ Natural philosophy embraces the study of all sensible beings that undergo change and possess the principle of motion and rest in themselves.
- ❖ The philosophy of natural beings divides into various branches.
- ❖ Metaphysics deals with primary form and first purpose
- ❖ Physics is the first and most important branch (theoretical dimension of Philosophy)
  - ❖ Four causes—matter, form, purpose and agent
- ❖ Ethics is practical dimension of philosophy
- ❖ Happiness is reached through the conjunction of the human intellect with the separate active intellect.





# Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Nichomachean Ethics*

- ❖ Commentaries on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, *Poetics*, *Topics*, *Metaphysics*, and so on
- ❖ *Middle Commentary* is presumed to be the only commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*
- ❖ *The concept of* the desired good and the highest good
- ❖ Distinguishes between the perfect good of the solitary individual and that of the citizen
- ❖ Politics and happiness



Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

We say that since it appeared that the ends are many, and we choose some of them for the sake of something else, such as wealth, the flute, and, in general, all instruments, it is clear that not all ends are perfect, and it appears that the best is something perfect. It follows necessarily that, if there is one thing only perfect, it is the thing sought, and if the perfect things are many, it is the most perfect and most complete of them. We say that the thing sought for itself is more perfect than what is sought for something else, and that which is not chosen at any time for anything else is more perfect than those which are chosen for something else, not for themselves. And the perfect in general is that which is chosen always for itself and is not chosen at any time for anything else. The thing most entitled to this description is happiness. That is, happiness is that which we choose for itself, not seeking it at any time for something else.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* mc  
(based on Hebrew and Latin translations)

We say that since it is apparent that the ends are many, and we choose some of them for the sake of something else, such as wealth, the flute, and, in general, all instruments, it is clear that not all ends are perfect, and it appears that the best, **which we seek**, is something perfect. It follows necessarily that, if there is **here** only one perfect good, it is the good that is sought; and if they are many, it is [this good], for those goods are sought for it, but it is sought for itself. We say that the thing sought for itself is more perfect than what is sought for something else, and that which is chosen at any time for itself is more perfect than those which are chosen for something else. And in general, **since we believe that** the perfect **in truth** is that which is chosen always for itself and is not chosen at any time for anything else, and we see that happiness is with this description, that is that we choose it **always** for itself, not seeking it at any time for something else. **Thus it is clear that the good with this description is that which ought to be the happiness.**

**NOTE: Averroes' additions to the Arabic of Aristotle's text are marked in bold and white font; his deviations from it are underlined, again in white font**

