

11-4-2020

## Damnatio memoriae: On Deleting the East from Western History

Koert Debeuf  
*Oxford University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp>



Part of the [Arabic Studies Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Islamic Studies Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Debeuf, Koert (2020) "Damnatio memoriae: On Deleting the East from Western History," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 32 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol32/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Journal of Public Policy by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact [library.uasc@umb.edu](mailto:library.uasc@umb.edu).

## **Damnatio memoriae: On Deleting the East from Western History**

**Koert Debeuf**

*Oxford University*

### **Abstract**

The story we read in books about the Renaissance tells us that Petrarch and Poggio rediscovered the books of antiquity that had been copied for centuries in medieval abbeys. The re-introduction of Greek science and philosophy, however, began in the twelfth century but occurred mainly in the thirteenth century. These works were first translated into Syriac and Arabic in the eighth and ninth centuries and stored in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad. There they were read, used, and commented on by Arab philosophers, of whom the most famous was Averroes (1126–1198), who lived in Cordoba. The translation of his commentaries on Aristotle changed the European philosophical scene profoundly. Averroes, who also had a philosophy of his own, had followers in Latin Europe until the sixteenth century. His work was well-known and he appeared in histories of philosophy until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Arabs were pushed out of the history books. One reason was the invention of the concept of the Renaissance.

*Koert Debeuf is a research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, Harris Manchester College, Oxford University, and an associate fellow at the Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.*

In 2012, the Harvard humanities professor Stephen Greenblatt won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*.<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt starts his book with the story of how the Italian humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) rediscovered *De rerum natura* by the Roman philosopher Lucretius in 1417 and in so doing changed the course of European history. Greenblatt's book is an epic overview of European intellectuals who found the treasures and wisdom of Greek and Roman antiquity in old monastery libraries. Greenblatt starts with Petrarch (1304–1374) and ends with Albert Einstein (1879–1955). The rediscovery of these works that were lost during the Middle Ages is the classic story of the Renaissance. Greenblatt writes:

In the high Middle Ages, scholastic philosophers, reading Aristotle through the lens of the brilliant Arabic commentator Averroës, constructed a sophisticated, highly rational account of the universe. And even Petrarch's vaunted aesthetic commitment to classical Latinity—his dream of walking in the footsteps of the ancients—had been evident for at least seventy years before his birth. Much of what Petrarch and his followers claimed for the novelty of their approach was tendentious, self-congratulatory exaggeration. But it is difficult entirely to demystify the movement to which Petrarch gave rise.<sup>2</sup>

Though these phrases imply that the story of the Renaissance is different from the myth we know, Greenblatt continues recounting the myth rather than “demystifying” it. In this article, I explore what happened in those “seventy years before his [Petrarch's] birth,” what role this “brilliant commentator Averroës”<sup>3</sup> played, and why this myth of Petrarch and Poggio is the only story we know about the European Renaissance.

## **Averroes and the Thirteenth Century in Europe**

During the Middle Ages, almost no work by Aristotle (or by Plato) was known in Europe. In the Arab world, however, all of Aristotle's works had been translated into Arabic, beginning in the eighth century AD. The center of translation was Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, where the intent was to collect as many books as possible in the House of Wisdom (Beit al-Hikma).<sup>4</sup> Much of this knowledge was spread to other centers of learning in the Islamic world. Two of the main centers were on European soil: Cordoba and Toledo. When Toledo was reconquered by Christians in 1085, scholars started to translate this knowledge into Latin.<sup>5</sup> The first translated works, however, had little influence. Aristotle remained incomprehensible to European readers because of the difficulty of his ideas and because of the unreadability of the translations. A change came in 1217, when scholars began to translate the commentaries of Averroes on the works of Aristotle into Latin.<sup>6</sup>

Averroes (1126–1198) wrote in the Hellenic and Arabic tradition of quoting Aristotle paragraph after paragraph and commenting on each paragraph. The translation of Averroes's commentaries at the beginning of the thirteenth century made the works of Aristotle available through Averroes's interpretations. Furthermore, Averroes had his own philosophical ideas that would lead to bitter debates until the sixteenth century. According to Ernest Renan, the philosophy of Averroes can be summarized by two doctrines: the eternity of matter and the theory of the intellect.<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of the eternity of matter contradicts the idea of the creation of the world. Though the debate over whether or not the world was created goes back to antiquity, it became a central debate again with the new translations of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> The theory of the eternity of the world was condemned by the Fourth Council of Lateran in 1215.<sup>9</sup> But that action did not end the debate over the eternity of matter versus the creation of the world. It continues today.<sup>10</sup>

Averroes's theory of the intellect was even more controversial. Jean-Baptiste Brenet summarizes it in three theses: the intellect is separate from the body by its essence; it is one because there is a single intellect for all human beings; and it is eternal. According to Averroes, only the intellect is eternal. In contrast, the body and the soul are perishable. Thus, the intellect survives after a human being dies because it is part of the eternal, incorruptible common Intellect.<sup>11</sup> This theory created a stir at the University of Paris and pushed Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in 1270 to write a book to refute it: *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*. With this book, the term “Averroists” was first recorded on paper.<sup>12</sup>

Averroes's theory triggered an extensive debate that raged in Europe for centuries. But that debate is only part of the story. First, the works of other Greek philosophers and scientists were also rediscovered through Arab translations. With the translation into Latin of Euclid's *Elements*, Ptolemy's *Almagest*, and Galen's works on medicine, Europe rediscovered the sciences of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.<sup>13</sup> And with the new translations of Aristotle's work on logic, a new scientific method was introduced. Second, Averroes was not the only “brilliant Arab commentator.” Essential works on algebra, medicine, chemistry, and astronomy by Arabic polymaths were translated into Latin. And several other Arab philosophers were introduced in Europe: Avicenna, al-Ghazali, al-Farabi, al-Kindi, ibn-Tufayl, and Avempace. Also introduced was the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who wrote in Arabic. In the thirteenth century these philosophers, with Aristotle, were known not just as mere philosophers but as the philosophers.<sup>14</sup> The ideas these Arab thinkers promoted, which called for the use of scientific thinking to reach the truth, like the ideas of Averroes, who took a position against the immortality of the soul, went against revelation.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction of Arab philosophical and scientific thought into Europe coincided with the founding of universities, beginning with the Universities of Paris and Oxford. Founded in 1200, the University of Paris was the center stage of the struggle between the faculties of philosophy and theology. Until the mid-thirteenth century, the study of philosophy was considered nothing more than preparation for the study of theology; this idea is summarized in the phrase “Philosophy is the handmaid of theology” (*Philosophia ancilla theologiae*). Inspired by the works of Aristotle and of Averroes and other Arab philosophers, the masters of the philosophy faculty began to question this idea and to ask for an independent status, even if the new ideas would go against those of the theologians and thus of the Church.<sup>16</sup> This movement, infused with Arab rationalism and known as scholasticism, amounted to an “intellectual liberation” and created an intellectual class independent of the Church.<sup>17</sup> To this day, the Roman Catholic Church speaks of this movement as having caused the destruction of the unity of reason and faith.<sup>18</sup>

Interest in Arab thinkers and scientists did not disappear with the so-called start of the Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with Petrarch and Poggio. On the contrary, at the end of the fifteenth and during the sixteenth century, Europe saw a revival of interest in the works of Arab thinkers. For example, between 1482 and 1576, most of the works of Averroes were retranslated, re-edited, and reprinted.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the classic translations of Averroes's work from Arabic into Latin were complemented by new, Latin translations from Hebrew versions of Averroes.<sup>20</sup> As a fuller picture of the work of Averroes became clear, he was seen less as a commentator of Aristotle and more as a philosopher in his own right. The center of Latin Averroism, or the following of Averroes's ideas in Latin Europe, had moved from France to Italy, and more precisely from the University of Paris to the Universities of Padua and Bologna. Many of the key philosophers of the Renaissance in Italy are considered to be Averroists, for example, Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525) and Augustino Nifo (1479/80–1538)

and, later, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), who was excommunicated and burned by the Church in Rome because of his heretical ideas.<sup>21</sup> Through the Jewish Paduan philosopher Elijah Delmedigo (1458–1493), the ideas of Averroes also influenced Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) and Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677).<sup>22</sup>

Averroes was also known and appreciated outside the circles of philosophers. In his *Divina Commedia*, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) describes in canto IV of the Inferno a special place called Limbo. The people there “have committed no sin” but even though “they have their merits” they cannot go to heaven “because they are not baptised.” There we find Homer, Aeneas, Caesar, and Saladin, but the most attention goes to the philosophers, centered on Aristotle, “the master of knowledge.” The last names Dante sees in Limbo are the ones translated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: “Euclid the geometrician, and Ptolemy / Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna / Averrhoes, who wrote the great commentary.”<sup>23</sup> Equally interesting is that Dante places the main Averroist master of the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, Siger of Brabant, in Paradise, next to Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus: “That one is the eternal light of Sigier / Who, teaching in the rue du Fouarre, / Syllogised truly and aroused envy.”<sup>24</sup> It is possible that Dante attended philosophical lectures by Siger at the university in the rue du Fouarre during several visits to Paris between 1294 and 1299.<sup>25</sup> Though whether Dante was an Averroist is still a matter of debate, it is remarkable that he gives Averroes, Avicenna, and Siger of Brabant such prestigious places in his *Divina Commedia*. In 1509–1511, some two hundred years after Dante finished his *Divina Commedia*, Raphael painted *School of Athens*, depicting all ancient Greeks who laid the foundation of Europe. Interestingly, he includes Zoroaster and Averroes, suggesting that he saw them as fundamental contributors to European philosophy, even though they were not Greek.

### **Averroes in Latin Europe: Loved but Mostly Hated**

Averroes, Avicenna, and other Arab philosophers became popular among the faculty of philosophy at the University of Paris but also at Oxford. The Church quickly understood the danger of Arab rationalism and its heretical theories. When intellectuals of the two new mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, were asked to take the lead in the intellectual battle, the mission of Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest, began. In 1270 three important attacks were undertaken against Averroes, his ideas, and his followers. The first attack came from Thomas Aquinas with his *De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas*, in which he blames Averroes for misinterpreting Aristotle. He calls Averroes “philosophie peripatetice perversorem” (the corrupter of the peripatetic philosophy). Furthermore, he argues, it is surprising that people who call themselves Christians actually defend this thesis.<sup>26</sup>

The second attack came from Giles of Rome (1247–1316), an Augustinian friar, who wrote *Errores philosophorum*, in which he discusses all points where the ideas of Aristotle contradict Christian faith. He then devotes a chapter to the “errors” of other philosophers: Averroes, Avicenna, al-Gazhali, al-Kindi and Maimonides. On Averroes he writes:

The Commentator reaffirmed all the errors of the Philosopher, but with greater obstinacy, and he opposed even more vehemently than did the Philosopher those who held that the world had had a beginning. Indeed, he is unquestionable more to be opposed than the Philosopher, because he attacked our faith more directly by presenting as false, doctrines that could not possibly contain falsehood because they are based on the First Truth. He is to be opposed not only for the errors of the Philosopher but also because he reviled all

law, as is clear from book II of the *Metaphysics* and also from book XI, where he reviles the law of the Christians, that is, our Christian law, and also the law of the Saracens, because they maintain that the universe was created and that something can be produced out of nothing. These vituperations are to be found also in the beginning of book III of the *Physics*, where he holds that some men, because of the contrary decree of the laws, deny self-evident principles, such as the principle that nothing can be produced out of nothing. Indeed, what is worse, he derisively dubs us and the upholders of the law verbalists, as if to say babblers and people who act without reason. In book VIII of the *Physics* also he reviles laws and he calls those who are verbalists in their law wills, because they claim that a thing can have being after absolute non-being.<sup>27</sup>

At the end of his chapter on Averroes, Giles summarizes the philosopher's errors in twelve points. The first error is his statement, "Quod nulla Lex est vera, licet possit esse utilis" (No religion is true, even though it can be useful).<sup>28</sup>

The third attack on Averroes and his followers in 1270 came from the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, who condemned fifteen theses, of which thirteen were Averroist, including the unity of the intellect and the eternity of the world.<sup>29</sup> Since these condemnations did not seem to stop the teaching of these heretic ideas at the University of Paris, in 1277, Tempier published 219 condemned propositions. The following three propositions suggest why the Church and theologians felt they were under attack by the faculty of philosophy:

- 152. That theological discussions are based on fables.
- 153. That nothing is known better because of knowing theology.
- 154. That the only wise men of the world are philosophers.<sup>30</sup>

The 1277 condemnations silenced the pro-Averroes voices at the University of Paris or forced them to move to Italy or Germany. They had associated Averroism and the study of Arab philosophy in general with disbelief and blasphemy.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, Thomas Aquinas was portrayed as the one who had beaten Averroes. Paintings on this theme can still be found in Italy. In the Church of San Domenico in Syracuse, Sicily, for example, *Disputa di San Tommaso d'Aquino* depicts Thomas sitting on a throne, with Averroes lying defeated on the ground before him.<sup>32</sup> The impact of the attack by Giles of Rome, though largely unknown today, should not be underestimated. Renan claims that Leibniz seems to have known Averroes only through *Quodlibeta*, one of Giles's other works. Renan also noticed that the chapter on Averroes in the *Directorium inquisitorum*, written by Nicolas Eymeric in 1376, was almost a "literal reproduction" of the *Errores philosophorum*.<sup>33</sup> The *Directorium* would become the handbook for Inquisition trials and remain so until the seventeenth century.<sup>34</sup> The *Errores* was widely read as a series of circulated manuscripts, and in 1482 it was one of the first books printed in Vienna. A second edition appeared as part of a collection printed in 1581 in Venice and a third in 1728 in Paris.<sup>35</sup> It was probably through the *Errores* that the image was created of Averroes as an atheist, an attacker of religion, even a "rabid dog," as Petrarch calls him.<sup>36</sup> In *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, Petrarch attacks four anonymous Averroists, former friends of his who had accused him of ignorance because he had not read Averroes.<sup>37</sup> In a letter to Boccaccio, Petrarch went further, claiming, "I will not be persuaded that any good can come from Arabia."<sup>38</sup>

Petrarch's opinion, however, was never widely accepted in Europe's intellectual circles. In the discussion that follows, I focus on the treatment Averroes and other Arab thinkers received in printed historical and philosophical overviews written between 1493 and 1831 and compare it to their treatment in twentieth-century histories of philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

Hartmann Schedel's 1493 *Weltchronik*, one of the first printed history books, is presented as a "description of the most famous and renowned."<sup>40</sup> It includes biographies of Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Petrarch, Poggio, Avicenna, Avenzoar, Averroes, Saladin, Albertus Magnus, and Bonaventura. Schedel shows great respect for Averroes, whom he describes as a physician and lover of wisdom (*Liebhaber der Weisheit*) and a great commentator on all the books of Aristotle. Published in 1707, but written hundred years earlier, Baldi's *Cronica de matematici overo epitome dell'istoria delle vite loro* gives a biographical overview of major figures in mathematics and astronomy. Of the seventy biographies, thirteen are about Arab scientists, an indication of the recognition of the importance of Arab mathematics and astronomy.<sup>41</sup>

The first history of philosophy, *Historiae philosophicae libri septem*, was written by Hornius, or Georg Horn, and published in Leiden in 1655.<sup>42</sup> Though Hornius denigrates Islam, he expresses appreciation for the philosophy in the Arab world. He praises the wisdom of the caliph al-Ma'mun and his House of Wisdom in Baghdad, where, he points out, Aristotle was translated and still studied in academies in the "Turkish and Persian empires" (*hodie in imperio Turcico & Persico Academias plurimas habent*). The best academies in Africa, he says, are in Morocco, Fez, Oran, Constantine, Tunis, Tripoli, Alexandria, and Cairo, while the most famous Arab philosophers live in Spain. The translations of the "majority of the greatest books of the Greeks and the Latins" fell into the hands of "very smart minds," who had been captured by the ardour of the subtlest philosophy.<sup>43</sup> He mentions Averroes and his great commentaries on Aristotle and also "his followers, called Averroists, who are today as well as in the past always involved in big disputes with other philosophers, mainly in Italy."<sup>44</sup> In general, Hornius rejects Diogenes Laertius's Hellenocentrism and prefers a "universalistic vision of the history of philosophy," which would have started in the Near East.<sup>45</sup>

The first general history of philosophy in French was the *Histoire critique de la philosophie* written by André-François Boureau-Deslandes in 1737.<sup>46</sup> It is another universal history that starts with Egypt and Babylonia, or the so-called first age.<sup>47</sup> Deslandes complains about "the ignorance of the Christians of the uses and customs of the Muslims."<sup>48</sup> He recounts the history of the House of Wisdom in Baghdad and says that caliph al-Mamun had "all the pleasure in inspiring his subjects to love for science."<sup>49</sup> He continues:

He became their father and legislator: the entire Orient applauded his virtues. It seems that Nature cannot suffer a void nor an eclipse. The centuries when Christianity had plunged into a shameful barbarism, were the same centuries when the Arabs have distinguished themselves the most. One does only have to observe that the 12th century is their favourite one, their century of distinction. They look to it like the Greeks see theirs of Alexander and the Romans theirs of Augustus.<sup>50</sup>

Deslandes repeats this assessment in his chapters on scholasticism, explaining that, in the age of Thomas Aquinas, Europe had behind it five centuries of no science, while the Arabs had had four centuries of science and philosophy. The Europeans had to catch up with science and philosophy by reading Arab works and Arab translations and interpretations of the Greeks. Quoting the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, he points out, however, that Arab philosophers made a lot of errors by mixing up Greek authors: "[They cited] Ptolemy rather than of Plato, Pythagoras rather than Protagoras, or Cratylus rather than Democritus. When Averroes borrows something from Plato, he gives extravagant titles to the Dialogues. We should be aware that he read wrong versions."<sup>51</sup> Deslandes sounds sympathetic to Averroes's theory of the intellect, explaining that Averroes's enemies found in his theory a "strong stain of atheism, because he

recognized for all divinity this universal intelligence, this ocean of spirits shared by every man.”<sup>52</sup>

The idea of philosophy as a universal history is also the structure on which Johann Jacob Brucker built his monumental *Historia critica philosophiae*, published first in German and then in Latin from 1742 to 1744.<sup>53</sup> Brucker was the first to divide the history of philosophy in three eras: (1) from the origins of philosophy to the end of the Roman monarchy, with Greek and barbarian philosophy,<sup>54</sup> (2) from Roman time to the restoration of science,<sup>55</sup> and (3) our age or the time until the eighteenth century. This way Brucker organized the history of philosophy in an ancient, a middle, and a new era. Before he introduces Greek philosophy, he spends three hundred pages describing the philosophy of the Hebrews, Chaldeans, Persians, Indians, Arabs, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Celts, Bretons, Germans, ancient Italians, Scythes, Thracians, and Getes.<sup>56</sup> Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761–1819) follows the same division of eras in his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie für akademische Unterricht*.<sup>57</sup> He, too, begins the old part with the Chaldeans and Egyptians, before describing the Greeks. But his discussion is much more limited than Brucker’s. The middle part starts at 800 AD and ends in the seventeenth century with Francis Bacon. The third part ends with the publication of the *Grundriss*. Tennemann spends eight pages on the “Araber,” of which one and a half pages are devoted to Averroes, the same amount of space he gives to Albertus Magnus and Duns Scotus. He tells the story of the House of Wisdom and mentions Alkindi, Alfarabi, Avicenna, Algazel, Ibn Tophail, Al Razi, Seiffedin, Nassireddin von Tus, Beidhasi, and Adhaddedin Al-Deschi and says that Maimonides was influenced by Averroes and Ibn Tophail. When writing about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, he mentions the Averroists, “welche des Averroes Auslegung des Aristotles folgten” (who followed Averroes’s lecture of Aristotle).

None of these historical overviews of philosophy mentions the idea of the Renaissance. They do, however, present the concept associated with the idea of the Renaissance that during the few centuries preceding the thirteenth century the Arabs made progress in philosophy and science, while the Europeans did not. Though these sources do not always present Islam and the Arabs in a positive light, most recognize that Greek knowledge came to Europe by way of the Arabs and that Europeans’ understanding of these works depended on Arab interpretations. Some historians acknowledged that there were Arab philosophers with their own philosophies and scientists with their own contributions to science. When Brucker talks about the restoration of the sciences, he points to the thirteenth century and not the fifteenth or the sixteenth century. This line is going to be different with Hegel.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel lectured on the history of philosophy at the University of Berlin in 1822, 1828, and 1830. His *Lectures* were published in 1837, six years after his death.<sup>58</sup> Though Hegel wrote a chapter on Chinese philosophy and one on Indian philosophy, he felt there was no real philosophy before the Greeks, because, he says, freedom is a precondition for philosophy and only the Greeks were free.<sup>59</sup> He calls it “a legend universally believed that Pythagoras, for instance, received his philosophy from India and Egypt.”<sup>60</sup> Hegel spends substantial space to scholasticism but without appreciating it, seeing it as “a barbarous philosophy of the finite understanding, without real content, which awakens no true interest in us, and to which we cannot return.”<sup>61</sup> His evaluation of Arab philosophy is mixed:

As quickly as the Arabians with their fanaticism spread themselves over the Eastern and the Western world, so quickly were the various stages of culture passed through by them, and very shortly they advanced in culture much farther than the West. For Mohammedanism, which quickly reached its culminating point, both as regards external



power and dominion and also spiritual development, Philosophy, along with all the other arts and sciences, flourished to an extraordinary degree, in spite of its here not displaying any special characteristic features. Philosophy was fostered and cherished among the Arabians; the philosophy of the Arabians must therefore be mentioned in the history of the philosophy. What we have to say, however, chiefly concerns the external preservation and propagation of Philosophy.<sup>62</sup>

Hegel writes further that the Arab philosophers occupied themselves mainly with studying and commenting on Aristotle. Thus: “[They] developed the metaphysics of understanding and a formal logic. Some of the famous Arabians lived as early as the eighth and ninth centuries; their progress was therefore very rapid, for the West had as yet made very little advance in culture.”<sup>63</sup> He also mentions Averroes in this context and in the chapter “Revival of the Sciences,” which he places in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries rather than the thirteenth. The first philosopher he discusses in this chapter is Pietro Pomponazzi or Pomponatius (1462–1525), “the most remarkable of these Aristotelians,” who wrote “on the immortality of the soul . . . —following a practice that was specially at vogue at the time.” Hegel adds: “The disciples of Averroës alleged that the universal nous, which is present in thought, is immaterial and immortal, while the soul as numerically one is mortal,”<sup>64</sup> an idea that he might have liked.

When we move on from Hegel to Bertrand Russell’s 1945 *History of Western Philosophy*,<sup>65</sup> one of the most widely read histories of philosophy in the twentieth century, we find that the role of Arab philosophy has been reduced even more. Like Brucker, Russell divides the history of philosophy into periods. His first period starts with Thales of Milete and ends with the fall of Rome. The second period, the Middle Ages, includes the scholastics, but also the “Arabians” and the Jews. The third period, the philosophy of modern times, begins with Descartes’s “Cogito, ergo sum.” He describes of the early history of Islam as follows: “The Arabs, although they conquered a great part of the world in the name of a new religion, were not a very religious race; the motive of their conquest was plunder and wealth, rather than religion. It was only in virtue of their lack of fanaticism that a handful of warriors were able to govern, without much difficulty, vast populations of higher civilization and alien religion.” Russell concedes that under the “early Abbasids the caliphate attained its greatest splendour,” adding that this “splendour, however, was short-lived.” He continues: “Absolute monarchy combined with polygamy led, as it usually does, to dynastic wars whenever a ruler died.”<sup>66</sup> On Arab philosophy, Russell is even more negative, focusing on the confusion between Aristotle and Plotinus, which he says was the fault of “Kindi (d. ca. 873), the first to write philosophy in Arabic, and the only philosopher of note who was himself an Arab.” He calls the Arab philosophers “encyclopaedic,” adding that “they were looked upon with suspicion by the populace, which was fanatical and bigoted.”<sup>67</sup> Russell singles out two “Mohammedan philosophers, one of Persia and one of Spain: Avicenna and Averroes.” He expands only on the last part of Averroes’s life, when the philosopher was exiled and his books were burned. Russell concludes: “Mohammedan civilization in its great days was admirable in arts and in many technical ways, but it showed no capacity for independent speculation in theoretical matters. Its importance, which must not be under-rated, is as a transmitter.”<sup>68</sup>

Between the histories of philosophy up to and including Hegel and Russell’s work, we can see a remarkable evolution. In Russell’s overview, Arab civilization is no longer described as having been centuries ahead of European civilization in philosophy and the sciences. Instead, the Arabs are seen as incapable of independent thinking. The list of Arab thinkers gradually decreases: Brucker mentions ten Arabs, Russell only two. With Russell, philosophy has become

a purely European (Western) accomplishment. One could argue that the scoop of his book, reflected in its title, is the history of only Western philosophy, but his passages on the (lack of) Arab philosophy and his silence on any other regional philosophy show that Russell only radicalized Hegel's view on the Greek origin of philosophy. The idea, alive until the middle of the nineteenth century, that Eastern philosophies might have influenced at some point Greek and other European philosophies, is completely out of the picture. Also interesting is that Russell devotes a chapter to the Renaissance, a term that was not used by Hegel, Brucker, and their predecessors. While Hegel mentions Erasmus (briefly) only twice and Thomas More not at all, Russell spends nine pages on Erasmus and More, whom he identifies as the two main proponents of the Renaissance. And while Hegel in his chapter "Revival of the Sciences" writes mainly about Pomponazzi, Giordano Bruno, Lucilio Vanini, and Petrus Ramée, Russell mentions Bruno and Vanini only once and briefly. While Hegel gives little space to Thomas Aquinas in his chapter about the scholastics, Russell gives Thomas an entire chapter.

In this article, we do not have the space to go deeper into the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century to explain how European history of philosophy has changed the way it did. But one French historian, Jules Michelet, deserves to be quoted here because his work can shed some light on the discourse of some historians who shaped historiography. Michelet introduced the word and concept "Renaissance" into historiography in 1855 when he published *Renaissance*, the seventh volume of his *Histoire de France*, which would become widely read.<sup>69</sup> About the Arabs, he does not mince words. Describing "the Jews and Arabs" as "damned by God. Miserables!," he blames them for misinterpreting Aristotle. On the origin of the Renaissance, he writes:

[H]ere comes the great formula, which we can never stop saying: Luckily the monks were there, religious conservators of Antiquity, its saviours. Tireless writers, these good Benedictines copied, multiplied these books. . . . The fatal patience of the monks did more than the fire of Omar, more than hundred libraries in Spain and all pyres of the Inquisition. . . . Let us fix these so important dates, which are the new eras for the human race. Virgil was published in 1470, Homer in 1488, Aristotle in 1498, Plato in 1512. If Petrarch cried with joy and kissed it, while we can still understand this, what would have been his reaction in seeing it being multiplied in the nobles characters of Venice and Florence, circulate all over Europe, pouring on everyone the pure light of the Hellenic sky, the freshness of its living waters, the streams of youth eternally flowing from the sources of the Iliad."<sup>70</sup>

## **Conclusion: Damnatio memoriae**

If one were to look at popular histories of philosophy of the twentieth century or consult school texts on the history of philosophy, one would see that the story written by Bertrand Russell is the story generally known and accepted in Europe. The history of philosophy has become a purely European matter, where the role of Averroes and the Arabs in general is reduced to one of transmitters of Greek knowledge back to Europe. The Renaissance is generally considered to be the key period during which Europe rediscovered its own philosophical and scientific past, while other civilizations remained in the dark. Even worse, according to this view, non-Europeans were not even capable of independent thinking. This process of deleting non-Europeans from the history of philosophy can be compared to *damnatio memoriae*, a decision of the Roman senate to

delete someone from history by removing all references to that person in the entire Roman empire. But the removal of someone's name does not mean that person never existed.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–17.

<sup>3</sup> Greenblatt writes Averroes as Averroës. I use the more common form, Averroes, throughout this article, except where it appears differently in quotations.

<sup>4</sup> A good overview on the role of Baghdad in the translation of Greek knowledge can be found in Al-Khalili, Jim, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance*. (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found—A History in Seven Cities* (London: Picador, 2019), 135–166.

<sup>6</sup> Alain de Libera, *La philosophie médiévale* (Paris: PUF, 2019), 358–363.

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme* (1852; Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Cyrille Michon, ed., *Thomas d'Aquin et la controverse sur L'Eternité du monde* (Paris: GF Flammarion, 2004), 35–37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting example is given by Michon, *L'Eternité du monde*, 381, with an extensive quotation out of Stephen Hawking's, *A Brief History of Time* (1988) in French translation: “On peut encore imaginer que Dieu a créé l'Univers à l'instant du Big Bang, ou même après, de façon qu'il ressemble à ce qu'il aurait dû être s'il y en avait eu un; mais ce serait un non-sens de supposer qu'il l'ait créé avant. Un univers en expansion n'exclut pas la possibilité d'un créateur mais il définit l'instant où ce dernier aurait pu accomplir son oeuvre!”

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Baptiste Brenet, *Averroès l'inquiétant* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017), 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas d'Aquin, *L'unité de l'intellect contre les Averroïstes*, trans. Alain de Libera (1270; Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22–26.

<sup>14</sup> When Giles of Rome wrote *Errores philosophorum*, a critique on the philosophers, in 1270, he criticized only Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, al-Ghazali, al-Kindi, and Maimonides. Giles of Rome, *Errores philosophorum*, ed. Josef Koch and John Riedl (1270; Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1944).

<sup>15</sup> Averroës, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> de Libera, *La philosophie médiévale*, 367–383.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *L'Europe est-elle née au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 2003), 176–177.

<sup>18</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (encyclical letter), September 14, 1998, par. 45, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html).

<sup>19</sup> Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Success and Repression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 343–357.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 342–344.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent overview of Averroism in the Renaissance, see Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni, eds., *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, Archives internationales d'histoire des idées/International Archives of the History of Ideas 211 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013). And then especially its chapter 4: Craig Martin, “Humanism and the Assessment of Averroes in the Renaissance,” 65–79.

<sup>22</sup> Carlos Fraenkel, “Reconsidering the Case of Elijah Delmedigo's Averroism and Its Impact on Spinoza,” in *ibid.*, 213–236.

<sup>23</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Charles Sisson (London/Sydney: Pan Books, 1981), Inferno, canto IV.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Paradiso, canto X.

<sup>25</sup> Alain de Libera, “Avant-propos,” in *Dante et l'Averroïsme*, ed. Alain de Libera, Jean-Baptiste Brenet, and Irène Rosier-Catach, (Paris: Collège de France, Les Belles Lettres, 2019), 9–20.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas d'Aquin, *L'unité de l'intellect contre les Averroïstes*, 5, §118. “Est etiam maiori ammiratione uel etiam indignatione dignum, quod aliquis Christianum se profitens tam irreuenter de christiana fide loqui presumpserit.”

<sup>27</sup> Giles of Rome, *Errores philosophorum*, IV.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, V.

- <sup>29</sup> Etienne Gilson, *La philosophie au Moyen Age: Des origines patristiques à la fin du XIVe siècle* (Paris: Payot, 1947), 558.
- <sup>30</sup> Grant, *Foundations of Modern Science*, 72–73.
- <sup>31</sup> Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, 201.
- <sup>32</sup> Brenet, *Averroès l'inquiétant*, 35–38.
- <sup>33</sup> Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, 184–186.
- <sup>34</sup> Luca Bianchi, “Nulla lex est vera licetpossit esse utilis,” in *Itrum—Error—Erreur*, ed. Andreas Speer and Maxime Mauriège (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 325–347.
- <sup>35</sup> Josef Koch, introduction to *Giles of Rome, Errores philosophorum*, iii–xvii.
- <sup>36</sup> Bianchi, “Nulla lex,” 325–326.
- <sup>37</sup> Theodore J. Cachey Jr., “Between Petrarch and Dante: Prolegomenon to a Critical Discourse,” in *Petrarch and Dante*, ed. Zygmunt Baranski and Theodore J. Cachey Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 11. Kristeller puts some doubts on the fact that these friends were Averroists: Paul Oscar Kristeller, “Petrarch’s ‘Averroists’: A Note on the History of Aristotelianism in Venice, Padua, and Bologna,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 14, no. 1 (1952): 59–65.
- <sup>38</sup> Francesco Petracca, *Opera* (Basel, 1554), 880. Quoted in Craig Martin, “Rethinking Renaissance Averroism,” *Intellectual History Review* 17, no. 1 (2007): 13.
- <sup>39</sup> An excellent overview of Averroes’s reception in the Renaissance can be found in Martin, “Rethinking Renaissance Averroism.”
- <sup>40</sup> Hartmann Schedel, *Chronicle of the World: The Complete and Annotated Nuremberg Chronicle*, ed. Stephan Füssel (1493; Köln: Taschen, 2018).
- <sup>41</sup> Bernardo Baldi, *Le Vite de’ Matematici: Edizione annotata e commentata della parte medievale e rinascimentale*, ed. Elio Nenci (1707; Milan: Francoangeli, 1998). The thirteen Arab scientists are Albumasari (Abu Ma’sar), Messala (Masa’allah—Maslam al Magriti), Albategno (Al-Battani), Ali Abenragele (Ali Abi Rigal), Arzahele (Al-Zarquali), Almansore (Al Hakim Al Mansur, ruler of Egypt 996–1021), Ali Abenrodano—Punico (Ali Ridwan Al Misr—iPunico?), Alhazeno (Al Haithem), Alchindo (Al Kindi), Alpetragio (Al Bitrugli), Gebro (Abu Mohammed Gabir), Alfargano (Al Fargani), and Tebitte (Abu Hassan Tabit Al Harrani).
- <sup>42</sup> Hornius, *Historiae philosophicae libri septem quibus de origine, successione, sectis & vita philosophorum ab orbe condito ad nostrum aetatem agitur* (Leiden: Johannes Elsevirius, 1655).
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid. 286–290. For the last sentence: “plurima praestantissima Latinarum & Graecarum monumenta verterunt. Quae cum inciderunt in homines ingenio facacissimos, coepit paulatim subtilissimae Philosophiae ardos eas usare.”
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 292. “Ejus sectatores Averroestae dicuntur, quorum cum aliis Philosophis praecipue in Italia & hodie & olim magnae semper fuerunt contentiones.”
- <sup>45</sup> Gregorio Piaia, “Averroes and Arabic Philosophy in the Modern Historia Philosophica: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in Akasoy, *Renaissance Averroism*, 242.
- <sup>46</sup> [André-François Boureau-Deslandes,] *Histoire critique de la philosophie ou l’on traite de son origine, des ses progrès, et des diverses Révolutions qui lui sont arrivées jusqu’à notre tems* (Amsterdam: François Changuion, 1737).
- <sup>47</sup> Deslande, *Histoire critique*, xxvii.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 229. “Golius prof de Leiden, observe que l’ignorance dans laquelle vivent les Chrétiens des moeurs & des usages des Mahométans.”
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 243. “Comme Almamon regna près de vingt ans, il eut tout le loisir d’inspirer à ses sujets l’amour des sciences.”
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 243. “Il en devint le Père & le Législateur: tout l’Orient applaudit à ses vertus. Il semble que la Nature ne puisse souffrir ni de vuide, ni d’éclipse. Les siècles ou le Christianisme étoit plongé dans une barbarie honteuse, furent les siècles mêmes ou les Arabes se distinguèrent le plus. Il faut seulement observer que le douzième est leur siècle favori, leur siècle de distinction. Ils le regardent de même oeil, que les Grecs regardoient celui d’Alexandre, & les Romains celui d’Auguste.”
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 242. “Les Philosophes arabes par exemple, citent toujours Ptolomée eu-lieu de Platon, Pythagore au-lieu de Protagoras, Cratyle au-lieu de Démocrite, etc. Quand Averroès emprunte quelque chose de Platon, il ne donne jamais des Dialogues que des titres extravagants. On juge bien qu’il ne les a lus que dans des versions fautives.”
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 257. “C’étoit la sùrtout le sentiment d’Averroès, & ses ennemies y trouvoient une forte teinture d’Athéisme, d’autant plus qu’il ne reconnoissoit pour toute Divinité que cette Intelligence universelle, que cet Océan d’Esprits partagés entre chaque homme.”

<sup>53</sup> Jacob Brucker, *Historia Critica Philosophiae A Mundi Incunabulis ad Nostram Usque Aetatem Deducta*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Bern. Christoph. Breitkopf, 1742–1744).

<sup>54</sup> Omnemque tum gentium barbarum tum Graecae philosophiam.

<sup>55</sup> Altera gentilis philosophiae sub imperatoribus florentis, quae ad speculum usque VI. excurrit, Judaicae, Saracenicae & Christianae a nascentis ecclesiae initiis usque ad Felicia restauratarum scientiarum tempora faciem exhibebit.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine König-Pralong, *La colonie philosophique: Ecrire l'histoire de la philosophie au XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris: Editions EHESS, 2019), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann, revised and expanded, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie für akademische Unterricht* (Leipzig: Barth, 1829).

<sup>58</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, 3 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1896).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1:100.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 3:94–95.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>65</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *History of Western Philosophy, and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest of Times to the Present Day* (London: Routledge, 1945).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 414–415.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 416–417.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>69</sup> Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France* (Paris: Chamerot, 1855), 7:xxxvii.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., I and vcc: “[I]ci vient la grande formule, qu’on ne manque jamais de dire: Heureusement les moines étaient là, religieux conservateurs de l’antiquité, ses sauveurs. Ecrivains infatigables, ces bons bénédictins copiaient, multipliaient les livres. . . . La fatale patience des moines fit plus que l’incendie d’Omar, plus que celui des cent bibliothèques d’Espagne et tous les bûchers de l’inquisition. . . . Fixons ces dates si graves, qui sont des ères nouvelles pour le genre humain. Virgile fut imprimé en 1470, Homère en 1488, Aristote en 1498, Platon en 1512. Si Pétrarque pleurait de joie et le baisait, en pouvant encore le comprendre, quel aurait été son transport de le voir multiplié dans les nobles caractères de Venise et de Florence, circuler par toute l’Europe, versant à tous la pure lumière du ciel hellénique, la fraîcheur de ses vives eaux, ces torrents de jeunesse qui coulent éternellement des source de l’Iliade!”