

Falsafa: Introduction to Arabic Philosophy

Seminar Leader

Sinem Derya Kılıç

“The more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance.”

Email

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——Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Course Description

Course Times

Thursdays,

10:45 am–1:45 pm

Within the traditional history of philosophy taught in the West, the importance of Arabic philosophy has long been underestimated. For the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, Arabic philosophy had “no content of any interest” whatsoever, and was therefore “not philosophy, but mere manner.” Although this view wouldn’t be considered tenable today, most Western colleges or universities still do not offer any courses dedicated to Arabic philosophy, and thus continue to leave this pivotal chapter of our shared intellectual history largely unaddressed.

Office Hours

By appointment only

In this course on Arabic philosophy (which means philosophy written in the Arabic language, regardless of the author’s origin), we will focus mainly on the period between the 9th and the 12th century—a period in which Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophers alike wrote in Arabic, engaged with a shared philosophical vocabulary, and integrated philosophical questions inherited from the ancient Greek tradition into their *falsafa* (Arabic for ‘philosophy’).

We will read representative texts by major thinkers such as al-Kindī, ar-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, ibn Miskawayh, Rūmī, ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), al-Ghazālī, ibn Bājja (Avempace), ibn Ṭufāil, ibn Rushd (Averroes), ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) and Maimonides, but also modern intellectuals such as Abdallah Laroui and Fatema Mernissi. By providing an overview of the multifaceted tradition of Arabic philosophy, this course highlights the rich heritage of *falsafa* as a central component of the intellectual traditions of the Islamicate world.

Course Readings

All required readings will be available in a Course Reader (print version), which will be distributed in the library. All additional readings will be available via Google Classroom.

* Recommended Books:

(1) Peter Adamson (2015) *Philosophy in the Islamic World. A Very Short Introduction*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press (ISBN 978-0-19-968367-3)

(2) Jon McGinnis / David C. Reisman (ed) (2007) *Classical Arabic Philosophy. An Anthology of Sources*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company (ISBN 978-0-87220-871-1)

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence from a once-per-week course should not affect the participation grade or require documentation. **More than two unexcused absences** (that is an absence from a once-per-week session of 180 minutes) in a semester **will significantly affect the participation grade for the course**. Bard College Berlin does not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Required Texts

Generally, there will be required readings for each session, consisting mainly of selected contributions by different authors on Arabic philosophy. All required readings will be included in the printed course reader, which all students are required to obtain and bring to class. All readings are expected to be prepared in advance of each week (with the exception of the first session). In addition, any podcast episodes assigned in the syllabus are also required listening and should be completed before the respective session. A digital version of the course reader will also be provided at the beginning of the semester via Google Classroom. Additional recommended readings may occasionally be uploaded to Google Classroom for students who wish to explore particular topics in greater depth, but these are not mandatory.

Assessment

Participation

Students should arrive to each class on time and prepared. Being prepared means

- (1) having completed the assigned reading,
- (2) bringing to class a non-electronic copy of the assigned reading, and
- (3) being ready to initiate and to contribute to discussion.

Engagement in class discussion should be regular as well as productive; quantity alone will not favorably affect the participation grade.

Class Presentations

Every student is expected to present on one text as per a sign-up sheet online. Each presentation of about 15 minutes will examine key passages of their choice, ideally using either presentation slides or a handout for the class. You are encouraged to write your midterm or final paper on the text that you presented on. In this manner, your essay can expand on the insights and questions that arose from your class contribution and the discussion that follows your readings.

Writing Assignments

There will be two principal assignments over the course of the term: **a midterm essay of 2000 words** due at 23:59 **on Oct 25**, and **a final essay of 3000 words** due at 23:59 on **Dec 6 for graduating students** and 23:59 on **Dec 18** for other students. All essays are to be **submitted as a Google document electronically via Google Classroom**. All sources must be quoted to avoid plagiarism. **ChatGPT or other AI tools may not be used under any circumstances.**

Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

Grade Breakdown

Class participation: 25%

Presentation: 20%

Midterm essay (2000 words): 25%

Final essay (3000 words): 30%

Course Schedule

Falsafa: Introduction to Arabic Philosophy

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
1 / Sept 3, 2026	INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS 'ARABIC PHILOSOPHY'?	
2 / Sept 10, 2026	FALSAFA: ORIGINS & BACKGROUNDS Abū Qurra (c. 740–829)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 120 “The Straight Path” & 122 “Founded in Translation” (1) Dimitri Gutas (1998), Introduction & Part I.1, in: <i>Greek Thought, Arabic Culture</i> ch. 1 (pp. 1–27) (2) Theodor Abū Qurra, <i>On Natural Theology</i>
3 / Sept 17, 2026	THE “FATHER OF ARAB PHILOSOPHY”: al-Kindī (c. 801–873)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 123 “Philosopher of the Arabs: al-Kindī” (1) al-Kindī, <i>On the Intellect</i> (in: <i>The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī</i>, ed. by Peter Adamson and Peter E. Pormann, Karachi: Oxford University Press 2012, pp. 93–98) (2) <i>Ibd.</i>, <i>On the Quiddity of Sleep and Dreams</i> (in: <i>The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī</i>, pp. 122–133)

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
		(3) <i>Ibd., On Dispelling Sorrows</i> (in: <i>The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī</i>, pp. 245–266)
4 / Sept 24, 2026	TAKE FIVE: ar-Rāzī [Lat. Rhazes] (c. 864–925/932)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 126 “High Five: Al-Rāzī” (1) ar-Rāzī, <i>The Philosopher’s Way of Life</i> (in: <i>Classical Arabic Philosophy. An Anthology of Sources</i>, ed. by Jon McGinnis und David C. Reisman, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing 2007, pp. 36–44) (2) <i>Ibd., On the Five Eternals</i> (in: <i>Classical Arabic Philosophy</i>, pp. 44–49) (3) <i>Ibd., Doubts against Galen</i> (in: <i>Classical Arabic Philosophy</i>, pp. 49–53)
5 / Oct 1, 2026	THE “SECOND MASTER”: al-Fārābī [Lat. Alfarabius / Avenassar] (c. 872–950/951)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 129 “The Second Master: al-Fārābī” 🎧 130 “State of Mind: al-Fārābī on Religion and Politics” 🎧 133 “Strings Attached: Music & Philosophy” (1) al-Fārābī, <i>On the Perfect State</i> (ch. 14–17) (2) <i>Ibd., On Poetry and Music</i> (excerpt)

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
6 / Oct 8, 2026	LOVE & FRIENDSHIP: Ibn Miskawayh (c. 932–1030)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 134 “Balancing Acts: Arabic Ethical Literature” (1) ibn Miskawayh, “Love and Friendship” (in: <i>The Refinement of Character</i> V, pp. 123–154)
7 / Oct 15, 2026	SUFISM & POETRY: Rābi’a of Basra (c. 716–801), Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240) & Rūmī (1207–1273)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 178 “Eyes Wide Shut: Rūmī and Philosophical Sufism” (1) Rābi’a of Basra, <i>Selected Poems</i> (2) ibn ‘Arabī, <i>Selected Poems</i> (3) Rūmī, <i>Selected Poems</i>
Oct 19 – Oct 25, 2026	FALL BREAK 	
Sunday, Oct 25, 2026	Midterm Papers Due	
8 / Oct 29, 2026	“I FLOAT, THEREFORE I AM”: ibn Sīnā [Lat. Avicenna] (c. 980–1037)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 138–141 & <i>Philosophy Bites</i> Podcast Episode “Peter Adamson on Avicenna’s Flying Man” (1) ibn Sīnā, <i>The Soul</i> I.1 & I.5 (in: <i>Classical Arabic Philosophy</i>, pp. 175–186)

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
9 / Nov 5, 2026	THE “AUTHORITY ON ISLAM”: al-Ghazālī [Lat. Algazelus] (c. 1055/56–1111)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 143–145 (1) al-Ghazālī, <i>The Rescuer from Error</i> (excerpt)
10 / Nov 12, 2026	ISLAND PHILOSOPHY PART I: ibn Bājja [lat. Avempace] (c. 1095–1138) ibn Ṭufāīl [Lat. Abubacer] (c. 1106–1185)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 146 “Philosophy’s Reign in Spain: Andalusia” 🎧 148 “Fantasy Island: Ibn Bājja and Ibn Ṭufāīl” (1) ibn Bājja, <i>The Governance of the Solitary</i> (excerpt) (2) ibn Ṭufāīl, <i>Hayy ibn Yaqzān: A Philosophical Tale</i> (pp. 103–134, “All things perish except His face”)
11 / Nov 19, 2026	ISLAND PHILOSOPHY PART II: THE ANDALUSIAN ROBINSON CRUSOE: ibn Ṭufāīl [Lat. Abubacer] (c. 1106–1185)	(1) ibn Ṭufāīl, <i>Hayy ibn Yaqzān: A Philosophical Tale</i> (pp. 134, “By the end of his fifth seven-year span”—166)
12 / Nov 26, 2026	“THE COMMENTATOR”: Ibn Rushd [Lat. Averroes] (1126–1198)	(♪♪) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 149, 151 🎧 152 🎧 Episode 160 “The Great Eagle: Maimonides” (1) ibn Rushd, <i>Decisive Treatise</i> (selected passages)

SESSION / DATE	TOPIC	READINGS
13 / Dec 3, 2026	JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: ibn Gabirol [lat. Avicbron / Avicbrol] (c. 1021/22–1070) 🔗 Maimonides (c. 1135/8–1204)	(🎧) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episodes 155 “Matter over Mind: ibn Gabirol” 🔗 Episode 160 “The Great Eagle: Maimonides” (1) ibn Gabirol, <i>The Fountain of Life</i> (ch. 1) (2) Maimonides, <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> II (Introduction 🔗 ch. 13–14)
14 / Dec 10, 2026	CULTURE 🔗 CRISIS IN THE MODERN ARAB WORLD: Abdallah Laroui (* 1933) 🔗 Fatema Mernissi (1940–2015)	(🎧) <i>History of Philosophy</i> Podcast Episode 192 “The Stronger Sex: Women Scholars and Islam” 🔗 195 “Anke von Kügelgen on Contemporary Islamic Thought” (1) Abdallah Laroui, <i>The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual</i> (excerpt) (2) Fatema Mernissi, <i>Beyond the Veil</i> (excerpt)
15 / Dec 14 – Dec 18, 2026	COMPLETION WEEK 📝📄 (No Class) <i>Final papers due on Sunday, Dec 6 for graduating students 🔗 Friday, Dec 18 for everyone else</i>	

ESSAY DEADLINES

Midterm Paper (2000 words) by Oct 25, 2026, 23:59 CET

Final Paper (3000 words) by Dec 6, 2026, 23:59 CET for graduating students 🔗 Dec 18, 2026, 23:59 CET for everyone else