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Averroes: Religious Dialectic and Aristotelian Philosophical Thought

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9 Averroes: religious dialectic and Aristotelian philosophical thought

Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Rushd (ca. 1126–98), who came to be known in the Latin West as Averroes, was born at Cordoba into a family prominent for its expert devotion to the study and development of religious law (*shar'īa*). In Arabic sources al-Ḥafīd (“the Grandson”) is added to his name to distinguish him from his grandfather (d. 1126), a famous Maliki jurist who served the ruling Almoravid regime as *qādī* (judge) and even as *imām* (prayer leader and chief religious authority) at the magnificent Great Mosque which still stands today in the city of Averroes’ birth and where Averroes himself served as Grand *Qādī* (chief judge). When the governing regime changed with the success of ‘Abd al-Mu’min (r. 1130–63), founder of the Almohad (*al-Muwaḥḥidūn*) dynasty, the members of the family continued to flourish under a new religious orientation based on the teachings of the reformer, al-Maḥdī ibn Tūmart (d. ca. 1129–30). Although insistent on the strict adherence to religious law, Ibn Tūmart’s teachings were at the same time equally insistent on the essential rationality of human understanding of the existence and unity (*tawḥīd*) of God and his creation as well as the rationality of the Qur’ān and its interpretation. This approach was embraced – even exploited – by Averroes in his own writings on dialectical theology and thereby played a role in the development of his thought on the nature of religious law and revelation in relation to philosophy founded on the powers of natural reason. Considerations of family, history, and contemporary religious doctrine play roles in the thought of other philosophical thinkers presented in this volume, but in the case of Averroes his times and his various appointments at Seville and Cordoba as *qādī* seem to have melded in special ways with his understanding of Aristotle and al-Fārābī. Over the

short period of 1179–81 he propounded publicly his controversial views on religion and natural reason in four important dialectical works: the so-called *Decisive Treatise*, the *Explanation of the Sorts of Proofs in the Doctrines of Religion* (*al-Kashf ‘an al-manāhij*), a *Damīma* or *Appendix on Divine Knowledge* usually understood as attached to the *Decisive Treatise*, and his famous *Incoherence of the Incoherence* written as a commentary on and response to al-Ghazālī’s *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In these compositions, Averroes is a thinker dynamically engaged with religious issues, working out a coherent account of matters of relevance to both religion and philosophy. The dynamism of his thought is also apparent in another way in philosophical works where he changed views on a number of issues, among them the nature of divine causality in the world and the vexing problem of providing a coherent and cogent account of human knowing and the role of the receptive human material intellect.

The philosophical works of Averroes range in size from short treatises on specific issues of logic, physics, psychology, *et alia* to his three sorts of commentaries on major works of the Aristotelian corpus. His *Short Commentaries*, usually considered early, consist of epitomizing accounts of Aristotelian doctrines, often substantially based on discussions in the accounts of commentators of the Greek tradition.¹ The *Middle Commentaries* more often have the form of a clarifying and simplifying paraphrase of the Aristotelian text, and for that reason are thought likely to arise in response to the request of his patron, Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf, for help in understanding the works of Aristotle. The late *Long Commentaries*, consisting of the entire text of Aristotle divided into sections followed by detailed commentary, are generally thought to contain his most mature thought. The first of these was the *Long Commentary on the “Posterior Analytics”* (ca. 1180–3). Following in measured succession were Long Commentaries on the *De Anima* (ca. 1186?), on the *Physics* (1186), on the *De Caelo* (1188), and on the *Metaphysics* (1190). As will be discussed below, Averroes himself held that truth, not as grasped *per accidens* by the methods of persuasion or dialectic, but in its fullest sense as *per se*, is to be found in his “books of demonstration,”² that is, in his philosophical works and in particular his commentaries on Aristotle which he held to be substantially composed of philosophical demonstrations. Through translations into Hebrew the work of Averroes

had a very substantial influence on the development of medieval Jewish philosophical thought. The works translated included the *Decisive Treatise*, the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, several *Short Commentaries*, *Middle Commentaries* on the *Physics*, *De Caelo*, *De Anima*, *Metaphysics*, and more, and the *Long Commentaries* on the *Posterior Analytics* and *Physics*.³ It is particularly significant that the *Long Commentaries* on the *De Anima* and on the *Metaphysics* were not included, since these contain his final positions on soul, intellect, and personal immortality as well as on God and the nature of metaphysical science. Yet it is because of translations from Arabic into Latin in the thirteenth century that Averroes is a widely recognized figure in the history of philosophy today. This early wave of translations, many by Michael Scot, who worked in Toledo and in Sicily at the court of Frederick II, were for the most part of philosophical commentaries and did not include his works of dialectical argumentation relevant to religion. Averroes' thought continued to draw the attention of Western thinkers, and interest was reinforced by a second wave of translations and the printing of his translated works with those of Aristotle.⁴ No such intense interest in the works and thought of Averroes was maintained in the Arabic philosophical milieu of the Middle Ages.

RELIGIOUS DIALECTIC AND PHILOSOPHY

Much philosophical confusion has arisen regarding the interpretation of the religious and philosophical thought of Averroes, often-times due to factors extraneous to his own work. Since the emergence of interest in Averroes broadly in the Arab world following the appearance of Renan's 1852 work, in some cases the writings and figure of Averroes have been used in blatant manipulation, with little if any regard to the genuine sense of his thought, to champion many diverse causes from socialism and Marxism to nationalism and more recently to promote the harmony of religion and rationality in the face of rising anti-rational Islamic fundamentalism.⁵ In other cases, however, confusion has been due to the lack of access to or consultation of the complete corpus of his works, while in still others it has been due to confusion in the interpretation of doctrine and texts. This latter has been particularly evident in regard to the issue of the relation of philosophy and religion and the imputation

to Averroes himself of the doctrine of "Double Truth" that is often claimed to have arisen in the Latin West.⁶ Careful consideration of Averroes' methodology as expounded and employed in his dialectical works will show that imputation to be incorrect and will also valuably set the stage for consideration of his strictly philosophical work.

In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* Averroes makes it clear that the discussions of philosophical topics recounted in that work should not be regarded as definitive accounts of his views. He also remarks on the nature of statements set forth in that work:

All this is the theory of the philosophers on this problem and in the way we have stated it here with its proofs, it is a persuasive not a demonstrative statement. It is for you to inquire about these questions in the places where they are treated in the books of demonstration, if you are one of the people of complete happiness (*al-sa'āda al-tāmma*) and if you are one of those who learn the arts the function of which is proof. For the demonstrative arts are very much like the practical; for just as a man who is not a craftsman cannot perform the function of craftsmanship, in the same way it is not possible for him who has not learned the arts of demonstration to perform the function of demonstration which is demonstration itself: indeed this is still more necessary for this art than for any other – and this is not generally acknowledged in the case of this practice only because it is a mere act – and therefore such a demonstration can proceed only from one who has learned the art. The kinds of statements, however, are many, some demonstrative, others not, and since non-demonstrative statements can be adduced without knowledge of the art, it was thought that this might also be the case with demonstrative statements; but this is a great error. And therefore in the spheres of the demonstrative arts, no other statement is possible but a technical statement which only the student of this art can bring, just as is the case with the art of geometry. Nothing therefore of what we have said in this book is a technical demonstrative proof; they are all non-technical statements, some of them having greater persuasion than others, and it is in this spirit that what we have written here must be understood.⁷

Demonstrative statements have a formal structure, insofar as they are the necessary conclusions of demonstrative arguments which are technically sound and yield knowledge for the one who formed the arguments and drew the conclusions. As Averroes knew well, Aristotle held demonstrations to be valid syllogisms based on

premises which are true, primary, and immediate as well as more known than, prior to, and causes of the conclusion (*Posterior Analytics*, I.2, 71b18–24). Syllogisms based on invalid technical form or on premises not meeting these criteria are not demonstrative and not productive of knowledge, however persuasive they may be. While demonstrations may build upon conclusions of other demonstrations, these statements based on non-demonstrative arguments may turn out to be true, but they would be so in a merely accidental way and not *per se*. For the practitioner of demonstration conclusions are necessary and known and, as such, are also persuasive; for the practitioner of rhetorical or dialectical argument statements cannot be known to be true on the basis of the reasoning given in the account. The syllogism used for these sorts of arguments will be a dialectical syllogism, a rhetorical syllogism, or a sign, says Averroes in his *Long Commentary on the "Posterior Analytics,"* and as such cannot be considered altogether evident or true (*al-yaqīn alladhī fī al-ghāya / secundum maximam veritatem*).⁸ Yet, as he indicates in the quoted passage from the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, there is no necessity that statements be demonstrative in order for them to be persuasive.

In his *Faṣl al-maqāl* or Decisive Treatise, the full title of which can be rendered, "Book of the Distinction of Discourse and the Establishment of the Relation of Religious Law and Philosophy,"⁹ persuasion is explained as having to do with the movement of the soul in assent (*taṣdīq*). Not all forms of assent are dependent in a compelling way on the truth of the statement to which assent is given. Following the lead of al-Fārābī regarding what are called "modes of thought" by David Reisman in an earlier chapter of the present collection,¹⁰ Averroes distinguishes human beings with respect to their native capacities and their methods of assent:

[T]he natures of men are on different levels with respect to assent. One of them comes to assent through demonstration; another comes to assent through dialectical arguments, just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstration, since his nature does not contain any greater capacity; while another comes to assent through rhetorical arguments, again just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstrative argument.¹¹

Nothing in dialectical arguments as such compels assent, though it may be the disposition of a given person to be swayed by dialectical

arguments based on assumed principles and so to assent with fullest personal conviction to a certain statement or proposition. Likewise in rhetorical arguments as such there is nothing to compel assent, though it may be the disposition of a given person to be swayed by emotive appeals and displays and, again, to assent with fullest personal conviction to a certain statement or proposition. In these cases assent voiced or otherwise evinced is not founded on the truth or falsity of a statement or proposition as the criterion of its appropriateness. If the conclusion of a dialectical or rhetorical argument happens to be true, it is not because of the argument itself but because of extraneous considerations. The truth of the conclusions, then, has to be considered *per accidens*, not *per se*. It is only demonstration properly so called which attains truth with necessity in its conclusion and necessarily causes knowledge.

It is in this context that Averroes' distinction of characters of individuals with respect to their intellectual abilities has to be understood. He does not assert that there are different truths for these diverse classes of human beings. Those for whom the rhetorical mode of argumentation is most fitting require the guidance of others if they are to assent to what happens to be the truth, since neither the premises nor the argument form as such contribute to the truth of the conclusion. Those for whom the dialectical mode of argumentation is most fitting are those who are misled particularly regarding the starting points and foundations of arguments; for them to hit upon the truth in their conclusions would require the guidance of others who in fact know the truth of the premises. There is then no doctrine of "Double Truth" in Averroes such that religion has its truth and philosophy has yet another. Instead, Averroes holds for a unity of truth when he writes in his *Decisive Treatise*, "Truth does not contradict truth but rather is consistent with it and bears witness to it."¹²

This principle of the unity of truth plays a central role in Averroes' arguments, for otherwise it would be possible to hold there to be true propositions set forth in religion by dialectical argumentation founded on interpretation of religious scripture but which are at the same time incompatible with true propositions set forth in philosophy founded on demonstration. Averroes does not hold for actual incompatible truths to be present in the discourses or argued conclusions of religion and philosophy. Rather, he openly acknowledges

that, in spite of the distinct ways assent is brought about in diverse classes of human beings, primacy has to be given to the philosophical method of demonstration.

We affirm definitely that whenever the conclusion of a demonstration is in conflict with the apparent meaning of Scripture [or Religious Law], that apparent meaning admits of allegorical interpretation according to the rules for such interpretation in Arabic. This proposition is questioned by no Muslim and doubted by no believer. But its certainty is immensely increased for those who have had close dealings with this idea and put it to the test, and made it their aim to reconcile the assertions of intellect and tradition. Indeed we may say that whenever a statement in Scripture [or Religious Law] conflicts in its apparent meaning with a conclusion of demonstration, if Scripture [or Religious Law] is considered carefully, and the rest of its contents searched page by page, there will invariably be found among the expressions of Scripture [or Religious Law] something which in its apparent meaning bears witness to that allegorical interpretation or comes close to bearing witness.¹³

Moreover, philosophically established truths can be used to correct theological excesses in scriptural interpretation such as the commonly held religious notion of creation *ex nihilo* and the origination of time. In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* Averroes sets forth the understanding of the metaphysical dependence of the world on God in accord with the account of God as creator by way of final causality which he argues in his philosophical works. God is the creator of the universe insofar as he draws it from potentiality into the actuality of existence and also conserves it. Such is the case without entailing a temporal origination of the world and a starting moment of time. God does so by being "the cause of the composition of the parts of the world, the existence of which is in their composition," so that "he is the cause of their existence" and properly called agent of the existence of the world.¹⁴ Since there cannot be two incompatible truths, in this case Averroes finds that the dialectical theologians moved from incorrect premises in their refusal to accept the literal account of Scripture because

in their statements about the world [they] do not conform to the apparent meaning of Scripture but interpret it allegorically. For it is not stated in Scripture that God was existing with absolutely nothing else: a text to this effect is nowhere to be found.¹⁵

Thus, Averroes holds that the truth of religion and the truth of philosophy are one and the same. In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* Averroes holds that

the religions are, according to the philosophers, obligatory, since they lead toward wisdom in a way universal to all human beings, for philosophy only leads a certain number of intelligent people to the knowledge of happiness, and they therefore have to learn wisdom, whereas religions seek the instruction of the masses generally.¹⁶

Not unlike al-Fārābī, Averroes holds that the role of religion is the education of human beings in proper social mores and conduct for their fulfillment and happiness. Yet it is necessary for those of the demonstrative class of philosophers to understand common religious propositions critically.

We have already seen that Averroes' account of the compatibility of the eternity of the world and Scripture is founded on a precise philosophical understanding of the issue. This issue of the eternity of the world *a parte ante* was one of the three positions for which al-Ghazālī accused the philosophers of *kufr*, unbelief. The remaining two were the denial of God's knowledge of particulars and the denial of resurrection and the afterlife. In both cases Averroes treads carefully in his responses, but those responses are in accord with the methodology indicated here. To the first he responds that divine knowledge cannot be understood on the model of human knowledge, which both in knowing particulars and in knowing universals is posterior to things. Since divine knowledge is the cause of things, not caused by things, the consequence is that God's knowledge cannot be characterized by human notions of universal or particular knowledge. In the *Ḍamīma* he holds that demonstration shows that it is not by some originated knowledge analogous to that of human beings that God can be said to know particulars or universals. Recognizing the limits of inquiry on this issue, he says, "This is the furthest extent to which purification [of concepts] ought to be admitted."¹⁷ He later adds that

there must be another knowledge of beings which is unqualified, the eternal Glorious Knowledge. And how is it conceivable that the Peripatetic philosophers could have held that the eternal Knowledge does not comprehend particulars, when they held that It is the cause of warning in dreams, of revelation, and of other kinds of inspiration?¹⁸

This issue of God's knowledge will be considered again below in a strictly philosophical context. But what the careful student should note here is that Averroes has affirmed that divine knowledge exists and that it is the cause of things. These assertions are acceptable to him on the basis of philosophical demonstration, as we shall see, and they are acceptable as statements of dialectical religious discourse. As he puts it, "demonstration compels the conclusion that [God] knows things, because their issuing from him is solely due to his knowing." Yet, "demonstration also compels the conclusion that God does not know things with a knowledge of the same character as originated knowledge."¹⁹ But given that divine knowledge is a *tertium quid* unlike human particular or universal knowledge, "the limits of inquiry on this issue" as dealt with here in the context of dialectical arguments strictly preclude the explanation of exactly what it means to say that God knows things.

Averroes' critical interpretation of religious issues in accord with philosophical demonstration is also found in his treatment of al-Ghazālī's condemnation of the philosophers for denying resurrection and the afterlife (*al-ma'ād*). In the *Decisive Treatise* he outlines his understanding of Scripture to contain three sorts of texts: those which must be read literally, those which the demonstrative class may interpret allegorically, and those over which there is disagreement. Scholars who err in regard to this third sort of text should be excused because of the acknowledged difficulty and disagreement. The issue here is of the third sort. If an expert scholar should hold for an allegorical interpretation of Scripture on resurrection and the afterlife with respect to its character (*fī ṣifati al-ma'ād*), not with respect to its existence (*fī wujūdihi*), he should be excused "provided that the interpretation given does not lead to denial of its existence."²⁰ As we shall see, in his mature philosophical work Averroes allows no provision for continued existence after death for individual human beings, though he does hold that human life continues for other members of the species insofar as the species itself exists eternally. Hence, we see here again there is no question of two incompatible truths but rather one truth which may be differently conceived by people of the different classes of intellectual ability and assent. Those of the dialectical and rhetorical classes may give assent to the proposition of future life in accord with their ability to conceive that life as one of personal immortality and continued existence for individuals *post mortem*. The philosopher, however,

gives assent to the proposition of future life, but does so without understanding it to refer to personal immortality, simply because the demonstrative methods of philosophical psychology yield only the notion of a future life for the human species, not the persistence of particular individuals.²¹

His argumentation for the existence of God in his *Explanation of the Sorts of Proofs in the Doctrines of Religion* is founded on statements from the Qur'ān but follows the same model.²² In this work of dialectical theology Averroes applies his own teachings on the different classes of human beings to his analysis of methods of Scripture. Complex syllogistic explanation is not the appropriate method of persuasion for the common folk and so is not found in the Qur'ān. Rather, the Qur'ān's arguments for God are rhetorical and also dialectical insofar as they are based on commonly held presuppositions of a religious sort. The argument from providence (*ināya*) for humans holds that the beings of the world exist for sake of human welfare and that this must be so only by a willing agent. The Qur'ān provides the premise and affirms the conclusion that the existing God is this agent. The argument from creation (*khalq*) has the premises that it is self-evident that animate things differ from inanimate and that the existence of the animate requires something to provide a determination (*qaṭan*) for life, namely God, the creator. The providential movement of the heavens for the benefit of our world equally gives indication of the creator. Thus, since everything created has to have a creator, observation of the universe and our world together with these premises yields the conclusion that God exists. For Averroes these arguments are suitable religious arguments, and they also happen to coincide with his philosophical argumentation which holds for a form of divine providence as well as for a form of divine creation. This understanding and also his rationalist approach to the issues of religion can be considered to coincide harmoniously with the rationalist elements of the theology of Ibn Tūmart, something which may have emboldened Averroes to set forth his views publicly in the four works discussed.²³

ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

Of Aristotle Averroes wrote, "I believe that this man was a model in nature and the exemplar which nature found for showing final human perfection."²⁴ He sought so much to follow the lead of

Aristotle (*Prior Analytics*, I.32) in attempting to convert arguments to syllogistic figures that he asserts in his *Middle Commentary on the "Prior Analytics"* that all speech and discourse should be reduced to syllogisms for critical analysis since "the nature of the reality on which demonstration rests" is truth and its self-consistency.²⁵ While the effort to return to genuine Aristotelian principles is increasingly evident in his later works on physics and metaphysics, Averroes struggled over the years to provide coherent interpretations of texts and issues in the works of Aristotle, employing translated works of the Greek commentary tradition by Alexander, Themistius, and others as aids to understanding much as do philosophers studying Aristotle today. His best-known struggle was with Aristotle's teachings on the intellect.

The Greek and Arabic philosophical traditions clearly saw that Aristotle in *De Anima*, III.5 posited a transcendent active intellect as a cause in the transformation of intelligibles in potency garnered via sensation into intelligibles in act known in human understanding. Yet they were also acutely aware that Aristotle had nowhere fulfilled his promise at III.7, 431b17–19, to return to consideration of the receptive powers of intellect to determine whether thinking of separate immaterial objects (intelligibles in act) is possible for human beings when they themselves are confined to the material conditions of body. While a complex and important issue for all thinkers of these traditions, for Averroes the issue of the nature, function, and metaphysical status of the receptive human power called material intellect (following Alexander of Aphrodisias) was one to which he returned repeatedly for refinement and development in at least five distinct works in addition to the three philosophical commentaries where his fullest accounts are to be found.²⁶

In his *Short Commentary on the "De Anima"* (ca. 1158–60), Averroes was under the influence of Ibn Bājja, who held that the name, material intellect, denoted an intellectual receptive potency with human imagination as its subject. After the external and internal sense powers apprehend the intentions (*ma'ānin*) or intentional forms of things, these particulars are received into the imagination, a power of soul which has no need of a bodily instrument for its activity.²⁷ Causally established in the things of the world by way of these intentions, these forms come to be intelligible in act through the immaterial power of the agent intellect which exists separately

from the soul. On this understanding, receptive material intellect is understood as “the disposition which is in the forms of the imagination for receiving intelligibles,”²⁸ brought to exist there thanks to the agent intellect which thereby brings the individual to intellectual understanding of intelligibles predicable as universal concepts. Averroes was initially so pleased with this account he called it “true” and “demonstrative.” This notion of the imagination as the subject for the material intellect accounts for the personal intellectual activities of each individual person. As an immaterial disposition attached to imagination, the material intellect seemed to transcend body and the particularity characteristic of bodily powers sufficiently to account for the understanding of intelligibles in act.

With the appearance of the *Middle Commentary* (ca. 1174), Averroes had substantially rethought his views on the nature of imagination as a power transcending the body. Imagination is now conceived as a power too mixed with the body to permit it to be subject for a disposition which must be so unmixed as to be open to the reception of any and all intelligibles without distortion or interference. As completely unmixed, the material intellect cannot properly be considered to have a subject which is a body or a power in a body. Apparently using the celestial bodies, souls, and intellects as his model, Averroes now conceives the material intellect as a disposition with the soul as subject, but with the special understanding that it is in its subject without being in a composed union with it, not involving the sort of composition found in the being of material substances or accidents. Instead the material intellect is made by the agent intellect to exist in association with each individual after the manner of the celestial soul, which has an association with a celestial body but exists separately. In this sense, then,

the material intellect is something composed of the disposition found in us and of an intellect conjoined to this disposition. As conjoined to the disposition, it is a disposed intellect, not an intellect in act; though, as not conjoined to this disposition, it is an intellect in act; while, in itself, this intellect is the Agent Intellect, the existence of which will be shown later. As conjoined to this disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in potentiality which cannot think itself but which can think other than itself (that is, material things), while, as not conjoined to the disposition, it is necessarily an intellect in act which thinks itself and not that which is here (that is, it does not think material things).²⁹

Thus, in the *Middle Commentary* the material intellect is a power made to exist in immaterial association with individual human beings by the separate agent intellect. This allows for sensed intentions intelligible in potency to be transformed by the intellectual power of the agent intellect and deposited in individual and immaterial receptive intellects belonging to distinct human beings.

The final position of Averroes on intellect is found in his *Long Commentary* (ca. 1190), where he rejects the notion of a plurality of individual material intellects, argues for a single eternal material intellect for all humankind, expounds a new teaching on the cognitive power, excludes human immortality, explains how the agent intellect is "our final form" and formal cause, and establishes principles essential for his account of the hierarchical relationship of intellects leading up to the First Cause or God. While in the earlier commentaries Averroes was concerned over the requirement that the material intellect be unmixed, the driving force behind his new views is found in two key principles generated out of his concern for the metaphysics and epistemology of the intelligibles received in the material intellect. The first concerns the material intellect itself. Insofar as the material intellect is "that which is in potency all the intentions of universal material forms and is not any of the beings in act before it understands any of them,"³⁰ it is not possible for the material intellect itself to be a particular or definite individual entity (*aliquid hoc* or *al-mushār ilā-hi*), since the received intelligible would be contracted to the particular nature of its subject, the material intellect. The material intellect then must be an entity unique in its species. It must be an existing immaterial intellect, yet it must also be receptive in nature. Averroes marks the unusual nature of the material intellect by calling it "a fourth kind of being" other than matter, form, or a composite of these.³¹ The second concerns the intelligibles themselves. The problem with the accounts of the earlier commentaries was that their plurality of immaterial receptive intellects meant a plurality of intelligibles in act without the same intelligible being understood by each human being. If two humans are thinking of the same intelligible, for example, a teacher and a student, then they cannot be thinking about two different intelligibles. Indeed, a third intelligible, over and above those in their individual intellects, would be required to explain why they are in fact thinking about the same intelligible. Consequently, it is necessary that the

intelligible in act exist separately from particular or definite individual entities in the single transcendent material intellect shared by all human beings.³²

This new teaching on the material intellect necessitated not only a more complex account of the relations of the agent and material intellects but also a rethinking of the nature of individual human knowers for Averroes. The result was the development of a more robust account of the internal sense powers and a detailed exposition of the role of the cogitative power (*fikr / cogitatio*) in the generation of intelligibles in the material intellect as well as in the knowing of intelligibles on the part of individual human beings. In the process of coming to have knowledge, the perishable bodily powers of common sense, imagination, cogitation, and memory work together to spiritualize or denude the intentions apprehended via sense of accidents and attributes extrinsic to the nature of the thing. Though none of these are properly called intellect, cogitation can be said to share in the powers of intellect insofar as it has the task of discerning and separating off the extraneous before depositing the still particular denuded form in memory. This brings about the state called the intellect in a positive disposition (*al-'aql bi-al-malaka / intellectus in habitu*). This disposition allows us to renew our connection with the material intellect and thus to think again about something we have thought about already earlier. The intelligibles in act or theoretical intelligibles thus attained may be said to have two subjects: the subject of truth, consisting of the cogitative and other internal powers of the individual soul, is cause of the intention presented to the material intellect; the subject for the existence of the intelligible in act is the material intellect where its existence is realized.

Even if the metaphysical natures of the agent and material intellects must be understood as distinct in existence from perishable individuals, the powers of these intellects must be understood as present in human souls and as essentially connected with human rationality. Our individual voluntary effort at coming to have knowledge remains grounded in a particular intention, but is also what generates in the individual the form presented to the separate intellects for abstraction and intellectual apprehension. This takes place when the "light" of the agent intellect shines on the presented form and the material intellect so as to allow for the abstraction of the intelligible from what has been presented to it and for the impressing of

the generated intelligible on the receptive material intellect. Like the potentially transparent medium for sight made actually transparent by light in Aristotle's doctrine of light and vision, the material intellect is actualized as receptive intellect by the "light" of the agent intellect. Averroes describes this as a process in which intentions intelligible in potency are made intelligible in act, that is, they are "transferred" in "being from one order into another."³³ In this natural process of conjoining (*ittiṣāl*), the agent intellect and material intellect are united with the knower such that the agent intellect is "our final form," that is, our formal cause and perfection, and the material intellect is our intellect. In this process the agent intellect is "form for us," both because we are the ones who individually initiate the process of knowing,³⁴ and also because in knowing, the agent intellect is intrinsic to us, not something external emanating intelligibles out of itself. In the formation of knowledge from experience, the agent intellect does not give intelligibles from its own nature to some distinct entity, but only functions as an abstractive and imprinting power, actualized as such only in the presence of denuded intelligibles provided by individual human beings. Since humans are deliberate initiators of the process of knowing, the agent intellect is their formal cause and the material intellect is the receptive power as shared human intellect actualized in abstraction.³⁵ Yet the individual human knower, who is bodily and identified with the perishable cogitative power, perishes at death, while the immaterial separate intellects continue in their existence eternally functioning as powers of knowing for other transitory members of the equally eternal human species.

Averroes understood the new doctrine of the material intellect in the *Long Commentary on the "De Anima"* to have important ramifications for his metaphysical teachings in his *Long Commentary on the "Metaphysics"*; the two works refer to each other. In contrast to Avicenna, who held that metaphysical argument for the establishment of the existence of the Necessary Being begins with consideration of primary concepts, Averroes held that the only suitable philosophical way to the existence of God is through Aristotle's arguments of the physics for an eternal cause of the motions of the heavens. Since physics concerns bodies and powers in bodies, this science which proves the existence of an eternal immaterial cause for the motion of the universe could not include in its subject matter

the nature of this immaterial entity. For Averroes, the role of philosophical psychology's epistemological arguments was to show the identity of intellect and immateriality in the natures of the agent and material intellects. Thus he could conclude that the immaterial entity reached by physics is in fact intellectual in nature. And with its establishment of the material intellect as an incorporeal receptive potency for intelligibles, philosophical psychology also showed that immaterial separate intellect could possess potency in some form.

This was also used by Averroes in his metaphysics to hold for a hierarchy of specifically distinct intellectual substances ranked according to potency in relation to God, the First Cause and First Form, whom he characterized as "pure actuality" (*fi'lun maḥḍun*).³⁶ While Averroes made liberal use of the language of creation in characterizing God, his metaphysical teaching expounded an Aristotelian account of an eternal universe drawn into existence by the final causality of the pure actuality of the First Cause, which is being in its highest form. All other entities (including the hierarchy of immaterial intellects moving the heavens) contain some note of potency at least insofar as their being and knowing necessarily contain reference to something extrinsic, namely, the pure actuality of being of the First Cause. The First Cause alone contains no reference to anything outside itself. What is more, as pure immaterial actuality of intellect, the First Cause is the highest actuality of thought with itself as its sole object, as Aristotle had held. As such, the knowledge of the First Cause is a noetic and metaphysical identity with its being. As noted earlier in considering his religious dialectic, for Averroes divine knowledge is neither universal nor particular and as such is not to be identified with any of the modes of knowledge known to human beings. Unlike human knowledge, for Averroes divine knowledge is creative of things, not posterior to them. In the context of Averroes' philosophical thought this can be understood to mean that the actuality and activity of the First Cause as the self-knowing pure actuality of being is responsible for its being the primary referent for all other beings, and thereby the cause of the existence of all beings as the ultimate final cause against which others are measured and toward which all beings are drawn. Hence, in knowing itself, it is knowing the cause of all other beings, and it is in the same activity causing all other beings.

Although perhaps somewhat similar in language of dependence, this doctrine is altogether different from that of Avicenna, who also held God to be the highest instance of the purity of being and actuality. While Averroes did set forth a doctrine of emanation of a hierarchy of intellects in his early *Short Commentary on the "Metaphysics,"*³⁷ he rejected that in his mature thought in favor of the view recounted above and also rejected the tripartite Avicennian distinction of being into necessary in itself, possible in itself, and possible in itself but necessitated by another. Averroes objected to this view because it allowed only the First Cause to be considered necessary in its own right. Following Aristotle, he understood the heavens and their movers not to be possible in themselves but rather necessary beings in their own right insofar as they are not subject to corruption. In his *Long Commentary on the "Metaphysics"* Averroes also rejects the Avicennian distinction between existence and essence, insisting that Avicenna was confused by theological considerations contaminating his philosophical metaphysics in thinking that one and being are dispositions added to the essence of a thing, rather than seeing man, one man, and existing man as modes of signifying one reality.³⁸

The works of Averroes were not widely influential in the history of Arabic philosophy, though they were appreciated by Moses Maimonides and some were known by Ibn Khaldūn. No school of Averroist thought arose in the Arabic tradition to continue his work, perhaps because of his failure to gain favor for his philosophically driven analysis of religious issues. But his works lived on in translations into Hebrew and Latin. In the Jewish tradition his translated works – the Middle Commentaries generally rather than the Long – were studied intensely and gave rise to their own supercommentary tradition (see below, chapter 17). In the Christian West, Latin translations of many of his *Long Commentaries* were available to thinkers of the thirteenth century, where they served to play a fundamentally important role in teaching the Latins how to read Aristotle with sympathy and insight (see below, chapter 18). The insights of Averroes and his detailed comments on Aristotle were initially welcomed in the Latin tradition.³⁹ Yet with deeper critical study and growing familiarity with and reflection upon the texts and issues, it soon became apparent that the commentaries of Averroes contained philosophical arguments and teachings on

issues such as the eternity of the world and the nature of the soul which were incompatible with Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo* and the personal immortality of the human soul. Around these issues the so-called “Latin Averroist” controversy arose in reaction to works by Siger of Brabant and Boethius of Dacia. In this context the much-discussed and seldom-understood “Double Truth” doctrine often wrongly attributed to Averroes himself was thought by Latin religious authorities to be held by certain philosophers in the Parisian Arts Faculty. This and the other issues mentioned reasserted themselves in various contexts up to the time of the Renaissance, when the works of Averroes enjoyed a second Latin life with new translations, for the most part from Hebrew versions, and with the publication of printed editions of works of Aristotle with the Commentaries of Averroes as well as other works of Averroes.

Understood in this fashion, Averroes has generally come to be regarded by some as first and foremost a rationalist philosopher whose loyalty to Islam must either be based on some form of fideism or must be disingenuous. Yet this dilemma and its dangerous horns should be rejected for a more sympathetic understanding of Averroes as a devotee of the most sophisticated and dominant religion of his historical culture, Islam. A distinguished scholar and religious *qādī*, Averroes’ devotion to Islam and its religious practices was never significantly questioned in a way prominent to historical scholarship. Rather, it is apparent that Averroes held the world and its First Principle, God, to be through and through rational in nature, such that human rational endeavors are understood to be the keys to the most complete knowledge and happiness open to human beings. His philosophical thought includes important roles for religion in the development of human powers toward their fulfillment in the highest intellectual insight into God and his creation, even as it gives critical assessment to the truth and efficacy of religious arguments and statements.

NOTES

- 1 Druart [141].
- 2 Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, ed. M. Bouyges, S.J. (Beirut: 1930), 427–8; Averroes [140], 257–8.

- 3 See G. Endress, "Averrois Opera: A Bibliography of Editions and Contributions to the Text," in Aertsen and Endress [134], 339–81.
- 4 See C. Burnett, "The Second Revelation of Arabic Philosophy and Science: 1492–1562," in C. Burnett and A. Contadini (eds.), *Islam and the Italian Renaissance* (London: 1999), 185–98.
- 5 See E. Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, in *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, ed. H. Psichari, vol. III (Paris: 1852); A. von Küglegen, *Averroes und die arabische Moderne: Ansätze zu einer Neubegründung des Rationalismus im Islam* (Leiden: 1994). Also see von Küglegen, "A Call for Rationalism: 'Arab Averroists' in the Twentieth Century," *Alif* (Cairo) 16 (1996), 97–132.
- 6 See O. Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Oxford: 1988) and O. Leaman, *A Brief Introduction to Islamic Philosophy* (Oxford: 1999).
- 7 Averroes, *Tahāfut*, 427–8; Averroes [140], 257–8. Translation slightly modified; Arabic added.
- 8 Averroes, *Sharḥ al-burhān li-Aristū*, in A. Badawī (ed.), *Ibn Rushd, Sharḥ al-burhān li-Aristū wa-talkhīṣ al-burhān (Grand Commentaire et Paraphrase des "Secondes Analytiques" d'Aristote)* (Kuwait: 1984), 184; Latin *In Aristotelis Opera Cum Averrois Commentariis* (Venice: 1562; repr. Frankfurt a. M.: 1962), vol. I, pt. 2, bk. 1, Comment 9, 321A. At 32vD Averroes quotes Aristotle's text that true conclusions can be made from false premises, though those conclusions are *per accidens*. The next Comment argues that the conditions for demonstration must be met completely.
- 9 In this translation I follow A. El Ghannouchi, "Distinction et relation des discours philosophique et religieux chez Ibn Rushd: *Fasl al maqal* ou la double vérité," in *Averroes (1126–1198) oder der Triumph des Rationalismus: Internationales Symposium anlässlich des 800. Todestages des islamischen Philosophen*, ed. R. G. Khoury (Heidelberg: 2002), 139–45; see 145.
- 10 See chapter 4 above; and al-Fārābī, *Taḥṣīl al-sa'āda*, in *Rasā'il al-Fārābī* (Hyderabad: 1926/1345 A. H.), 29–36; "The Attainment of Happiness," in *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. M. Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: 1969), sect. iii, 34–41. Cf. Walzer [77], ch. 17, 276–85.
- 11 Averroes [139], 49. Translation slightly modified.
- 12 For detailed discussion of this rendering of Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, I.32, 47a8–9, see Taylor [148].
- 13 Averroes [139], 51.
- 14 Averroes, *Tahāfut*, 151–2; Averroes [140], 90. Creation *ex nihilo* is also denied in the *Long Commentary on the "Metaphysics"*: Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a*, ed. M. Bouyges (Beirut: 1949), 1497–1505;

- Engl. trans. at Averroes [137], 108–12; Latin in *In Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis*, vol. VIII, 304rD–305vI.
- 15 Averroes [139], 57.
- 16 Averroes, *Tahāfut*, 582; Averroes [140], 360.
- 17 Averroes [139], 75.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Averroes [139], 61.
- 21 Taylor [216].
- 22 Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *al-Kashf ‘an al-manāhij al-adilla fī ‘aqā'id al-milla* (Beirut: 1998), 118–19; English trans. Averroes [136], 79ff.
- 23 See M. Geoffroy, “L’Almohadisme théologique d’Averroès (Ibn Rushd),” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 66 (1999), 9–47.
- 24 Averroes [135], 433. My translation. For other texts, see S. Harvey, “The Quiddity of Philosophy according to Averroes and Falaquera: A Muslim Philosopher and his Jewish Interpreter,” in J. A. Aertsen and A. Speer (eds.), *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?* (Berlin: 1998), 904–13. Also see Taylor [146].
- 25 Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s “Prior Analytics”* (Arabic), ed. M. M. Kassem, with C. E. Butterworth and A. Abd al-Magid Haridi (Cairo: 1983), 226.
- 26 These are (1) the *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*, trans. K. P. Bland (New York: 1982); (2) *Epistle #1 On Conjunction* and (3) *Epistle #2 On Conjunction*, ed. and trans. in M. Geoffroy and C. Steel (eds.), *Averroès, La béatitude de l’âme: éditions, traductions et études* (Paris: 2001); (4) *De Separatione Primi Principii*, in C. Steel and G. Guldentops, “An Unknown Treatise of Averroes against the Avicennians on the First Cause: Edition and Translation,” *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 64 (1997), 86–135; and (5) the *Commentary on the “De Intellectu” of Alexander*, in M. Zonta, “La tradizione guideo-araba ed ebraica del *De intellectu* di Alessandro di Afrodisa e il testo originale del *Commento* di Averroè,” *Annali di Ca’ Foscari* 40.3 (2001), 17–35.
- 27 *Epitome de Anima* (Arabic text), ed. S. Gómez Nogales (Madrid: 1985), 108. Gómez Nogales has also translated his edition as *La psicología de Averroes: comentario al libro sobre el alma de Aristóteles* (Madrid: 1987).
- 28 *Epitome de Anima*, 124.
- 29 Averroes [138], 111–12.
- 30 Averroes [135], 387. The account which follows is based on 387–8.

- 31 Averroes [135], 409.
- 32 Averroes [135], 411–12.
- 33 Averroes [135], 439.
- 34 “[W]ithout the imaginative power and the cogitative [power] the intellect which is called material understands nothing” (Averroes [135], 450).
- 35 “[T]hat in virtue of which something carries out its proper activity is the form, while we carry out our proper activity in virtue of the agent intellect, it is necessary that the agent intellect be form in us” (Averroes [135], 500). Also see 439. On “our final form,” see 444–5, 485–6, 490.
- 36 In the *Long Commentary on the “Metaphysics”*: Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba’d al-ṭabī’a*, 1599.7.
- 37 See Davidson [208], 220ff.
- 38 Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba’d al-ṭabī’a*, 313ff.; see also 1279ff.
- 39 See C. Bazán, “Was There Ever a ‘First Averroism’?” in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 27 (Berlin: 2000), 31–53.