

MOHAMMED RUSTOM

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**Michael E. Marmura**  
**1929-2009**



Professor Michael Elias Marmura was born in Jerusalem on November 11th, 1929. He received his early education in Jerusalem, and becoming thoroughly acquainted with the vast literary tradition of his native Arabic, Professor Marmura left for the United States to continue his studies. He completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin, and then went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan. In 1959, Professor Marmura successfully completed his PhD in Islamic philosophy (on the question of the world's pre-eternity in Ghazālī and Averroës) under the supervision of the well-known scholar of Islamic philosophy and theology, the late Professor George Hourani. Around the time he defended his thesis, in the Fall of 1959, Professor Marmura took up a position at the University of Toronto's Department of Near Eastern Studies (later called the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies, and now known as the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations). Students took a natural liking to him, and he was also able to establish himself rather quickly as one of the leading authorities on Avicenna and Ghazālī.

After teaching Islamic thought and Arabic literature at the University of Toronto for some thirty-six years, and having served as the Chair of the Department on two separate occasions, Professor Marmura retired from the profession in 1995. In 2004, on the occasion of Professor Marmura's seventy-fifth birthday, a conference was held at the University of Toronto in his honour, and was well-attended by his colleagues, friends, and students. A *Tabula Gratulatoria*, signed by those who attended the conference and many of those who were unable to attend, was also presented to him. As a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Professor Emeritus, he continued to teach in the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations until 2006. In the summer of 2009, the Marmuras moved to Antigonish, Nova Scotia. On the evening of September 17th, 2009, Professor Marmura passed away in Antigonish. He is survived by his wife Elizabeth (Betty), their three children, and four grandchildren.

As a scholar of Islamic philosophy, Professor Marmura was gifted with a profound knowledge of the intricacies of classical Arabic, a very sharp mind, and, most importantly, the ability to convey philosophical Arabic in a manner that was at once faithful to the original and comprehensible to the contemporary English reader. These qualities enabled Professor Marmura to publish a number of important articles and books throughout his career. But it was not until shortly before his retirement that his most lasting contributions to the field of Islamic philosophy would begin to see the light of day. It was as if the last decade of his life was a distilling of sorts of the profound knowledge he had acquired of the Islamic philosophical tradition throughout his long years of study. In 1997, he published *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press; 2nd ed., 2000), which is by far the most accurate and eloquent annotated translation of Ghazālī's famous *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. This bilingual text is preceded by valuable Arabic and English introductions by the translator. In 2005, Professor Marmura went on to publish a collection of his writings on Islamic thought, entitled *Probing in Islamic Philosophy* (Binghamton: Global Academic Publishing). The articles in this collection bring together over four decades of his penetrating scholarship on Islamic philosophy in general, and Avicenna and Ghazālī in particular.

Perhaps Professor Marmura's greatest contribution is his 2005 annotated translation (with parallel Arabic text) of the Metaphysics section of Avicenna's famous *al-Shifā'*, entitled *The Metaphysics of the Healing* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press). Despite the vast amount

of scholarship we have on Avicenna, no scholar before Professor Marmura had undertaken to translate and publish the *Shifā*'s section on Metaphysics into English. Professor Marmura had, in fact, roughly translated the entire work while he was a graduate student. He once noted to me that this was primarily an exercise for himself, as a way of coming to terms with Avicenna's complex language and thought. Although Professor Marmura revised the translation at several stages throughout his career, it would not be until four years before his death that he would publish his translation of this seminal philosophical work.

It can also be noted here that, apart from several important essays on Avicenna which Professor Marmura had published since the appearance of *Probing in Islamic Philosophy*, he had also completed a translation of the Psychology section of Avicenna's *Shifā* with his former student, the noted scholar of Islamic philosophy, Professor Deborah Black. The appearance of this work promises to be a major contribution, and will complement the volume on the *Shifā*'s Metaphysics. Needless to say, Professor Marmura's scholarship, both through his published writings and the works of his students (many of whom are established scholars of Islamic philosophy today), has and will continue to have an impact upon the fields of Islamic studies, medieval philosophy, and philosophy of religion. Professor Marmura is known to have taken his subject matter very seriously, particularly Avicenna. For example, when he was busy with various academic and administrative responsibilities, he had one day experienced an intense headache. He came across a remedy in Avicenna's *al-Qānūn fī al-tibb* ("The Canon of Medicine"), a text which had such a long life in the West. Having put together the strange concoction prescribed by his medieval physician, he took it down in good faith, only to realize that this odd blend worsened his condition! In so far as we can isolate Professor Marmura's scholarly activities from his character (and none would doubt that he embodied what he studied and taught), some comments are in order concerning the latter. I first met Professor Marmura in November 1999, when, as a first year undergraduate student in Islamic studies at the University of Toronto, I approached him and asked him to teach me "Islamic philosophy." "Well, you're going to have to learn Arabic first," he cautioned. Although the following year he allowed me to take his graduate seminar in Islamic philosophy and theology, it was out of sympathy for my struggles that he let me stay in the class. I could not, at that stage, really follow the discussions. But I could learn from his character. I noticed how humble and gentle he was, towards both his confused undergraduate student who was so eager to learn "Islamic philosophy" but could barely string together two sentences in Arabic (let alone philosophical Arabic), and those of his graduate students who were unable to keep up with him.

His humility extended to his students even when they had their act together. Two graduate students in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations keen on studying with the legendary "Professor Marmura" managed to track him down when he was no longer paying regular visits to the Department. Since he had moved to Fergus, Ontario in 2006, he was about an hour and a half drive outside of Toronto. Yet he made himself accessible to these students by having his wife pick them up at the Guelph bus station (a twenty minute drive from Fergus) in order to bring them to the Marmura household. There they had the chance to spend the entire morning learning from him.

In my own case, after six more years of hard work and a couple of other demanding courses with Professor Marmura, I finally had the opportunity to study Avicenna with him, in the original

Arabic, one on one. The year-long course would be in his office at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations once a week, and quite early in the morning. I was aware of the fact that Professor Marmura was sacrificing his time to take me through the philosophical texts with which he was so intimately familiar; but the thought did not trouble me greatly, because I knew that he had also set aside the days of our meeting to take care of other administrative affairs in the Department. Yet, after every class, I noticed that he would quickly disappear. I would find out later that he had been coming to campus, using public transportation and often in fairly cold temperatures, just to teach me that “Islamic philosophy” about which I had inquired when we first met. On another occasion, when Professor Marmura was moving some things out his office, he contacted me, asking for a hand with the move. When I got to his office, I realized that he did not need help with lifting heavy boxes or moving oversized furniture. It was his way of drawing me in to hand over to me a number of his own precious books.

Many of us in the Department have come to learn of the manner in which Professor Marmura concealed his virtues. During the aforementioned conference in his honour, a long-time student noted to the audience how Professor Marmura, upon seeing the impoverished condition of a student in the Department, delivered food to his/her door in person.

Amongst Professor Marmura’s virtues, this time out in the open, were his charismatic style of teaching and kind disposition. His classes were both intellectually rigorous and exciting. He had the unique gift of being able to recite from memory countless verses of Arabic and English poetry, which would always seem to roll off of his tongue at the right moment. If he did not have a poem to illustrate his point, he would surely be able to draw from his endless treasury of anecdotes and stories. A student who made a good point was not just a good student, but a “rascal;” and some students would, when entering the class room, be met with expressions such as, “Ahhh, *tanawwarat al-ghurfa...*” (“Ahhh, the room has become illumined...”). Such graceful gestures would always give one the impression that, for Professor Marmura, learning was not supposed to be a dry, cerebral exercise involving close engagement with medieval texts. Rather, it was a means of becoming more human. If there is one adjective which best summarizes Professor Michael E. Marmura, both as a scholar and as a person, it would likely be “charitable.” In a world where people are increasingly self-interested and self-absorbed, the one who gives himself to others so freely, even if he wishes to conceal himself, will necessarily be “seen,” and, by virtue of his being “seen,” will help others to see. Like Avicenna’s famous book, such a person, which Professor Marmura undoubtedly was, will be a “cure” or “healing” for the rest of us: *tanawwarat al-ghurfa*.

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*(Author’s title given as of the time of writing)*