

OPENING STATEMENT

What is language? How does language work? Scholars writing in Arabic in the eleventh century had good answers to these two questions. Their theories of language, mind, and reality—of words, ideas, and things—appear in books about how to describe God, how to interpret scripture, how to solve logical problems, and how to criticize poetry. They used a conceptual vocabulary very different from the Anglophone or European toolbox that academia provides for us today. This book is a study of their Arabic intellectual world and a translation of their approaches to questions that still concern us a millennium later. It is a book about these scholars' analyses of how their minds worked, and of the role language played when they turned those minds to the world outside.

My methodological principle in this research has been to follow eleventh-century Arabic scholars' conceptual vocabulary into their areas of concern. This is consequently a book about *ma'nā* (their word for mental content) and about *ḥaqīqah* (their word for accuracy). It is very much a work of philology. But a tantalizing prospect has persistently intervened, the prospect of finding theories about aspects of human experience that are universally applicable. We share with these eleventh-century scholars the experience of having a mind, using language, and enjoying poetry, but this shared experience is impaired by the absence of shared vocabulary. So this is a book of philology and translation, in which I write about how *ma'nā* did not play a role in their conceptual vocabularies that is at all equivalent to the role "mental content" plays for us today. *Ma'nā* was an omnipresent, useful, and stable word that enabled eleventh-century scholars to explain a great deal, whereas my invariable translation, "mental content," is an uneasy academic

neologism with a highly uncertain reception and different implications in different scholarly disciplines. I use it to mean the stuff of cognition. The benefit of “mental content” is its strangeness in ordinary English: while it can cover an appropriate range of cognitive items and processes, its awkwardness reminds us that we are dealing with a conceptual vocabulary that is not our own. *Ḥaqīqah* was equally omnipresent, and I suggest in this book that it was always used to describe something claimed to be accurate. My argument is not that we should always translate *maʿnā* as “mental content” and *ḥaqīqah* as “accuracy” or “accurate account” (although I have done so in this book) but rather that it is useful to always think of *maʿnā* as mental content and *ḥaqīqah* as the process of getting something right. My decision in this book to persist invariably with a single translation for *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* is a practical tactic to make that thought experiment easier. Translation in this book is an experimental process and not a conclusion.

I engage in the translation struggle because of the tantalizing prospect outlined above: that eleventh-century Arabic scholarship contains observations of interest to twenty-first-century academics who work on language, translation, or literary criticism but do not read Arabic. I also engage because philology is “the discipline of making sense of texts” (Sheldon Pollock),¹ and I think that my experimental translations of *maʿnā* and *ḥaqīqah* have produced answers that help us further understand the theological, lexicographical, logical, and literary-critical work of the scholars studied in this book. I show how a curated Arabic lexicon interacted with pragmatics and was fundamental to all other scholarly disciplines, how Islamic theology was both about naming and about science, how logic was built with both Greek and Arabic, and how this new Arabic logic combined with old Arabic grammar to produce literary criticism. These are all eleventh-century Arabic accounts of what language is and how it works.

These Arabic accounts used *maʿnā* in descriptions of both the connections between mind and language, and the connections between mind and reality. The meaning of a word was a *maʿnā*, and the attribute, quality, or essence of an extramental thing was a *maʿnā*. The word *ḥaqīqah* could then be used to describe any of these connections as accurate. If language pointed accurately at mental content it was *ḥaqīqah*, and if mental content accurately reflected extramental reality it was *ḥaqīqah*. Cognition took place in and with *maʿnā*; mental content was the stuff of cognition. When words aligned accurately with mental contents, they were *ḥaqīqah*. When mental contents were an accurate account of the real world, they were *ḥaqīqah*. Eleventh-century scholars writing in Arabic all thought about cognition and language in similar ways, using a single vocabulary. We do not have parallel concepts or practices in English or other European

1. Pollock (2014, 22).

languages. On the contrary, we have vocabularies with genealogies entirely unconnected to this Arabic conceptual vocabulary. This is why it is difficult for us to see how lexicographers could have been so influential in the creation of theory, how theologians could have thought that arguing about naming was rational and ontologically salient, how a logician could have used the vocabulary of Arabic grammar and theology to explain mental existence, and how a literary critic could have described literary beauty as produced by grammar and logic. My book tries to explain these positions.

At every step in their intricate theorizing, the eleventh-century scholars were negotiating the relationships between words, ideas, and things using an autochthonous vocabulary based around *ma'nā*. But they were not negotiating our sensitivities to the boundaries between these three categories, nor were they struggling to explain the meaning of the words *ma'nā* and *ḥaqīqah*. These were just words that they used as part of their core conceptual vocabulary. They did not care about the fault lines of a European history of ideas that was still several centuries in the future. They were sensitive to different things; they cared more about hermeneutics, for example, than about the threat of linguistic relativism, and this makes their solutions to questions of language reference and accuracy all the more interesting. The problems are the same: we still have minds and use words like they did, but the contours of debate have changed along with the vocabulary. In certain areas, this is an advantage: an intellectual culture obsessed with hermeneutics, suffused with bilingualism, and in possession of both a vast canon of classical poetry and a carefully curated lexicon was arguably in a better position to produce theories of language than we are today.

I have chosen to focus on four scholars who lived and worked in what is now Iran and Iraq. All four men would prove hugely influential in the centuries to come, although, as the remarks above may lead one to expect, not all of them would be as famous in Europe as they were in the Arabic, Persian, and Turkic worlds. The one man whose fame and theories crossed north into Europe was the Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), whom I use to investigate a discipline he played an oversized role in creating: Arabic logic. The other three were less translated. Ibn Fūrak was a theologian, exegete, and legal theorist whose reworking of the Aš'arī theological school's doctrines remains a reference point today. Ar-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī was a contemporary of both men and a lexicographer who wrote exegesis, creed, literary compendia, and literary criticism, and who provided much of the synthesis between Neoplatonic and Perseo-Arabic ethics that Abū Hāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 1111) would make famous a century later. Finally, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Ġurġānī was a grammarian who wrote two works of literary criticism that changed the field for ever.

Al-Ġurġānī's poetics, his account of the aesthetics of language in both the Quran and Classical Arabic poetry, is the subject of my seventh chapter, "Poetics."

His theories cannot be understood, nor could they have come into being, without the Arabic lexicography that ar-Rāḡib exemplifies, the Islamic theology that Ibn Fūrak represents, or the Aristotelian logic developed by Ibn Sīnā. But to make lexicography, theology, and logic the servants of literary criticism would be unfair to the scholars who worked in those fields. Ar-Rāḡib had his own ideas about poetics; Ibn Fūrak, his own perspective on the Quran's language; and Ibn Sīnā, his own clear sense of a philosophical mission. I do not want to present these genres, or these scholars, in a story of chronological progression or influence. I would like them to be test cases through which I advocate for a philological focus on *ma' nā*. If I can demonstrate that reading for *ma' nā* helps us understand ar-Rāḡib, Ibn Fūrak, Ibn Sīnā, and al-Ġurḡānī, then readers may be tempted to use the same strategy for reading the work of other scholars from other genres in other centuries. This hope is also a deliberate rejection of disciplinary and genre boundaries. These scholars knew that exegesis was different from legal theory, and that ethics was different from poetics, but that did not stop them writing books in both or all fields, nor did it stop them from writing what we may consider philosophy in their exegesis or poetics in their ethics. Most important for my methodology, these discipline-conscious scholars, who never missed an opportunity to delineate the terminological and conceptual differences between the genres of scholarship they covered, used a stable conceptual vocabulary with *ma' nā* at its core across all their books without distinction. That is my contention, and its translation my task.

In chapter 2, I work through the precedents for the use of *ma' nā* that were available to scholars in the eleventh century. *Ma' nā* was a word that had already done a great deal of work in translations from Greek, in literary criticism, in grammar, and in theology. With that terrain laid out, chapter 3 pauses to establish a methodology for translation with the help of Wittgenstein, Kuhn, and secondary scholarship on Arabic. Then, in chapter 4, I start to lay out eleventh-century epistemology. It begins with the lexicon. I use ar-Rāḡib's works to describe the basic set of eleventh-century assumptions about what language was, how reference and intent worked, and what *ma' nā* and *ḥaqīqah* meant. Ibn Fūrak shared these assumptions, and with his theology I show how reading for *ma' nā* reveals how epistemology (his account of how we know) could bleed into ontology (his account of what there is) and vice versa. It is here that we see some of the fruits of what was for eleventh-century authors an unproblematic slippage between language and cognition, and between the mind and the world. *Ma' nā* was undoubtedly cognitive, but it was also linguistically determined, just as while it was clearly in the mind, it was also out there in the extramental world as well. Neither slippage was as problematic for Ibn Fūrak and ar-Rāḡib as it is for us. Their understanding of cognition was almost entirely linguistic, and it was anchored by the lexicon. Their understanding of God allowed him, using a single mechanism consisting of

ma' nā, to control both the qualities of extramental things and the cognitive representations of those qualities and things in human minds.

From Arabic lexicography and Islamic theology I move to Aristotelian logic with Ibn Sīnā. Here, reading for *ma' nā* shows how this move is not as great a conceptual leap as one may expect. Greek logic turned into Arabic logic when it started working with *ma' nā*, and reading logic through this lens reveals the connections between Greek structures and the linguistic, literary, and theological discussions of the Arabic eleventh century. Ibn Sīnā also provides some clarity on whether logic is about cognition or about language, clearing up a millennium-old commentary *quaestio* about the relationship of the linguistic opening passages of *De Interpretatione* to logic. *Ma' nā* was the item of autochthonous Arabic core conceptual vocabulary that enabled this move and several of Ibn Sīnā's other core philosophical contributions. His account of logical cognition also provided al-Ġurġānī, a few decades later, with a conceptual vocabulary that could be turned to aesthetics. *Ma' nā* is the conceptual vehicle by which Arabic grammar entered al-Ġurġānī's poetics. I argue that it is only by focusing on *ma' nā* that we can clearly see these connections. In the final translation problem of the book, I aim to explain how a literary critic located lyric eloquence in grammar itself. Al-Ġurġānī did this by using an account of cognitive process that explained how the *ma' nā* in our heads is manipulated by the words we hear and read. Those words come to us in syntactic, grammatically governed, order. The beauty lies in this sequencing and in the associated adjustments that the poet makes. Poetics becomes grammar; grammar becomes logic; and poetic genius is the unexpected in syntax. Accuracy becomes dynamic. The contents of our heads are where the magic happens. With al-Ġurġānī we have a model in which new mental content is created, content that never had and never will have a referent in language or in the world outside. Literature uses grammar, logic, and even theology, but it goes beyond them to create something new. The achievement of al-Ġurġānī's criticism was to explain, using *ma' nā*, how this worked.

From Greek, to Arabic and Persian, and then to English (via Latin), this is a book about translation. The eleventh-century scholars who wrote Arabic also spoke (and in some cases wrote) Persian. They read Greek in translation. Today, I write in English, a language with a European history stretching back through Latin, into which I am trying to transpose the Arabic writings of native speakers of Persian. The critical extra element that makes the translation process so problematic and so important is that I am translating theories. Or, as Thomas Kuhn would put it, I am translating core conceptual vocabulary that helps shape the theories it constitutes. This circular process makes it hard to jump from an eleventh-century Arabo-Persian space into a twenty-first-century Anglo-European one. It is worth restating that there is no word in English that does the work done by *ma' nā* in Arabic. My choice in this book, "mental content," does a job as a placeholder, but

that is all. In chapter 3 I will delve into these methodological questions of translation in more detail. I will defend my experimental attempt to replace a single theoretical term with a single theoretical translation, arguing that the resultant dissonance in the English target language reminds us that we do not have a core conceptual vocabulary in which epistemology and ontology bleed into each other. On the contrary, we have a conceptual vocabulary that separates them into “epistemology” and “ontology.” There was no word for either in eleventh-century Arabic.