Averroes’ Philosophical Analysis of Religious Propositions

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Averroes’ Philosophical Analysis of Religious Propositions

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One of the many views of Averroes and Averroism current in contemporary thought is that of R. A. Gauthier who is quoted with approval regarding the origins of Latin Averroist doctrine in the impressive first volume of Torrell’s recent biography of Aquinas. In the work cited by Torrell, Gauthier argues with considerable cogency that Latin Averroism is a creation of the Christian theologians of the 13th century, one that he traces to Albert the Great, Robert Kilwardby, Bonaventura, Aquinas and others who, in criticizing Averroes’ teachings on the nature of the soul and the nature of the intellect from their own interpretive understanding of his texts, gave rise to the beginnings of what would later become a foundation for the sort of thinking found in Siger of Brabant and others who were characterized as Averroists in their day and continue to be so characterized by scholars today. The text of central importance on this issue is the Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle, since the Latin West in the 13th century did not have translations of the Epitome or the Middle Commentary nor was there available a Latin translation of the Tahafut al-Tahafut, the Incoherence of the Incoherence. For Gauthier, “One admits actually more and more today that Averroes was not an averroist”3. What he finds is that these theologians gave the text of Averroes an unnaturally reading emphasizing obscure passages which the early Arts masters had not seen fit to make the centerpiece of interpretation. In this he is referring primarily to Averroes’ doctrine of the intellect and the notion of monopsychism on one interpretation or the notion of there being one possible or material intellect for all humankind on another interpretation4.

1 My participation in the 1997 SIEPM congress was made possible thanks to a generous grant from the Marquette University Religious Commitment Fund.
4 Albert the Great raises the issue of monopsychism as does Kilwardby, while Bonaventura points with more acuity to the doctrine of the unicity of the possible or material intellect. See Gauthier, op. cit., *222.
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Gauthier cites the work of Salvador Gomez Nogales in support of his view that Averroes should not be considered an Averroist and it is precisely in regard to the issue of Averroes' psychology and his views on the afterlife that Gomez Nogales himself asserts just the view of Averroes that Gauthier endorses. Gomez Nogales concludes the 1976 article cited by Gauthier with a clear statement of his conclusions, one of which is that „Averroes is not an Averroist. If it is true that there had been some averroists who admitted the unity of the human intellect, this is not the case for Averroes who admits the individual immortality of the human soul, even in regard to the material intellect“45. As he sees it, Averroes holds for a plurality of individual material intellects possessed by immortal human individuals. According to Gomez Nogales, Averroes is found to accept in his theological writings religious dogmas on moral responsibility for immortal human individuals whose worldly actions result in punishment and reward in the afterlife. For Gomez Nogales, these statements are fully consonant with the philosophical views of Averroes when those views are properly understood.

This is a view propounded by others who have sought to reconcile the theological and philosophical views of Averroes in a way consonant with the literal interpretation of his religious propositions. Ovey Mohammed, for example6, holds that Averroes' true position has been misunderstood by scholars unfamiliar with the Qur'anic foundations of Averroes' thought and that, when viewed in the light of Qur'anic anthropological teachings, Averroes' philosophical pronouncements in the Long Commentary on the De Anima are fully consonant with his statements elsewhere and with Qur'anic teachings7. But a more cautious approach to this issue was that of George Hourani who sought to understand the sense and subtlety of Averroes' statements at the end of the Tahāfut al-Tahāfut about the nature of the soul and the afterlife.

In the penultimate section of the Tahāfut al-Tahāfut, Averroes provides an account whereby the individuality and immortality of human souls might be preserved after death, an account which can be read as supporting the views of Ovey Mohammed, Gomez Nogales, and, thereby, Gauthier. After citing al-Ghazali's critique of Avicenna that, if numerical individuation takes

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45 „Averroës n'est pas averroiste. S'il est vrai qu'il y a eu des averroîstes qui ont admis l'unité de l'intellect humain, ce n'est pas le cas pour Averroës qui admet l'immortalité individuelle de l'âme humaine, même dans l'intellect matériel.“ Salvador Gomez Nogales, Saint Thomas, Averroës et l'Averroïsme, in: Aquinas and Problems of His Time, ed. G. Verbeke and D. Vethels (eds) Leuven and The Hague 1976, 161–177; see 177.


7 For a detailed discussion of this view, see my article cited in the previous note.
place by way of the soul’s relation to a particular body, then when bodies perish souls too must perish, Averroes sets forth another possible way of dealing with this issue. He writes,

„But Avicenna’s opponents may ask his partisans through what the individuation and numerical plurality of souls takes place, when they are separated from their matters, for the numerical plurality of individuals arises only through matter. He who claims the survival and the numerical plurality of souls should say that they are in a subtle matter, namely the animal warmth which emanates from the heavenly bodies, and that this is a warmth which is not fire and in which there is not a principle of fire; in this warmth there are the souls which create the sublunary bodies and those which inhere in these bodies.”

That is to say, a doctrine of celestial matter may well account for the manner in which there can be natural scientific and metaphysical coherence and sense to a doctrine of personal immortality. Such a teaching makes philosophical sense in dealing with the issue of the metaphysical problems which would result on the assumption of the truth of the notion that there is personal survival for individual souls after death. For the Aristotelian understanding of the soul requires that, as a member of a species containing a plurality of members, the soul metaphysically needs matter for its individuation, for its distinction from other members of the species. Without such individuation, there would be no metaphysical difference between one soul and another, that is, there would be just one soul for all humanity. Yet, while that metaphysical requirement is evident enough, how are we to understand a human soul to leave one matter, its original earthly body, and to take on another, the celestial subtle matter, in such a way that the being of the individual soul is retained with the preservation of personal identity, something which is surely a necessity for the preservation of a doctrine of moral responsibility and deserved punishment and reward? Such a view, a form of transmigration, is explicitly rejected by Aristotle in De Anima Book I and is contrary to the principles and arguments set forth by Aristotle on the relationship of soul and body in De Anima Book II. Such a thing is impossible because this particular soul is the form of a human body and even of this particular body and has its being as the form and actuality of this body. Reflection on what the implications would be for powers which depend upon body for their actualization such as imagination and cogitation reminds us that for Averroes the brain and heart are not interchangeable between individuals since corporeal experiences and habits affect and are etched upon body as well as soul. Moreover, as Hourani indicated, if we follow Qur’anic suggestions of an interval of unconsciousness for the entombed dead, other difficult questions

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remain as to how individuality and personal identity can be maintained when the soul is no longer united with the body and not yet united with celestial matter. Nevertheless, inspite of these difficulties, Hourani found he could not consider this to be a facade constructed by Averroës for the sake of his contemporary conservative Muslim public. Rather, he read this text and other works of Averroës as evidence of „a true tension between his philosophy and his Muslim religion — precisely because he takes the two seriously“10.

On Michael Marmura's reading of the twelfth discussion of the Tahafut al-Tahafut in which Averroës provides a rhetorical polemic stressing the importance of religious belief in bodily resurrection and the importance of religion as a whole for the formation of character throughout life, Averroës is writing with intentional vagueness: „ambiguity and evasion are also used by Averroës as a means for adhering to that basic Farabian principle of his political philosophy, namely that demonstrative knowledge must not be divulged to the public. His Tahafut was written for philosophers and nonphilosophers alike“11. What in part prompts Marmura to make this comment is Averroës's curious reference at the end of the nineteenth discussion of the Tahafut al-Tahafut concerning the material intellect and its relevance to the question of the personal immortality of the human soul. There Averroës writes,

„This question is one of the most difficult in philosophy, and the best explanation that can be given of this problem is that the material intellect thinks in a universal judgment, and that that which forms its essence is absolutely immaterial. Therefore Aristotle praises Anaxagoras for having made intellect, namely an immaterial form, the prime mover, and for this reason it does not suffer from any action from anything, for the cause of passivity is matter and in this respect the passive potencies are in the same position as the active, for it is the passive potencies possessing matters which accept definite things.“12

With this statement Averroës makes it clear that his remarks in this section of the Tahafut al-Tahafut are to be taken in the context of his Aristotelian

10 Nonobstant les défauts de cette théorie des corps célestes, je ne peux pas la considérer comme une façade du philosophe devant un public musulman conservateur. De la totalité de ses écrits on peut conclure qu'il y a une vraie tension entre sa philosophie et sa religion musulmane — précisément parce qu'il prend aux sérieux les deux. La philosophie est une science qui démontre des vérités. Le Qur'ân vient de Dieu. Ainsi, Nous, la communauté des musulmans, nous savons définitivement que l'enquête démonstrative ne différe pas de ce que nous a donné la révélation, parce qu'une vérité n'en contredit pas une autre, mais plutôt s'accorde avec elle et lui rend témoignage.** George E. Hourani, Averroës musulman, in Multiple Averroës, Paris 1978, 21–30; see 30.

11 He also continues, „It was written in response to Ghazali who, from Averroës's point of view, has 'let the cat out of the bag', so to speak, by going public on matters that should be confined to the qualified few. This, for Averroës, was Ghazali's cardinal sin.** M. E. Marmura, Some Remarks on Averroës's Statements on the Soul, in: Averroës and the Enlightenment, M. Wahba and M. Abousenna (eds.), Buffalo 1996, 279–291; see 289.

12 Bouyges, 579; Van den Bergh tr., 358–359.
philosophical psychology and its doctrine of the material intellect. If it happens that tentative, ambiguous or vague statements or propositions on the nature of the soul are made from a dialectical perspective or a religious perspective, that is, from a perspective which assumes an interpretive stance regarding the truth of certain starting points from a non-philosophical source such as commonly held notions or even religious revelation, then an understanding of Averroes's philosophical psychology can be used as a tool for unpacking and clarifying the ambiguous propositions with a view to determining the truth. Hence, if we can fathom the sense of his remarks in this comment on the material intellect and establish something of how he understood the nature of the rational soul, then we will be in a position perhaps to set aside vagueness and ambiguity regarding his understanding of the individual rational soul and the possibility of its migration into celestial matter at the end of earthly existence. Moreover, if we can do this by explicating his teachings on soul in the Long Commentary on the De Anima, the source for the great thirteenth century Latin controversies on the soul, then we can address the issue of the Averroism of Averroes, that is, the issue of his alleged non-paternity for Latin Averroism, at least with respect to the psychological and metaphysical issue of soul, intellect and personal immortality. Let us then turn to his doctrine of the material intellect in the Long Commentary on the De Anima.

13 That is, doctrines detailed in the Tahāfut al-Tahāfut can be verified as truly philosophical teachings of Averroes if they are found in his technical and demonstrative philosophical commentaries, although the converse is not the case. His remarks on the nature of his discourse in the Tahāfut al-Tahāfut should be kept in mind here. In a comment on his discussion of the divine attributes, he says:

"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 perfect eudaemonia, 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." Bouyges, 427–428, Van Den Bergh tr., 257–8.
Averroes's understanding of the material intellect in the Long Commentary on the De Anima is to a great extent based on two key philosophical principles which are metaphysical in nature. First, to be intelligible in act, the intelligible cannot be received into a this or particular individual without thereby becoming an intelligible in potency, not in act\(^4\). Thus, insofar as this fundamental principle is observed, it is obvious that intellectual understanding which involves the grasp of intelligibles in act cannot take place in particular human beings. That is, for Averroes it follows that *bic homo non intelligit*, something of which he is well aware\(^5\). Secondly, the intelligible in act must be one, not many, for if it were in many intellects, it would be many intelligibles in act, not one; there would not be the single and common referent for each intelligible, with the consequence that science would not be possible\(^6\). It follows that the material intellect cannot exist in a particular material individual and so must exist in a separate immaterial entity. It also follows that there cannot be a plurality of material intellects. Rather, the material intellect must be one for all humankind. For Averroes, human participation in rationality is only operational\(^7\), not founded on an ontologically per se possession of an intellect which grasps the intelligibles in act. The consequence of this is that there is no personal immortality for individual rational human souls in the mature thought of Averroes\(^8\).

This becomes more evident when we consider the single passage in the Long Commentary on the De Anima in which he makes reference to religious law and the immortality of the human soul. There he states that „it is impossible for probable things to be completely false“\(^9\). After quoting his Text of Aristotle's remarks in De Anima 3.5 that „We do not remember because that is not passive; the passive intellect, however, is corruptible and without this it understands nothing“\(^10\). Averroes explains that the issue at stake is that of the immortality of „soul, that is, the speculative intellect“\(^11\). Now the proposition stating that soul or speculative intellect is immortal is one of these propositions which are probable and not completely false. There

\[\text{Reference Notes:}\]


\(^5\) „Dicamus igitur quod manifestum est quod homw non est intelligens in actu nisi propter continuationem intellecti cum eo in actu.“ Crawford, 404. The intelligible to which he refers is in the separately existing material intellect.

\(^6\) See Crawford, 411 – 412. The text of Averroes there is derivative upon Themistius, Heinze, 104.1 – 14; Lyons, 189.2 – 15; and see Todd, tr., 129.


\(^8\) See the article by Taylor cited in note 6.

\(^9\) Crawford, 409.

\(^10\) „Et non sumus memoria, quae sit e ne non passurus; intellectus autem passivus est corruptibilis, et abscbe hoc nihil intelligit.“ Crawford, 409. This is a citation of De Anima 430a24 – 25.
are „probable propositions which give the soul both kinds of being, mortal and non-mortal." „The Ancients recounted this and all the religious laws alike reflect it“\textsuperscript{21}. But, as we have seen, the account of the material intellect in the Long Commentary on the De Anima does not allow for any basis for the proposition that there is personal immortality. Hence, the probable proposition which is true and stated in religion is that soul or speculative intellect is immortal. But how is that proposition to be understood? The soul which is non-mortal is the human soul as species which eternally supplies images to material intellect through the cogitative and memorative activities of transient particular human beings. The statement found in religion that soul is immortal must then be understood by philosophers as having as its referent the human species through which soul will always be existing, even if others fail to understand the proposition in its truth and believe it to refer to each particular soul personally. Such propositions are understood in accord with the capacity for understanding possessed by each listener\textsuperscript{22}.

The religious proposition asserting personal immortality by way of celestial matter for the individuation of souls of the dead has been shown to be philosophically valueless in the thought of Averroes. The seemingly irrelevant reference to the material intellect at the end of that section of the Tahafut al-Tahafut upon careful analysis proves to be a reference to a doctrine which holds for there to be no basis for a doctrine of personal immortality. Consequently, from a philosophical standpoint – which for Averroes is the standpoint most fully concerned with truth – the religious proposition asserting personal immortality must be recognized as valuable in its religious context but must be left aside as without philosophical foundation in its philosophical context. That is, it is a dialectical proposition which, for Averroes, is found to be without adequate grounds for its establishment as a demonstrative proposition. But if the soul is not immortal and there is no plurality of material intellects, then we can conclude that Averroes in fact accepted the doctrine of the unity and uniqueness of the material intellect as set forth in the Long Commentary on the De Anima and also accepted its implications for personal immortality and religious propositions concerning punishment and reward in the next life. But if that is so, Averroes was an Averroist, at least on the controversial issue of the separate and unique material intellect and its entailed consequences. This conclusion follows upon the foregoing philosophical analysis of the religious propositions from the Tahafut al-Tahafut and the Long Commentary on the De Anima considered here\textsuperscript{23}.

\textsuperscript{21} „Et hoc apologizaverunt Antiqui, et in representatione illius convenient omnes leges." Crawford, 409.


\textsuperscript{23} This conclusion was also reached by Melnerny 1993, 8–9.