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Averroes and the Philosophical Account of Prophecy

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Abstract

Prophecy is conspicuous by its complete absence from all three of the commentaries on *De Anima* by Averroes. However, prophecy and philosophical metaphysics are discussed by him in his *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, a work written before his methodological work on philosophy and religion, the *Faṣl al-maḡāl*, generally held to have been written ca. 1179-1180. The analyses and remarks of Averroes presented in that *Commentary* have been characterized by Herbert Davidson as “extremely radical” to the extent that “The term prophet would, on this reading, mean nothing more than the human author of Scripture; and the term revelation would mean a high level of philosophical knowledge”. In the present article I discuss Averroes on method in matters of religion and philosophy as well as prophecy in philosophically argumentative works and in dialectical works, with particular consideration of the reasoning of his *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*. I conclude that Averroes found in philosophy and its sciences the most complete and precise truth content and highest levels of knowledge and understanding and from them constructed his worldview, while he found prophecy and religion to be like an Aristotelian practical science in that they concern good and right conduct in the achievement of an end attained in action, not truths to be known for their own sake.

Introduction

Prophecy is an essential part of Islam as practiced throughout the ages and, with the significant exception of the infamous Abū Bakr Muḡammad ibn Zakariyya’ al-Rāzī (d. 925), is acknowledged by all the major philosophers of the classical rationalist tradition as central to religion, the wellbeing of society, and human happiness. In Islam it is understood that God has sent many prophets but it is Muḡammad himself who is the most important for reciting the Qur’ān so generously sent by God to human beings who already had the natural ability to know God as Creator and to know right actions by nature (*fiṭra*). Al-Fārābī himself made prophecy and the messenger known in philosophy as the Agent Intellect an integral part of philosophical psychology and epistemology of human knowing. The same is true of Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) who seems to have felt even more strongly about the necessity of integrating religious phenomena of Islam with rational philosophical knowledge,¹ even to the point of providing a treatise on the proof of prophecy.²

Averroes (Ibn Ruṣd) was himself a religious judge, rose to become chief judge in religious law at Seville and Cordoba, and even wrote a handbook of Islamic jurisprudence in which the Prophet is, of course, repeatedly cited.³ In his treatise on religious reasoning, *al-Kaṣf ‘an manābiḡ al-adilla*

¹ D. Gutas, “Avicenna’s Philosophical Project”, in P. Adamson (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna. Critical Essays*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2013, pp. 28-47, part. p. 33.

² Ibn Sīnā, *Risālah fī iṭbāt al-nubuwwāt*, ed. M.E. Marmura, Dār al-nahār li-l-naṣr, Bayrūt 1968.

³ Ibn Ruṣd, *Bidāyat al-muḡtahid wa-Nibāyat al-muḡtasib*, Dār al-Ma’rifā al-Qāhira, 2 vol., 1402/1982.

fi ‘*aqā'id al-milla* or *The Explanation of the Sorts of Proofs in the Doctrines of Religion*,⁴ prophecy is mentioned many times and is likewise assumed as a foundation of religious doctrine. This topic also is touched upon in his *Tabāfut al-tabāfut* or *Incoherence of the Incoherence*⁵ many times. And prophecy is discussed in his work commonly known as the *Decisive Treatise*, his *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna aṣ-ṣarī'a wa-l-ḥikma min al-ittiṣāl*.⁶ Hence, one might reasonably expect he would follow his well-known predecessors in the classical rationalist tradition of philosophy in the lands of Islam and set out an account of prophecy in his three *De Anima* commentaries as part of his philosophical psychology. Yet that is not the case. Averroes does not address the issue of prophecy at all in his *Short, Middle and Long Commentaries on De Anima*. Perhaps the most important philosophical commentary in which he critically considers the consequences and issues of the integration of philosophy and prophecy is his *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*,⁷ a

⁴ Ibn Ruṣd, *al-Kaṣf 'an manābiḡ al-adilla fi 'aqā'id al-milla*, ed. M. 'Ābid al-Jābirī, Markaz Dirāsāt al-Waḥda al-'Arabīya, Bayrūt 1998, 2001². An English translation is available in *Faith and Reason in Islam. Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments*, tr. I. Najjar, One World, Oxford 2001.

⁵ Averroès, *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, Texte arabe inédit établi par M. Bouyges, Imprimerie Catholique, Bayrūt 1930, 1987 (Bibliotheca Arabica Scholasticorum, Série arabe III); English translation in *Averroes' Tabāfut al-Tabāfut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, tr. by S. Van Den Bergh, 2 vol., Luzac & Co., London 1954 (rpt. 1969, 1978), e.g., pp. 427-8; tr. pp. 257-8.

⁶ Averroes. *The Book of the Decisive Treatise Determining the Connection Between the Law and Wisdom & Epistle Dedicatory*, tr. and ed. Ch.E. Butterworth, Brigham Young U.P., Provo Utah 2001. I have sometimes given a literal rendering of the title as *The Book of the Distinction of Discourse and the Establishment of the Connection between the Religious Law and Philosophy* following the critique of European translations by El Ghannouchi, “Distinction et relation des discours philosophique et religieux chez Ibn Rushd: *Faṣl al-maqāl* ou la double vérité”, in R.G. Khoury (ed.), *Averroes (1126-1198) oder der Triumph des Rationalismus*, Internationales Symposium anlässlich des 800. Todestages des islamischen Philosophen, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, Heidelberg 2002, pp. 139-45, part. p. 145. See Taylor, “Ibn Rushd / Averroes and ‘Islamic’ Rationalism”, in *Medieval Encounters. Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 15 (2009), pp. 125-35. [Special issue on *Al-Andalus: Cultural Diffusion and Hybridity*, ed. I. Corfis]; Id., “Averroes on the *Sharī'ah* of the Philosophers”, in R.C. Taylor – I. Omar (eds.), *The Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Heritage: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives in the Abrahamical Traditions*, Marquette U.P., Milwaukee (WI) 2012, pp. 283-304; and Id., “Providence in Averroes”, in P. d’Hoine - G. Van Riel (eds.), *Fate, Providence and Moral Responsibility in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*. Collected Studies in Honour of Carlos Steel, KU Leuven U.P., Leuven 2014 (Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, De Wulf - Mansion Centre, Series I), pp. 454-72. Cf. the introduction pp. 1-3 by Campanini to his translation in *Averroes, the Decisive Treatise. The Connection Between Islamic Religious Law and Philosophy*, trans. and ed. M. Campanini, Gorgias Press, Piscataway NJ (2017). “Decisive Treatise” in the sense of a determining or determinative account by Averroes as judge and legal scholar will suffice for present purposes. The rhyme of *al-maqāl* with *ittiṣāl* may support the short title as *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl*. There may also be an intentional connection to the use of *faṣl* in Qur’ān 38:20. My thanks to Josep Puig Montada and Fouad Ben Ahmad for sharing their insightful reflections on this issue. Precisely how the title should be understood requires further reflection.

⁷ Averrois Cordubensis *Compendia Librorum Aristotelis qui Parva Naturalia vocantur*, Arabic text, ed. H. Blumberg, The Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge (Mass.) 1972. English translation as *Averroes. Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, tr. H. Blumberg, The Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge (Mass.) 1961. In his *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect*, a work which sets forth an account of philosophical psychology like that found in the *Short Commentary* on the *De Anima*, Averroes provides a thoroughgoing analysis of human knowing in response to Aristotle’s remarks at the end of *De Anima* 3.7. There Aristotle raised the question of whether separate things can be known by human beings existing in the body. (Averroes again treats of this issue much later in book 3, comment 36, of this *Long Commentary* on the *De Anima* of Aristotle. See Averrois Cordubensis *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima Libros*, ed. F.S. Crawford, Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge Mass. 1953 [*Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem*. Versionum Latinarum VII, 1], pp. 479-502; and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) of Cordoba, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, Translated with Introduction and Notes by R.C. Taylor with Th.-A. Druart Subeditor, Yale U.P., New Haven 2009, pp. 381-401). In the final sections of the *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction* after his philosophical accounts have been set out, Averroes works to show how philosophical perfection of the soul and the apprehension of God as the First Form accords with religious law and

work with discussion of issues raised in his study of a curiously novel version of the *Parva Naturalia* of Aristotle.⁸

In the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* Averroes provides a presentation of prophecy distinctively different both from what is found in al-Fārābī and Avicenna and from what is set forth in his own *Faṣl al-maqāl*, *al-Kaṣf*, and *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*. The peculiarity of his analysis and teaching in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* is noted by Herbert Davidson who writes,

Averroes is making an extremely radical statement for a medieval philosopher, a statement from which he appears to retreat elsewhere. He is asserting that the phenomena we are considering, including revelation and prophecy, give no reliable information about matters belonging to the domain of science, not even by furnishing the uneducated with a figurative representation of theoretical truths. Revelation and prophecy do not, either expressly or allusively, instruct mankind about God, the universe, creation, the human soul. They promulgate no rules of human behavior leading to eudaemonia. Revelation as well as the written record of revealed knowledge thus contribute nothing to the soul's well-being.⁹

In noting the difference between what Averroes says in the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* and what we find in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, Davidson further remarks that

The discrepancy is harsh. The *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* advanced carefully reasoned arguments to show that the phenomenon of revelation cannot conceivably provide knowledge about subjects belonging to the domain of science and philosophy, that revelation cannot even recast theoretical knowledge in figurative images for the use of common people. Averroes' *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* and semipopular works affirm, on the contrary, that the prophet and the phenomenon of revelation do teach theoretical matters to the unenlightened in a figurative language comprehensible to them, and that revelation hints to potential philosophers where the purer expression of truth lies.¹⁰

Suggesting two ways of dealing with the difference of accounts, one that "Averroes may have changed his mind" and the other that the contexts of works may have determined the difference, Davidson writes regarding the latter,

The intent would be instead that the human author of Scripture first acquired theoretical knowledge through proper scientific methods and then coolly and deliberately – not through an inspired imaginative faculty – recast his hard-won philosophic knowledge into language appropriate for his less

prayer for the sake of the remembrance of God. See *The Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect by Ibn Rushd with the Commentary of Moses Narboni*, Ed. and tr. K.P. Bland, The Jewish Theological Seminar of America, New York 1982, pp. 103-5; also see p. 69 and p. 87. The *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, the *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction* and the *Short Commentary on the De Anima* are all doctrinally prior to his *Middle Commentary on the De Anima*. They are also temporally prior to his account in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* of methodology and its theological companion piece, *al-Kaṣf*, both of which are generally held to have been written around 1179-80. Prophecy is briefly discussed in a Farabian political fashion in his *Commentary on the Republic* of Plato. See *Averroes On Plato's Republic*, English tr. by R. Lerner, Cornell U.P., Ithaca (NY) - London 1974, pp. 48, 72, 80-81.

⁸ See R. Hansberger, "Kitāb al-Ḥiss wa-l-maḥsūs: Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia* in Arabic Guise", in C. Grellard - P.-M. Morel (eds.), *Les Parva Naturalia d'Aristote: Fortune antique et médiévale*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 2010, pp. 143-62.

⁹ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes On Intellect. Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect*, Oxford U.P., New York - Oxford 1992, p. 344.

¹⁰ Davidson *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes* (above, n. 9), p. 350.

enlightened brethren. The term *prophet* would, on this reading, mean nothing more than the human author of Scripture; and the term *revelation* would mean a high level of philosophical knowledge.¹¹

It is evident enough that Averroes may well have had a change of mind as to whether prophecy should be discussed in the context of philosophical psychology given its absence from his commentaries on *De Anima*.¹² The question of whether there is a doctrinal or perhaps methodological change involves a larger consideration of his philosophical thought on the issue of prophecy. That, however, requires consideration of his methodology in dealing with religious matters in his various kinds of writings. Hence, in what follows I first set out Averroes's account of method in writing on matters that concern issues involving the intersection of religion and philosophy, a method that requires a distinction of discourse between writings that are 'evident' (*zāhir*) as open to all and writings that are 'interpreted' (*mu'awwal*) as reserved solely for the philosophically astute. Second, I consider prophecy in a selection of key 'evident' works. Third, I consider prophecy in selected passages of some philosophical works where matters of concern to religion are treated following the 'interpreted' approach. Fourth, I make application of this method to his own works in reference to the strong remarks of Davidson quoted above. Finally, I conclude with a consideration of his world view and what appears to be his idiosyncratic conception of religion.

1. Averroes on Method in Matters of Religion and Philosophy

Averroes's famous disavowal of the possibility of a double truth, one for religion and one for philosophy and wisdom (including science), with the clear statement of the unity of truth in his *Faṣl al-maqāl* that "truth cannot contradict truth,"¹³ is the foundational principle that underlies his distinction of discourse. This requires that where there is disagreement on issues that are included in the subject matter of both religious and philosophical study and investigation, priority be given to the philosophical and scientific interpretation absolutely speaking. Yet the majority of people are not capable of grasping this distinction of discourse and of reconciling such an interpretation with religious discourse since this latter by its very nature is meant to be emotive and dialectically persuasive. Accordingly Averroes sets out a psychological division of human beings into three groupings. There are those who are moved by the rhetoric of emotional suasion through accounts that affect the heart and imagination. Others give assent to dialectical reasoning based on religious postulates yielding understandings in accord with religious tradition. The third consists of those who are intellectuals knowledgeable and trained in the philosophical arts employing the reasoning of logic and the method of demonstration. The first two are persuaded to assent by ways that may in fact hit on the truth though there is no necessity that they entail truth. The third, however, by the very method of demonstration with the use of premises known to be necessary and true and with the employment of valid syllogistic form, can attain truth per se and with necessity.¹⁴ Of course, Averroes clearly states that some fundamentals of religion are such that they must be held by the people of all three levels, namely God's existence, His dispatching

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-2. Emphasis by Davidson.

¹² While it is not what Davidson seems to have in mind, I want to suggest that the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* may have been written before Averroes came to be fully determined to use methodologically the distinction of *zāhir* and *mu'awwal* writings separating modes of discourse.

¹³ See R. Taylor, "Truth does not contradict truth": Averroes and the Unity of Truth", *Topoi* 19 (2000), pp. 3-16.

¹⁴ See Taylor, "Ibn Rushd / Averroes and 'Islamic' Rationalism" (above n. 6), and "Averroes on the *Sharī'ah* of the Philosophers" (above, n. 6).

of prophets to humanity and an afterlife of reward and punishment.¹⁵ To these universal requirements Averroes adds that in the case of philosophical interpretations that may confuse the general populace irrespective of their truth, these may not be shared outside the circle of the third group, the people of demonstration. For those incapable of understanding at this highest level, these interpretations would pose a serious threat to religious belief, perhaps even leading to unbelief.¹⁶ Such is the case with the issue of the nature and meaning of the afterlife.¹⁷ Hence, the distinction of discourse supports the practical life of members of society who are guided by religious teachings toward the good and right in their lives as individuals and members of the community of believers. It also allows for religious teachings to be interpreted by those with qualified skills and with insight and sensitivity regarding the good of all, provided they not undermine those less capable of understanding.

In his *Kašf* Averroes refers to this distinction of discourse in matters of religion when he writes,

In a separate work [scil. the *Faṣl al-maqāl*] we have already made clear the congruity of [philosophical] wisdom with [religious] Law (*al-ḥikma li-š-šar'*) and the command of religion for [the doing of philosophy]. We said there that [religious] Law (*al-šari'a*) has two parts: [one] evident and [one] interpreted (*zāhir wa-mu'awwal*). The evident is obligatory for the majority (*al-ḡumbūr*) and the interpreted (*al-mu'awwal*) obligatory for the learned (*al-ulamā*). The obligation of the majority in regard to it is to take it according to its evident sense and to refrain from interpreting it (*ta'wila-hu*); for the learned it is not permitted to inform the majority of its interpretation.¹⁸

In this work his concern is to investigate ways of reasoning concerning religious beliefs which are evident (*'an al-zāhiri min al-'aqā'id*) and proper for belief by the people (*al-nās*), not to delve into matters of interpretation suited only to the learned well versed in philosophy and the sciences. His rationale is that the people of the religion of Islam have been confused by many publicly professed interpretations that stray “from the intent of the lawgiver” (*'an maqšid al-šari'*).

In this way Averroes sets out a methodology regarding matters of religion which intersect with philosophical studies. In his own works this distinction is maintained in the surface text with the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, *al-Kašf 'an manāhiḡ*, and the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* which should be classified as dialectical (and perhaps in parts rhetorical) works with their starting points being fundamental principles of religion. The target audiences for these works are stated to be people of the rhetorical and dialectical modes of assent.¹⁹ In contrast, his philosophical works which he calls demonstrative are concerned with what can be determined through human rational scientific investigation and learning. While these two modes of discourse are to be employed, affirmed and maintained for the good of the majority in society,

¹⁵ Averroes *Faṣl al-maqāl*, p. 18 Butterworth.

¹⁶ Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, p. 21 Butterworth.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ibn Rušd, *al-Kašf*, p. 99 al-Jābirī. My translation.

¹⁹ See Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, pp. 19 and 21; *al-Kašf*, pp. 99-100 al-Jābirī; *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, pp. 427-8 Bouyges, tr. pp. 257-8. Cf. B.S. Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation*, SUNY Press, Albany (NY) 1985, pp. 255-6. In the case of another dialectical work, his *Question on Divine Knowledge*, the so-called *Damima*, his account is largely a philosophical explanation of God's prior eternal knowledge not being dependent on worldly things. He means to imply – without sufficient explanation – that divine knowledge includes knowledge of particulars. See the text in *Faṣl al-maqāl*, p. 42 Butterworth. His philosophical account of divine knowledge elsewhere indicates a lack of knowledge of particulars as such on the part of God. See Averroes, *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, pp. 74-75 Blumberg. Also see Averroes, *Tafsir ma ba'd at-tabi'at* (above, n. 5), pp. 1707-8.

the principle of the unity of truth still applies. That is, in matters of religion where religious teachings and philosophical reasoning intersect, there is one truth, not two, and the primacy of philosophy with its method of demonstration must be maintained, precisely as argued in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*.

I have argued elsewhere that this distinction is maintained by Averroes regarding the issues of personal immortality, divine providence and creation.²⁰ As he points out in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, the issue of the afterlife is a matter of considerable dispute over its full meaning and purpose and disputation of that sort must not be shared with the majority who would surely be confused and harmed by such questioning. Instead, they must be permitted only the ‘evident’ understanding and not be exposed to the ‘interpreted’ understanding.²¹ Following the guidelines of the *Faṣl al-maqāl* reiterated in *al-Kaṣf* and the *Ṭabāfut al-ṭabāfut*, the truth of the matter is to be determined in the philosophical sciences. There is no doctrine of an afterlife in his *Short and Middle Commentaries on De Anima* and even assertions of the absence of an afterlife for individuals are expressed in his *Long Commentary on the De Anima* and his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*.²² As for divine providence, in his *Ṭabāfut al-ṭabāfut* he presents the ‘evident’ account with God as the intentional agent of providence clearly affirming it, while in the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* he denies divine intentionality through direct, efficient, providential causation and instead affirms that God’s providence must be understood as per accidens to God’s own self-understanding.²³ Hence, in these cases the true understanding of each issue is to be had in philosophy with ‘interpreted’ meanings for these important religious teachings, interpretations that must be kept from the majority.

2. Prophecy in Three Dialectical Religious Works

In the *Faṣl al-maqāl* prophecy is repeatedly affirmed throughout as is the division of the levels of religious meaning in scripture appropriate for the three groupings of people discussed above. As also indicated earlier, all three are said by Averroes to have the ability to know (*al-maʿrifa*) in an affirmative way the existence of God, his sending of prophets to humankind, and reward and punishment in the afterlife: “[T]he three sorts of indications due to which no one is exempted from assenting to what he is responsible for being cognizant of – I mean, the rhetorical, dialectical and demonstrative indications – lead to these three roots”.²⁴ These are the fundamental beliefs that lead human beings to proper action and all are affirmed in the Qurʾān.

In the *Ṭabāfut al-ṭabāfut* the affirmation of prophecy is also assumed throughout.²⁵ There Averroes asserts, as expected, that miracles are principles of religion not to be questioned or doubted because they are beyond human apprehension. Their value lies in guiding human beings to virtue and so they play a key role in the foundational assumptions of practical science.²⁶ Even so, the miracles

²⁰ R.C. Taylor, “Personal Immortality in Averroes’ Mature Philosophical Psychology”, *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 9 (1998), pp. 87-110; Id., “Averroes on the Ontology of the Human Soul”, *Muslim World* 102 (2012), pp. 580-96; Id., “Conceiving Creation According to Ibn Rushd / Averroes” (video lecture), The Catholic University of America, 3 December 2013 available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8UpixK0hUs>; and Id., “Providence in Averroes” (above, n. 6).

²¹ Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, pp. 20 ff. Butterworth.

²² See Averroes, *Tafsīr ma baʿd at-ṭabīʿat*, pp. 1612-13 Bouyges. Also see Taylor “Ibn Rushd / Averroes and ‘Islamic Rationalism” (above n. 6); and Id., “Averroes on the Ontology of the Human Soul” (above, n. 20).

²³ See Taylor, “Providence in Averroes” (above, n. 6).

²⁴ Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, p. 18 Butterworth.

²⁵ See, for example, Averroes, *Ṭabāfut al-ṭabāfut*, pp. 427-8 Bouyges, tr. pp. 257-8.

²⁶ Averroes, *Ṭabāfut al-ṭabāfut*, pp. 514 ff. Bouyges, tr. pp. 314 ff.

performed by prophets need not be considered to be the bringing about of what is logically impossible but perhaps rather what is possible in itself but not possible for human beings. However, the most certain of all miracles is the Qurʾān itself:

The clearest of miracles is the Venerable Book of Allah, the existence of which is not an interruption of the course of nature assumed by tradition, like the changing of a rod into a serpent, but its miraculous nature is established by way of perception and consideration of every man who has been or will be till the day of resurrection. And so this miracle is far superior to all others.²⁷

Further, the true reality of the nature of the prophet as prophet is to be found “in the act of making known the mysterious and establishing laws which are in accordance with the truth and which bring about acts that will determine the happiness of the totality of mankind.”²⁸ The true affirmation of the prophet lies in this and not in the attainment of hidden knowledge through dreams which may have natural explanations.²⁹ The religious laws that come from God via prophets together with natural human reason are needed for the sake of the construction of a proper political structure and society. Basic principles common to all religions received from prophets and lawgivers have their value and certification in the guidance of human beings away from wickedness and toward actions that are virtuous.³⁰

In *al-Kaṣf* Averroes devotes several pages to the issue of God’s sending of messengers, including a detailed critical analysis of religious reasoning by dialectical theologians followed by an explanation of the Qurʾān itself and the success of its message for the betterment of humankind. The affirmation of the prophet rests on two principles: the evident existence of prophets as conveyers of religious laws in revelation concerning knowledge and right actions for the attainment of happiness, and the evident function of prophets as setting out religious laws in revelation from God.³¹ It is not necessarily the case that every miracle worker is a prophet, but it is the case that the Qurʾān itself with the knowledge it provides regarding religious laws, right human conduct, and even more about the nature of God is rightly deemed miraculous for its consequences. In this the proof of God’s prophet is the goodness of the Qurʾān in its presence in guiding human beings, just as the proof of the physician lies in the actual healing of the sick.³²

In each of these works the existence and nature of prophecy is taken as evident in the experience of human beings in connection with the Qurʾān’s message which provides religious laws for the guidance of humankind toward goodness. In the religious context of these writings, the soundness of religious scripture, like the proof of the physician found in the cure of the patient, lies in the positive outcome for human society.³³

3. Prophecy in Four Philosophical Works

The Commentary on the Parva Naturalia

The *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* is a rather odd text, as mentioned earlier, because it is based on a substantially revised and reworked version of Aristotle’s text that circulated

²⁷ Averroes, *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, pp. 515-16 Bouyges; tr. p. 315.

²⁸ Averroes, *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, p. 516 Bouyges; tr. p. 316.

²⁹ Averroes, *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, p. 533 Bouyges; tr. p. 326.

³⁰ Averroes, *Tabāfut al-tabāfut*, pp. 584-5 Bouyges; tr. p. 361.

³¹ Averroes, *Al-Kaṣf*, pp. 179-80.

³² Averroes, *Al-Kaṣf*, pp. 184-5.

³³ For a valuable discussion of the reasoning of Averroes on prophecy in his *al-Kaṣf*, see N. Zouggar, “La prophétologie d’Averroès dans le *Kaṣf mahābiḡ al-adilla*”, *Annales Islamologiques* 46 (2012), pp. 387-408.

in Arabic.³⁴ The key part for present concerns is Averroes's discussion of prophecy in the section corresponding to Aristotle's *On Dreams*. For Averroes dreams may be true or false but either way they relate to the imagination (*al-mutahayyala*) and people believe that prophecy is from God (*ya'taqidūna fī l-wahyi annahu min Allāh*). It seems particularly to involve matters of knowledge relevant to the attainment of happiness according to them (*'indahum*).³⁵ But it comes about in us in the same way as the primary principles of understanding, that is, the way the agent intellect bestows those primary principles which can be helpful in the forming of new knowledge.³⁶ What is most mysterious, however, is that the intelligences themselves – this includes the agent intellect as well as God properly speaking – cannot comprehend particulars since they have no matter and so only know universals. Regarding this Averroes expresses amazement over two issues. First, how can the human imagination get particulars of dreams from a universal immaterial nature which is an intellect? Second, how does the separate intellect (e.g., the agent intellect or even God) single out the particular recipient for the particular content with the particular dream if that intellect only knows universals?³⁷ With no lack of boldness, Averroes then writes, “Now the discussion concerning these matters, even though it be very difficult for human comprehension, must nevertheless be undertaken to the limit of one's natural capacity for comprehension, for the essence of happiness (*ḡawharu al-sa'ādati*) is nothing more than this very thing”.³⁸

We can see here that the first issue is metaphysically problematic. But Averroes handles it in a way similar to what he does in the *Short Commentary on the De Anima* and similar to what can be found in Ibn Baḡḡa.³⁹ Since intelligibles from the agent intellect cannot be received as such in the particular human imagination belonging to the human knower, then the universals are received into the imagination as particulars. In the *Short Commentary* this means that the power called material intellect is a disposition of the forms in the particular human imagination, not new forms. Perhaps we can describe this by saying that the particular in the imagination comes to have a qualification relating to universality such that the particular can be seen in the light of universality or under a mode or consideration of universality, though Averroes does not spell all this out in the *Short Commentary*. What is in the imagination then can in some way stand for the universal though the universal as such cannot be received into a particular human imagination without being particularized and no longer being universal. Universals then are received as particulars and are received into the particular imagination in its unique human circumstances.⁴⁰ What is received is received in the mode of the recipient, not in the mode of a separate immaterial intellect. Hence, what the individual receives is an individual spiritual (*ruḡānī*) form that is similar to the intelligible⁴¹ and that, it seems, must function as a representation of the intelligible while also bearing some content similarity to what is in the intelligible.⁴² The epistemological account by Averroes in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*

³⁴ R. Hansberger, “The Arabic Adaptation of the *Parva Naturalia* (*Kitāb al-Ḥiss wa-l-maḡsūs*)”, *Studia graeco-arabica* 4 (2014), pp. 301-14.

³⁵ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 67 Blumberg; tr. p. 40.

³⁶ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 73 Blumberg; tr. p. 42.

³⁷ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, pp. 74-75 Blumberg; tr. pp. 43-44.

³⁸ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 75 Blumberg; tr. p. 44.

³⁹ See my discussion of Ibn Baḡḡa in the introduction to Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, pp. xxv-xxvii and lxxxix-xciii Taylor-Druart.

⁴⁰ Cf. Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 81 Blumberg; tr. p. 47.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Cf. Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 82 Blumberg; tr. p. 48.

deserves a full comparative study of its precise relation to the epistemology of the *Short Commentary*, something beyond the limits of the present article. Yet it is clear that this explanation provides a not unfeasible account of how particular human minds can hold representations of universals, an account Averroes never develops further elsewhere. Still, the problem remains on the side of the immaterial intellectual agent in relation to a particular recipient.

The second issue is religiously problematic in the extreme if, as people of religion commonly believe, prophecy is from God and directed to determinate particular individuals as prophets. The implied common religious assumption here is the view that in the case of prophetic dreams God is providing particular intentional willed providential assistance or revelation to a particular individual. This would mean, for example, that God chose some particular human to be his prophet through whom God revealed the particular words of the Qur'ān by the command to recite made to this particular human by the angel Gabriel, an intellect separate from matter. Yet as pure intellect, how could a particular recipient of prophecy and revelation be chosen by a separate intellect? However, even after explicitly insisting on its importance in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, Averroes simply does not say a word on this issue and does not deal directly with it at all in this work; clearly it must remain as remarkable and challenging as his exclamation indicated. Why does he not make his views explicit?

It seems that Averroes found himself on the horns of a dilemma. To assert such a philosophical teaching that immaterial entities know only universals and not particulars would involve contradicting common religious teachings about particular willed divine action in revelation to a particular prophet; and to assert the alternative would be to contradict the philosophical principle that knowledge on the part of separate entities consists of immaterial universals and to hold that those entities somehow possess knowledge of determinate particular entities.

Averroes does, however, address the issue indirectly in the final pages of his treatment of dreams by considering the nature of the knowledge purportedly gained in dreams. Earlier in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* while addressing the issue of prerequisites for the attainment of knowledge by a particular individual Averroes explains that knowledge of concepts is culturally, temporally, geographically and even corporeally specific and must also be based on a prior natural experience through the senses of what will be known.⁴³ This consideration arises again a few pages later as to whether what is gained in dreams is of theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge or a particular cogitative power (*quwwa fikriyya ġuz'iyya*). As indicative of future particulars, dreaming is of the last kind. It may be believed (*qad yuẓannu*) some parts of practical knowledge as found in medicine may be grasped in sleep. However, the notion that dreams would reveal knowledge in the theoretical sciences is completely antithetical to the very nature of such knowledge. Theoretical knowledge is garnered through experience, as noted earlier, and the primary propositions provided to human beings by the intellect (*scil.*, the agent intellect).⁴⁴ Were it to be provided immediately through dreams, those primary propositions given for the sake of knowledge formation would be teleologically valueless (as also would sensation). Here this would not be attained through an apprehension of causes but rather without human effort and directly in dreams. Entities capable of this would be of a nature altogether different from that of human beings. For Averroes such a thing is an impossibility, a method of knowledge completely alien to the nature of human beings. Hence, the implication is that the very notion of a separate intellect which could provide a knowledge of theoretical matters such as the

⁴³ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 47 Blumberg.

⁴⁴ Averroes, *Comm. Parva Naturalia*, p. 79 Blumberg.

nature of human beings or the relationship of body and soul and how they should act in accord with their natural good is impossible. In this early work no direct solution on the second issue of how a separate immaterial intellect could pick out a particular recipient is provided; instead, Averroes explains how the communication of knowledge to a human being by such an intellect is itself an impossible notion. No further implication is explicitly provided even though understanding these matters properly should “be undertaken to the limit of one’s natural capacity for comprehension, for the essence of happiness is nothing more than this very thing”.

Philosophical Commentaries on the De Anima

Averroes wrote three commentaries on the *De Anima* of Aristotle and in none of them is there an account of prophecy found accompanying his differing considerations of human knowing. Rather, in each of them we find wholly naturalistic accounts with the separate agent intellect acting as a formal actuating principle that makes intellectual abstraction possible. In each work sensory experience, primary principles from the agent intellect for the formation of intelligibles, and a receptive subject for the apprehension of abstracted intelligibles all play similar roles. The differences between these works stem from diverse conceptions of the nature of intelligibles in act and the required character of their subject, as I have explained elsewhere.⁴⁵ For reference in further discussion below, it is also worth noting here that none of these commentaries has provision for the continued existence of the human soul after death.

In his *Short Commentary* or *Mukhtaṣar* the human power of imagination in relation to impressions received by the external senses and affecting the common sense plays a distinctive and higher role than it does in lower animals insofar as the still particular forms or intentions that come to be in the individual human being’s imagination become the subjects for intelligibles in act and so for the predication of universals. It “is distinguished by the fact that it does not need an organic instrument for its activity”.⁴⁶ This is because in this work Averroes conceives the material intellect, that is, the power receptive of the intelligibles in act in the soul that make possible human intellectual understanding, to exist in the individual human being as a disposition belonging to the forms in the human imagination. In his own version of an account inspired in part by Ibn Bāḡḡa and in part by Alexander of Aphrodisias,⁴⁷ Averroes understood the term “material intellect” not to denote properly an intellect – since intellect as intellect is necessarily something in act and separate – but rather to denote a receptive disposition (*isti’dād*) having as its subject the forms existing in the human imagination.⁴⁸ In this way the imagination – which Averroes thought not to be a wholly bodily power, at least in the case of human beings – is able to serve as substrate or foundation for a disposition which makes possible the understanding of intelligibles in act.⁴⁹ That is, the intellectual power existing in each understanding human being called “the material intellect” cannot literally be an intellect since an intellect as such is not a potency nor can it literally be material since matter receives an actuality only as a particular; hence, since it is a disposition actualized in human knowing, it remains for it to be attached to the forms of the imagination as a disposition by which human

⁴⁵ R.C. Taylor, “Intelligibles in act in Averroes”, in J.-B. Brenet (ed.), *Averroès et les averroïsmes juif et latin*, Actes du colloque tenu à Paris, 16-18 juin 2005, Brepols, Turnhout 2007 (Textes et Études du Moyen Âge, 40), pp. 111-40.

⁴⁶ Ibn Ruṣd, *Talḥīs kitāb al-naḥṣ*, ed. A.F. Al-Ahwani, Maktabat al-Nahdat al-Miṣriya, al-Qāhira 1950, p. 74.9-10; *Epitome de Anima*, ed. S. Gómez Nogales, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid 1985, p. 108.14-15.

⁴⁷ See Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, pp. xxv-xxviii (Introduction).

⁴⁸ Averroes, *Talḥīs kitāb al-naḥṣ*, p. 83.11-12 Al-Ahwani; *Epitome De Anima*, p. 120.13 Gómez Nogales.

⁴⁹ Averroes, *Talḥīs kitāb al-naḥṣ*, p. 86.5-15 Al-Ahwani; *Epitome De Anima*, p. 124.1-10 Gómez Nogales.

understanding takes place.⁵⁰ In this analysis Averroes does not provide all the details and perhaps is not fully coherent, but he does point clearly to the consequence that the individual human soul is itself perishable on this account. For, while imagination is common to animals (and he says of human imagination that it “is distinguished by the fact that it does not need an organic instrument for its activity”, as noted earlier), it is nevertheless the case that the human imagination is a particular power belonging to the individual human being and is not separate immaterial intellect. To that extent, the power of imagination is as perishable as is the body of the human being to whom it belongs. And no argument for the immortality of the soul can be made through appeal to the immaterial reception of intelligibles in act into an essential power of the soul, since Averroes has said the material intellect is not literally intellect but is rather a disposition of the forms in the imagination. Precisely how this account allows for human intellectual understanding Averroes does not fully explain in this work, something not surprising since he rejects this account in his later *De Anima* commentaries. There is no hint or implication whatsoever for another way for the human attainment of theoretical or practical knowledge through any power of the soul that relates to prophecy.

His *Middle Commentary* or *Talḥīṣ*, completed and in circulation by 1186, contains many texts identical to the *Long Commentary* or *Šarḥ* based on an earlier incomplete version of the *Long Commentary*.⁵¹ Although generally a paraphrasing account of Aristotle’s *De Anima* in three parts in accord with the traditional division of the Greek, this work includes discussion which does not precisely correspond to the text of Aristotle, including a paragraph⁵² just before his paraphrase of *De Anima* 3.4 and 3.5 and a lengthy excursus⁵³ following *De Anima* 3.5. It is in these additional materials that Averroes rejects his account in the *Short Commentary* and sketches a new understanding of the power of reason and the human soul. The most important development is a new analysis of the nature of the material intellect as a subject for intelligibles in act and of its relationship to the human soul. Disregarding the *Short Commentary*’s understanding of the material intellect as identified with a disposition of the forms in the imagination, Averroes insists that as intellect the material intellect “cannot be mixed with the subject in which it is found” since if that were so

the forms of things would not exist in the intellect as they really are – that is, the forms existing in the intellect would be changed into forms different from the actual forms. If, therefore, the nature of the intellect is to receive the forms of things which have retained their natures, it is necessary that it be a faculty unmixed with any form whatsoever.⁵⁴

That is, the nature of intellectually understood intelligibles in act dictates that they be received into a subject that is unmixed with the body or powers of a body or any other form. Consequently,

⁵⁰ See Averroes, *Talḥīṣ kitāb al-naḥṣ*, p. 86.5-15 Al-Ahwānī; *Epitome de Anima*, p. 124.1-109 Gómez Nogales.

⁵¹ See Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, pp. xxix-xxxiii (Introduction). Also see C. Sirat - M. Geoffroy, *L’original arabe du Grand Commentaire d’Averroès au De Anima d’Aristote. Prémices d’édition*, Vrin, Paris 2005 (Sic et non); and R. Glasner, “Review of Averroes. *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima. A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text with English Translation, Notes and Introduction*, A. L. Ivry”, *Aestimatio* 1 (2004), pp. 57-61. Glasner reported her work established the date of the *Long Commentary* on the *De Anima* as ca. 1186. However, later she was less sanguine about the precise date while retaining the view that the first long commentary was that on the *De Anima*. See R. Glasner, *Averroes’ Physics. A Turning Point in Medieval Natural Philosophy*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2009, pp. 19-21.

⁵² Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, A Critical Edition of the Arabic Text with Engl. Trans., Notes and Introd. by A.L. Ivry, Brigham Young U.P., Provo, Utah 2002 (Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy), p. 109 (278).

⁵³ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, pp. 110-12 Ivry.

⁵⁴ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima*, p. 109 Ivry.

the material intellect cannot be a disposition of the forms of the imagination but must rather be immaterial intellect and yet also receptive.⁵⁵ Here Averroes draws on his understanding of celestial entities, namely, the celestial bodies which the celestial souls are 'in' and the intellects which are the causes of the movement of the celestial bodies by their souls, as Marc Geoffroy has rightly pointed out.⁵⁶ In the case of the eternal heavens the moving body and its soul are not composed hylomorphically as are transitory sublunar beings. Rather, the soul is 'in' the celestial body without forming a single hylomorphic composite from the two, each of which is an eternal being. In the case of humans, the material intellect is not literally 'in' the body, the soul or the human composed of the two, since the material intellect must remain unmixed to be receptive of intelligibles without distortion by pre-existing formalities. Hence, an individual material intellect belongs to and exists 'in' the human soul. To this extent, the power of soul called material intellect has its existence and individuation through its relation to and association with the individual soul existing in the body. Although Averroes chooses not to draw the conclusion explicitly, it is clear the perishing of the composite of soul and body also entails the loss of individualization and existence for the associated human material intellect, that is, the human being as knower. Though he again has an important role for the agent intellect in the abstraction and realization of forms in the human material intellect, unlike al-Farabi and Avicenna, there is no discussion of prophecy as something received from the agent intellect.

The *Long Commentary on the De Anima* is extant as a whole in Latin but in Arabic only in fragments. It is the sole commentary on the *De Anima* by Averroes translated into medieval Latin. This is a lengthy work containing the complete *De Anima* of Aristotle with detailed commentary passage by passage. While Averroes himself says that this was the first of his long commentaries,⁵⁷ it is unknown when he commenced work on the *Long Commentary on the De Anima*. Still, it has been established that an early version was the likely source for some identical texts found in the *Middle Commentary* and also found in an important Arabic manuscript written in Hebrew characters.⁵⁸ The version of the text represented by the Latin translation is generally taken to be Averroes's mature and final understanding of the soul and intellect since its new doctrine of soul and intellect is referred to in his late *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*⁵⁹ and for other reasons.⁶⁰

Drawing on a new reading of his own of the teachings of Themistius,⁶¹ Averroes reconceives the receptive material intellect as a unique and separately existing substantial principle shared by human beings. In this work Averroes reasons that abstraction and human intellectual understanding come

⁵⁵ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, p. 112 Ivry.

⁵⁶ M. Geoffroy - C. Steel, *La Béatitude de l'âme: Éditions, traductions annotées, études doctrinales et historiques d'un traité d'Averroès*, Vrin, Paris 2001 (Sic et non), pp. 64-65, 71 ff.

⁵⁷ See Glasner, "Review of Averroes. *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima* (above, n. 51), and *Averroes' Physics* (above, n. 51).

⁵⁸ See Sirat - Geoffroy, *L'original arabe* (above, n. 51). Also see Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, pp. XXVIII-XXXIII; L-LI (Introduction).

⁵⁹ Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, p. LII (Introduction).

⁶⁰ Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, p. L-LI (Introduction). Also see R.C. Taylor, "Textual and Philosophical Issues in Averroes' *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*", in A.M.I. van Oppenraaij - R. Fontaine (eds.), *The Letter before the Spirit. The Importance of Text Editions for the Study of the Reception of Aristotle*, Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2012 (*Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus*, 22), pp. 267-87.

⁶¹ See R.C. Taylor, "Themistius and the development of Averroes' Noetics", in R.L. Friedman - J.-M. Counet (eds.), *Medieval Perspectives on Aristotle's De Anima*, Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie - Peeters, Louvain-la-Neuve - Paris - Walpole (Mass.) 2013, pp. 1-38.

about when the two separate substances, the agent intellect and the material intellect, are intrinsically present in the human soul by a form of sharing or participation, albeit not substantially. As I have argued elsewhere, the separate material intellect in this work is a common locus for the unique set of intelligibles in act abstracted on the basis of sensory apprehension and shared by all human scientific knowers.⁶² But the human soul is the first actuality of a natural body having organs, while those intellects are separate from body. In light of this, Averroes determines that the term soul is equivocal and that intellect is not properly part of the substantial essence of the human soul. Explaining his understanding of Aristotle, Averroes writes,

[I]t is better to say, and seems more to be true after investigation, that this is another kind of soul and, if it is called a soul, it will be so equivocally. If the disposition of intellect is such as this, then it must be possible for that alone of all the powers of soul to be separated from the body and not to be corrupted by [the body's] corruption, just as the eternal is separated. This will be the case since sometimes [the intellect] is not united with [the body] and sometimes it is united with it.⁶³

That is, for a human being soul is the actuality of body responsible for the formation of the hylomorphic composite. The rational part of soul or intellect is not properly soul as form of the body; it can be called soul but only in an equivocal sense. Intellect then does not belong properly and per se to this hylomorphic composite in virtue of itself but rather is only shared through the presence of the agent intellect and the material intellect during the earthly life of the human individual. Hence, no argument for personal immortality can be based on the per se presence of an intellectual – and thereby immaterial – power of the soul fully intrinsic to each individual human. The consequence is that, while the agent intellect, the material intellect, and also the human species can be reasoned to be eternally in existence,⁶⁴ there is no basis in argument for a continued existence of the individual human soul after the death of the body.

These philosophical works of Averroes present a considerable challenge regarding the issue of prophecy. In each of the *De Anima* commentaries considered briefly here he provides detailed accounts of the complex processes of human understanding. He explains in detail the important roles of the separate agent intellect in the *Short* and *Middle Commentaries* and of the separate agent intellect and material intellect in the *Long Commentary* yet says nothing about the psychology and metaphysics of prophecy. As indicated earlier, he was aware that the writings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna in philosophical psychology and metaphysics contained integrated accounts of prophecy that connected human imagination and knowing with the agent intellect. While this makes his *De Anima* commentaries anomalous in relation to the work of his predecessors in the tradition, it also makes his *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* itself anomalous in relation to his *De Anima* commentaries. And, while in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* he does address prophecy in the context of a psychology and metaphysics of dreams, he clearly sets out some severe epistemological aporiai for the account of prophecy and even chooses to say nothing in regard to what he had termed the most important issue of all regarding “the essence of happiness”.

⁶² Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, p. LV ff. (Introduction).

⁶³ Averroes, *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima*, pp. 160-1 Crawford; tr. *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, p. 128 Taylor-Druart.

⁶⁴ Averroes, *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima*, p. 407 Crawford; tr. *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, p. 322 Taylor-Druart. For a more detailed account of the *Long Commentary* and key issues in other commentaries on *De Anima*, see Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, introduction, *passim*.

Applying Averroes's Own Method to His Works

Before attempting to provide a coherent account of the thought of Averroes it may be judicious to consider the dating of the works discussed thus far. It is generally held that the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* and the *Short Commentary on De Anima* are early works of Averroes, the former known to be completed in January 1170 in Seville and the latter certainly earlier, perhaps even a decade earlier. In the case of the latter, we know he returned to it much later making corrections and revisions.⁶⁵ The editor of the *Middle Commentary on the De Anima*, Alfred Ivry, notes that the manuscripts give two dates for the work, 1172 and 1181.⁶⁶ Because of identical passages of in the *Middle Commentary* and the *Long Commentary*, he argues that the former is posterior to the latter. I believe I have sufficiently resolved this issue in favor of the traditional view of the *Middle Commentary* having been completed first before the *Long Commentary* (completed by 1186),⁶⁷ though the dating of the works of Averroes is notoriously complex. For the argument I am building here, it is sufficient to say that these two commentaries are posterior to the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* and the *Short Commentary on De Anima*. In the three commentaries on *De Anima* Averroes kept his primary focus on his source text and the history of the interpretation of the nature of the soul in the philosophical tradition. It may well be that one should not expect an account of prophecy in these, since the issue of dreams and prophecy is not treated in the *De Anima*. Perhaps Averroes felt no need to raise it even though it was discussed by al-Fārābī and Avicenna. In the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*, however, the discussion of dreams and prophecy is suitable since they are raised in his source text, the modified version of the *Parva Naturalia*. Nevertheless, the discussion of prophecy in the commentaries on *De Anima* is conspicuous by its complete absence.

The three dialectical religious works discussed earlier, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, *al-Kaṣf*, and the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* are usually regarded as all written around 1179-1180. As explained earlier, in these works he follows the method set out in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, dividing discourse on issues common to philosophy and religion into the evident suitable for all and the interpreted suitable only for the philosophers. As made clear earlier, that is explicitly stated in *Faṣl al-maqāl* and *al-Kaṣf*. It is reiterated by negation in the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* when he instructs his readers that the discussions in this work should be taken as merely persuasive, *scil.* dialectical, and that for the truth of the matter they should consult his demonstrative works, *scil.* his philosophical works.⁶⁸ These works, in which a methodology for the treatment of issues common to philosophy and religion is set out and employed, are all definitely posterior to the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* and to the *Short Commentary on De Anima* and arguably prior to the *Middle Commentary* and the *Long Commentary*. Thus, it seems Averroes may not have yet spelled out in sufficient detail his methodology regarding works of religion and philosophy on subjects common to both.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ See Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes* (above, n. 9), pp. 265 ff.

⁶⁶ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, p. 148, n. 50 Ivry.

⁶⁷ Taylor, "Textual and Philosophical Issues" (above, n. 60). Also see Averroes, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, pp. xxviii ff. (Introduction).

⁶⁸ Averroes, *Tahāfut at-tahāfut*, pp. 427-8 Bouyges; tr. pp. 257-8.

⁶⁹ See Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, p. 23 Butterworth. Hence, the assertion of the need for the suitably learned to consult the demonstrative works may not include the short commentaries or the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* and the *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*.

The first step in the analysis of Averroes's account of prophecy is to follow the very methodology which he sets out in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* and references in his *al-Kaṣf*. Discourse on issues that are the subject of both philosophy and religion, such as the afterlife, divine providence, miracles, the nature of prophecy and the like, must be divided into two forms, one which is 'evident' (*zāhir*) and fitting for all human beings and another which is 'interpreted' (*mu'awwal*) and fitting only for the learned. The latter group does not consist in the '*ulamā*' learned only in Islamic religious sciences but rather, as he makes clear in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*, the philosophers. In that work he spelled out that, when there is conflict in regard to truth concerning a matter of fact in both philosophy and religion, a clear priority must be given to philosophy with its most perfect method of *qiyās*, philosophical *burhān*, demonstration, where such is available. Where there is uncertainty or disagreement in interpretation among those skilled in philosophy, the 'evident' is to be retained and promulgated for the public and what is contentious and unresolved among the philosophically learned should not be shared with the public. Further, should some philosophers make mistakes regarding interpretation, they should not be held guilty of some failing since they are making their best effort over a complex and intellectually challenging matter. However, those who share their interpretations with the public should be condemned as themselves unbelievers since they may lead others to unbelief:

For anyone not adept in science (*al-'ilm*), it is obligatory to take them [the descriptions of the next life] in their evident sense (*'alā l-zāhiri*); for him, it is unbelief to interpret them because it leads to unbelief. That is why we are of the opinion that, for anyone among the people whose duty it is to have faith in the evident sense (*'alā l-zāhiri*), interpretation is unbelief (*at-ta'wīl fi haqqi-hi kufrun*) because it leads to unbelief. Anyone adept in interpretation who divulges that to him calls him to unbelief; and the one who calls to unbelief is an unbeliever.

This is why it is obligatory that interpretations be established only in books using demonstrations (*fi kutubi al-barāhīn*). For if they are in books using demonstrations, no one but those adept in demonstration will get at them. Whereas, if they are established in other than demonstrative books with poetical and rhetorical or dialectical methods used in them, as Abū Ḥamīd al-Ġazālī does, that is an error against the Law and against wisdom (*'alā al-ṣar'i wa 'alā al-hikma*).⁷⁰

Eschewing the option of providing philosophical explications – an interpreted account – of the nature of God, creation, providence, miracles, prophecy and the afterlife, Averroes explicitly states his *al-Kaṣf* to be concerned with the 'evident' (*al-zāhir*) aspects of these issues and proceeds to a very critical analysis of religious argumentation on these matters, sometimes using Aristotelian reasoning in the course of his critique. In this work he also provides his own form of reasoned defense of 'evident' doctrines as an application of the methodology spelled out in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*. The same is true of his writing in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*. In the *Tabāfut al-tabāfut* he also generally defends the 'evident' doctrines though, given the nature of the work as a philosophically reasoned response to the critique of the philosophers by al-Ġazālī, the argument is oftentimes substantially beyond the abilities of nearly anyone but a trained philosopher, even if he characterizes this work as dialectical since that is its primary intention. (It is perhaps in his detailed discussions of creation that Averroes comes closest to violating his proscription against sharing interpreted philosophical accounts with the public, but he was required to treat this in detail despite its complexity since the issue is treated at length with considerable depth by al-Ġazālī in the *Tabāfut al-falāsifa*).

⁷⁰ Averroes, *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, p. 2 Butterworth. Arabic added. Tr. slightly modified.

In his philosophical or demonstrative commentaries on *De Anima* and his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* Averroes denies the afterlife as literally understood to human beings or the human soul. In the latter work he also argues in detail against the notion of creation ex nihilo reasoning for a conception of creation as without beginning and also against the notion of particular divine providence. Regarding the nature of God, he reasons in his *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* that God has only knowledge of Himself, a conception of knowledge based on the Aristotelian notion that knowledge is the understanding of causes.⁷¹ As such, knowledge of particulars qua particulars is unavailable to God as immaterial intellectual knower of universals (quite in accord with the reasoning of the early *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia*). This has important implications for his conception of prophecy.

Now since he has made it clear in his discussion of method on issues common to religion and philosophy that it is impossible for truth to contradict truth, that is, he denies that there is one truth for religion and another for philosophy,⁷² it is then in philosophy or science that the truth is fully found. The *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* does not provide any discussion of the distinction of discourse reasoned in detail by Averroes in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*. Rather, its account of prophecy is philosophically discussed in the manner of what he later calls an ‘interpreted’ discourse, one denoting the truth in the fullest sense, even if he does not complete the discussion of the second issue there, namely, how an immaterial intellect can know particulars. Hence, it is clear that nothing prevents us from asserting that the teachings (and their implications) found in the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* are in accord with his own thought on the nature of prophecy. It may well be that the cautious distinction of ‘evident’ discourse from ‘interpreted’ discourse spelled out in detail in the *Faṣl al-maqāl* and exercised in *al-Kaṣf* and *Tabāfut al-tabāfut* determined for Averroes a methodology he would make effort to employ from the time of the writing of the *Faṣl al-maqāl*. Regardless of that, Averroes’s world view is non-traditional and, as Davidson puts it, involves “an extremely radical statement for a medieval philosopher”.

The deep concerns indicated by Davidson with respect to the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* remain and can be raised even more broadly. For Averroes there is no cogent philosophical account of prophecy that is congruous with the traditional religious conception of prophecy as literally a conveyance and instruction provided to human beings on the nature of God, on the things of world, or on the proper nature of human conduct and fulfillment. Davidson’s remarks that “The discrepancy is harsh” between the *Commentary on the Parva Naturalia* and what we find in “Averroes’ *Tabāfut al-Tabāfut* and semipopular works” can be considered as a consequential symptom of the doctrine of the two sorts discourse, one in the non-philosophical works as predominantly ‘evident’ (*ẓāhir*) containing a teaching meant to be taken literally, the other philosophical in aiming at the truth in the fullest sense and labeled ‘interpreted’ (*mu’awwal*). Davidson’s further assertion follows if we ourselves play the role of philosopher and apply Averroes’s own method to his works: “The term prophet would, on this reading, mean nothing more than the human author of Scripture; and the term revelation would mean a high level of philosophical knowledge”.⁷³

⁷¹ See Averroes, *Tafsir ma ba’d at-tabi’at*, pp. 1708-9 Bouyges.

⁷² See R.C. Taylor, “‘Truth does not contradict truth’: Averroes and the Unity of Truth”, *Topoi* 19 (2000), pp. 3-16.

⁷³ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes* (above, n. 9), pp. 351-2.

Some concluding remarks

Averroes's teachings on prophecy as well as those on the afterlife, creation, God's nature and action, miracles and other related issues follow from his efforts to craft his own Neo-Aristotelian rationalist *Weltanschauung* or worldview while living in a cultural context of Abrahamic traditions which set out a conception of God distinctively different from that of the pagan Greek Aristotelian philosophical tradition. While the deity of this religious tradition is conceived as generous and benevolent, intimately present to the world, and acting freely in every way, the Neo-Aristotelian approach philosophically conceived and followed by Averroes entailed principles antithetical to that religious tradition. These are hardly difficult to see regarding his conception of the divinity. God is thought thinking thought intending only Himself, not something lower. Further, since there are only four causes for his philosophical master Aristotle, final, formal, moving and material, God is not a fifth kind of efficiently creating cause nor is God intimately and immediately acting in the lives of things below by his own efficient causality. Averroes does not provide us with any other explanation of the conciliation of the religious and the philosophical or scientific except what we find in the *Faṣl al-maqāl*'s reasoning and entailments. He provides no discussion of any approach similar to that of Kantian antinomies or a method to transcend the philosophically 'harsh' consequences which follow on his methodology. Nevertheless, he was man of Islamic religious practice and a deeply intelligent and committed jurist who played key roles in the application of religious rules of human practice in the courts of Cordoba and Seville.

One might be inclined to conclude that Averroes remains an enigmatic figure with an idiosyncratic conception of his professed Abrahamic religion. Yet he clearly enough explains his philosophical worldview methodically and generally follows that method in his writings, setting out teachings that accord with the principles of religion in his 'evident' (*zāhir*) works while reserving explanations that clash with religion for investigation by philosophers suited for 'interpreted' (*mu'awwal*) writings. In this he develops perhaps more explicitly and more radically the worldview found in the writings of al-Fārābī who affirmed an afterlife but also in his *Book of Religion* (*Kitāb al-milla*) explained that virtuous religion has a practical part that sets out universals and rules for right human action though these are properly speaking "subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy" and a theoretical part that consists of religious opinions which "have their demonstrative proofs in theoretical philosophy and are taken in religion without demonstrative proofs".⁷⁴ Averroes's *al-Kaṣf* represents his attempt to craft a form of 'evident' (*zāhir*) religious *kalām* largely on the basis of a Neo-Aristotelian based critique of reasoning by predecessors on religious opinions or beliefs. Yet in his 'interpreted' (*mu'awwal*) works of philosophy, he sets out teachings that are directly – or by clear argumentative implication – quite contrary to those of the religion in which he was raised, as mentioned just above in the previous paragraph. What is more, as I have shown elsewhere,⁷⁵ in his theoretical *Commentary on the Metaphysics* of Aristotle he states explicitly that the most perfect form of worship of the Divinity is to be found in knowing God and creatures in the science of metaphysics as a religious obligation specific to philosophers (*al-ṣarī'a al-hāṣṣa bi-l-ḥukamā*).⁷⁶ Hence, it seems reasonable to conclude that Averroes found

⁷⁴ Alfarabi. *The Political Writings. Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, tr. Ch.E. Butterworth, Cornell U.P., Ithaca - London 2001, p. 97.

⁷⁵ Taylor, "Averroes on the *Shari'ah* of the Philosophers" (above, n. 6).

⁷⁶ Cf. S. Harvey, "Avicenna and Maimonides on Prayer and Intellectual Worship," in H. Ben-Shammai (ed.), *Exchange and Transmission across Cultural Boundaries: Philosophy, Mysticism and Science in the Mediterranean World*,

in philosophy and its sciences the most complete and precise truth content and highest levels of knowledge and understanding and from them constructed his worldview. Given that perspective, religion — which is indispensable for proper human ethical and political development⁷⁷ — is like an Aristotelian practical science in that it concerns good and right conduct in the achievement of an end attained in action, not truths to be known for their own sake.⁷⁸

Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 2013, pp. 82-105,

⁷⁷ See Averroes, *Tabāfut at-tabāfut*, pp. 582-3 Bouyges; tr. pp. 359-61.

⁷⁸ My thanks to Peter Adamson, Matteo Di Giovanni and Jules Janssens for valuable comments and suggestions on a draft of this article. I am also very grateful to Steven Harvey for his close reading of the penultimate draft and for sharing many critical comments and suggestions.