

ERIC ORMSBY, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. On Life, Death, and Languages. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 29–31*. Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, 2021 (xxii pp. including foreword by Nader El-Bizri + 231 pp. + 128 pp., Arabic text).

The book is a part of the ongoing project run by the Oxford University Press and the Institute of Ismaili Studies that promotes the publication of new editions and translations into English of the well-known encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ*). There is no need to mention the importance of *Epistles* and the controversy that surrounds them.¹ The volume contains the three last epistles of the section devoted to natural sciences. These texts deal extensively with human life and the mind, and so they prepare the reader for the following section on the soul and the intellect. Epistles 29, «On the quiddity of the wisdom of death», and 30, «On the quiddity of bodily and spiritual pleasures and pains», describe the brothers' view on this life and the next from the perspective of a philosophical conception of the human being and the world, in contrast to (though in dialogue with) religious perspectives. Epistle 31, «On the reasons for the differences in languages» consists of a thorough reflection on the nature of oral and written language that should be seen in the context of the discussions of the subject of the origin of language that were so frequent in early Islam within linguistic and philosophic circles.² In addition, epistles 29 to 31 contain a wealth of materials and references about some of the main issues that characterize Ikhwān's encyclopaedia. Epistle 29 reflects the influence of al-Kindī on the Ikhwān.³ Epistle 31 is a most important source for the

1. For a general introduction, see C. BAFFIONI, «Ikhwān al-Safāʾ», *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/ikhwan-al-safa/>).

2. Cf. P. LARCHER, «Et Allah apprît à Adam tous les noms... (Cor., 2, 31) : L'Origine du langage dans la pensée islamique», in N. Germann and S. Harvey, eds., *The Origin and nature of Language and Logic. Perspectives In Medieval Islamic, Jewish, and Christian Thought*, Turnhout, 2020, 3–27; Th. A. DRUART, «Al-Fārābī, an Arabic Account of the Origin of Language and of Philosophical Vocabulary», *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 84 (2010), 1–17.

3. See the recent G. de VAULX D'ARCY, *Les épîtres des Frères de la Pureté ... Mathématique et philosophie*, Paris, 2019, in which the author translates this epistle 29 into French and says that

political thinking of the Ikhwān.⁴ Ormsby's edition follows the general criteria of the collection. Manuscript Atif Efendi 1681 is the basis of the Arabic text, whose edition is complemented with a selection of several manuscripts and the Beirut edition by Buṭrus Bustānī. Even though this methodology is not supported by all scholars,⁵ the result is a more complete and precise edition of epistles 29, 30 and 31 than the earlier work by Bustānī. Ormsby, who provides the first translation of epistles 30 and 31 into a Western language, renders the texts accurately, stressing their nature of *adab* treatises in which literary discourse is placed at the service of educating the reader. In so doing, Ormsby brings these highly relevant sources of the intellectual history of Arabo-Islamic culture to a wider public, outside the circle of experts. He also makes an important contribution to the ongoing research and debate on the *Epistles* and paves the way for a better understanding of this most fascinating and controversial work.

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the *Epistles* were written by Aḥmad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī, a disciple of al-Kindī. However, in G. CALLATAÿ'S review of this book (*Studia graeco-arabica* 9 (2019), 310–312) this hypothesis is refuted.

4. C. BAFFIONI, «Prophecy, Imamate, and Political Rule among the Ikhwān al-Ṣafa'», in A. Afsaruddin, ed., *Islam, the State, and Political Authority. Medieval Issues and Modern Concerns*, New York, 2011, 75–92.

5. G. de VAULX D'ARCY, «The *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity Edited by the Institute of Ismaili Studies. When the Re-Edition of a Text Can Be Its Destruction», *MIDÉO* 34 (2019), 253–330.