



Averroes on the Metaphysics of Aristotle

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The Philosophical Review, Volume 18, Issue 4 (Jul., 1909), 416-428.

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AVERROES ON THE METAPHYSICS OF ARISTOTLE.

AVERROES lived from 1126 to 1198. He was thus a contemporary of Maimonides (1135-1204), and of Abelard (1079-1142). He lived in Mohammedan Spain, and was the last of the Arabian philosophers in that country. The governing dynasty of the Almohades was not in favor of philosophical studies, as leading to heresy and unbelief, and under this régime a taboo was put on science and philosophy, their advocates and students were proscribed and persecuted, and works dealing with the forbidden subjects were confiscated and burned. As a result, interest in the study, once so great as to influence the rest of Europe and stimulate it to imitation and emulation, rapidly declined. As a second result, the works of the Arabian philosophers in the original Arabic are exceedingly rare, and a large part of them lost, probably forever. Fortunately, translations were made of them in Latin and Hebrew in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and to these, especially the Hebrew, we are indebted for the preservation of many works of the Arabian philosophers, of which the originals are lost. This is especially true of Averroes; for he became, for reasons not quite certain, the favorite of the Jews in Spain, Provence, and Italy, to the exclusion of Aristotle himself, of whom he was considered the commentator *par excellence*; and some of his works are extant in the Arabic language, transcribed in Hebrew characters for the use of the Arabic speaking Jews in Mohammedan countries. To the accident of their transliteration they owe their escape from the Mohammedan inquisitor.

Besides works on medicine, jurisprudence, and astronomy, and a treatment of some philosophical themes, Averroes is known especially as a commentator of Aristotle, and in this department his fame rests especially on his so-called "great" commentaries, which he was the first to compose, and which have won for him a mention in Dante's *Inferno*.

As is well known, Averroes wrote commentaries to all the works of Aristotle, and to some as many as three different kinds, — “great,” “middle,” and “brief.” The “great” commentary contains the text of Aristotle in full, and a detailed discussion of the meaning. The “middle” commentary contains only the first few words of the text of each paragraph, followed by a paraphrase of the content of Aristotle’s thought, closely following the order and method of the original. In the “brief” commentary or resumé, or compendium, Averroes abandons the order of the original, gives an exposition of the subject of the treatise in his own words and by his own method, elucidates the problems under discussion from the Aristotelian treatises bearing on the matter in hand, and settles his account with his Arabian predecessors in the same field, such as Alfarabi and Avicenna, particularly the latter. The short commentary is thus a kind of independent work on the same subject as the Aristotelian treatise of the same name.

As was said before, the works of Averroes in the original Arabic which are extant are very rare, and these form only a small fraction of what he wrote. When Renan wrote his masterly monograph “*Averroës et l’Averroïsme*,” which is still the only complete work on the subject, though there is now new material for elaborating and revising at least one section of that book, all that was known to be extant in the original of the Aristotelian treatises of Averroes were one manuscript in Florence, containing the “middle” commentary on the *Organon*, the *Rhetoric*, and the *Poetics*, and a second manuscript in the Escorial in Madrid containing the commentary on the *Psychology*. Besides these he knew of Arabic manuscripts in Hebrew characters of the compendium of the *Organon*, the “middle” commentary of the treatise *On Generation and Corruption*, on the *Meteorologics*, the *Psychology*, and the compendium of the *Parva Naturalia*. These were in Paris in the national library, and the Bodleian in Oxford contained besides in the same characters the commentaries on the *De Cælo*, the *Generation and Corruption*, and the *Meteorologics*.

Since then a few other manuscripts have turned up, two in Leyden, one containing the “middle” commentary on the *Organon*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*, and the other his “great” commentary on

the *Metaphysics*. In Vol. XVIII of the *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1904-05, Derenbourg described another manuscript of the Escorial library in Madrid containing commentaries on some of the smaller physical treatises of Aristotle, and in Vol. XX (1906-07) of the same periodical, Horten, of Bonn, the translator of Avicenna into German, called attention to the publication in Cairo two or three years ago of the "middle" commentary on the *Metaphysics*, under the editorship of Mustafa Al-Qabbani, without any indication of the manuscript source of the edition. An examination of the work proved to the present writer that it was not the "middle" commentary, but the compendium, and a correspondence elicited from the editor, Al Qabbani, the information that the manuscript from which the edition was taken is in the Khedivial library in Cairo, and contains other works of the same author, and Professor Moritz, the director of the Khedivial library, dates the manuscript about 700 A. H. (= 1322).

This little work, covering 85 closely printed large octavo pages of small type of the Arabic edition, is one of the most important of Averroes's works, giving us as it does the commentator's views on what he regards as the crowning point of philosophy, the study of the separate intelligences, and of God. Renan speaks of the importance of the treatise, and Munk gives a brief statement of its contents, based upon the Latin translation, or perhaps the Hebrew.

If any excuse is needed for presenting this subject to this association¹ now, I may say in the first place that no account of any extent was given of it before, and that none of the writers on Averroes, including the best known, Renan, Munk, and Steinschneider, saw the original Arabic, which became known only about two years ago. It is unfortunate, however, that the Cairo edition is not a good one, teeming with what are either misprints or errors of the manuscript. The result is that while it helps us decidedly to correct the Hebrew and Latin translations, and to separate the numerous interpolations from the genuine text of Averroes in these translations, we can by no means as yet dispense with the latter, as, owing to the defective edition or manu-

¹ This paper was prepared for the American Philosophical Association.

script of the original, they help us in many cases to correct the Arabic. Of the two translations the one that can least be dispensed with is the Hebrew, and for the following reasons :

The Latin translation of Jacob Mantinus was made from the Hebrew in the sixteenth century, and published in the Venice Latin editions of Aristotle with the commentaries of Averroes. If therefore we are sure of the Hebrew text we do not need the Latin. The relation is not quite the same as between the Hebrew and the Arabic. There is only one Arabic manuscript extant, and, if we may judge from the Cairo edition, not an unusually good one. It dates from the fourteenth century, whereas the Hebrew translation was made by Moses Ibn Tibbon in 1258, about sixty years after the death of Averroes. It is therefore based upon an earlier manuscript than the one extant, and as there are ten manuscripts extant of the Hebrew translation, it is of no mean assistance to us in arriving at Averroes's correct text.

Another consideration should not escape us in considering the relative value of a Hebrew and a Latin translation of an Arabic original, apart from the dependence of one upon the other, as in this special case. Arabic, being a Semitic tongue, can be so well rendered literally into Hebrew, — and through many years of translation from the former into the latter has been so rendered, constituting a Hebrew philosophical style closely modelled after the Arabic, — that one who is familiar with the two languages, and with the subject, has no difficulty in reconstituting the Arabic text from the Hebrew translation. That such a relation does not hold between the Arabic and the Latin needs not my saying.

I have dwelt at length on this matter, because it is the fashion in some quarters to belittle the Hebrew translations as worthless, and editors of Arabic philosophical texts are in the habit of ignoring them, when they might be of great value. This applies to men like J. Müller, Schmölders, Mehren, and others. Mehren speaks of them as "*de valeur suspecte*," and Steinschneider wonders whether the phrase is a cover for his inability to use them. This is, I think, the secret in most cases. Sachau, the Orientalist of the University of Berlin, also thinks, "*man kann mit ihnen gar nicht anfangen*." Fausto Lasinio, on the other hand,

in his publication of excerpts from Averroes's logic, makes use also of the Hebrew translations; and Munk and Steinschneider, who are really able to judge in this matter, are both of the opinion that the Hebrew translations are of great value, and that a knowledge of mediæval Hebrew is more important in the study of Arabian philosophy than a knowledge of Arabic itself.

The present study is based upon the Arabic text of the Cairo edition above mentioned, upon a copy of the Hebrew translation made by the present writer from seven manuscripts, and upon the Latin translation as found in the Venice edition of Aristotle and Averroes in Latin, 1573.

To judge from the Arabic text there is a number of interpolations in the Hebrew translation, and the Latin always agrees with the Hebrew. But as there is here and there an omission in the Arabic, one is not quite sure that some of the apparent interpolations in the translations are not rather omissions in the Arabic.

Averroes begins his treatise by dividing the sciences and arts into three classes: (1) Theoretical, (2) practical, and (3) auxiliary or logical. The aim of the theoretical is knowledge alone. In the practical, knowledge is for the sake of action. The logical is auxiliary to the other two.

The theoretical sciences are divided into two classes: Universal and Particular. The Universal considers the existent absolutely and its essential attributes (*συμβεβηκότα καθ' αὐτό*). It embraces (1) Dialectic, (2) Sophistic, and (3) Metaphysic. The particular investigates the existent in a particular state. It embraces (1) Physics, which deals with changeable existence, and (2) Mathematics, which deals with quantity abstracted from matter.

The three principal sciences, physics, mathematics and metaphysics, correspond to the three kinds of existences: (1) Existence in matter (physics); (2) things existing in matter, but treated apart from the latter (mathematics); (3) consists of two parts, (*a*) principles existing absolutely not in matter (separate intelligences, spirits of the spheres), and (*b*) Universals common to sensibles and intelligibles, such as unity, plurality, actual, potential, etc. The last two constitute the subject of metaphysics.

Of the universals he says in another place that *as universals*

they have no extra-mental existence. They are not figments of the brain; they are not mere concepts; they do exist objectively in the concrete, but not as universals. The attribute of universality they do not acquire until they are apprehended by the reason and the reason endows them with it. As objectively existing in the concrete they have a creative or productive power,—man produces man, but not as universals. The mistake of the Platonists, according to Averroes, is that they make the universals efficient causes.

Of the four causes, metaphysics deals especially with the formal and final, and with the efficient also *in a sense, i. e.*, not as preceding its effect in time, the sense in which it is used in physics. He has in mind here God as the combination of the three causes mentioned, formal, final, and efficient, but not preceding the universe in time, since motion is eternal. In physics the material and moving causes alone are considered.

Averroes, it will be seen, divides the efficient cause into two kinds,—the *movens* and the *agens*. The former belongs to physics, the second to metaphysics. The first produces motion only, in its effect, the second gives it form in virtue of which motion takes place.

Metaphysics builds upon foundations laid in physics and mathematics. From the former it accepts the idea of an immaterial mover and shows in what way it moves. From mathematical astronomy it accepts the number of movers, *i. e.*, the number of motions in the heavenly spheres, since each motion has a mover.

Metaphysics is thus divided into three parts. Part one deals with sensibles *qua* existents, and all their genera, *i. e.*, the ten categories, and their *συμβεβηκότα καθ' αὐτό*. Part two considers the principles of *οὐσία*, *i. e.*, the separate intelligences, determines the character of their existence, and relates them to their first principle, who is God. It determines his attributes and actions, the relations of other existences to him, and proves that he is the ultimate perfection, first form and first agent. Part three investigates the subjects of the special sciences and refutes the errors of former thinkers. By special sciences he means logic, physics, and mathematics.

Metaphysics occupies itself with this matter because the special sciences do not verify their own principles. This is the province of a universal science. Dialectics cannot do it, though it too is a universal science, because it employs *acknowledged* but not necessarily *true* propositions in its proofs. These may lead to erroneous conclusions. Metaphysics alone uses *true* premises. The third part, however, is not as essential to the science of metaphysics as the first two. (It will appear from this that Averroes does not agree with Herbert Spencer.)

These three parts of metaphysics Averroes divides into five chapters, devoting the first three chapters to the first part of the subject, the sensible *qua* existent, the fourth chapter to the second part, viz., the separate intelligences and God. The fifth chapter which was to have dealt with the third division of the science, viz., the subjects of the special sciences, he seems never to have written, as it is not found either in the Arabic or in the translations. It is a pity that he did not write it, for under the head of 'refutation of errors of former thinkers' he would have given us important historical material concerning the philosophical and theological sects of his day. On several occasions in this treatise he refers to the views of the Mutakallimun, a school of philosophical theologians of those days, and dismisses them with a brief statement, deferring a more complete discussion of their tenets to the fifth chapter, which he seems not to have written.

The purpose and value of metaphysics is the same as that of the other theoretical sciences, viz., the perfection of the rational soul. Metaphysics is more important in this respect because it is the perfection of the other sciences, leading as it does to a knowledge of existing things through their ultimate causes, and verifying the principles of the other sciences.

In the order of teaching, metaphysics comes after physics, since it makes use of certain principles laid down there, hence called metaphysics. In essence, however, it comes before physics, hence its other name, *first philosophy*.

The proofs in this science are of the kind called "signs" or "indications" (*σημεία* of Aristotle), *i. e.*, where we proceed from what is better known *to us* to what is better known *per se*, or,

which is the same thing, from a consequent to its antecedent. The definition of this kind of proof, known as *dalâla* in Arabic, is given by Averroes in his compendium of logic as that in which the middle term is not the *cause* of the conclusion, but the cause of our inferring it, as for example when we prove that the moon is spherical from the crescent shape of its light. The crescent-shaped light is not the cause of its sphericity, but the *consequence*. It is, however, the cause of our *knowing* that the moon is spherical. It is really a kind of induction, as we should call it.

The rest of the first chapter is devoted to definitions of terms used in the science, closely modeled after the fifth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

The second chapter investigates the ten categories, the sense in which the term 'existent' is applied to all of them, neither synonymously nor homonymously, but *per prius et posterius*, or as Aristotle calls it, *πρὸς ἕν, i. e.*, by virtue of their greater or lesser participation in *οὐσία*, or reality.

The nine categories of accident are all dependent upon the first. It is independent of them. The definition is found first in *οὐσία*. In the other categories, if it exists at all, it is secondary.

The essences or universal concepts of things are identical with the things themselves, else knowledge would be impossible. The Platonists, who place the concepts outside of the concrete, either make knowledge impossible, or they require another set of concepts to understand the first, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Neither the form nor the matter is generated or destroyed. Hence it follows that the definition is neither generated nor destroyed.

The universals *as universals* exist in the mind only. The universals *as universals* are not the essences of things. Sensible things are composite. This is proved by the fact that we ask the question, Why? This cannot be asked of the simple. We can only ask, Why is *A*? Why is *B*? The answer to the question, 'why,' is any one of the four causes. Though composite, the concrete things do not contain the elements of which they are made *in actu*, or they would be nothing else but the elements, which is not true.

There is in the compound a something outside of the elements which makes it what it is, and that is the *Form*.

In the definition, the genus corresponds to the matter, the difference to the form.

Matter is that which is *in potentia*. Form is actuality. Geometrical figures, too, have a kind of matter, and hence have a definition.

Things have a two-fold existence, —sensible and intelligible. Intelligible existence is sensible existence as known.

If a definition has parts, the compound alone has a definition. Matter, form, and simple things in general have no definition. Multiplicity is due to matter, unity to form. Though a composite of matter and form, and possessed of a definition containing parts, the concrete is a unit, because the combination of matter and form means the realization of the potential.

Chapter III deals with the *συμβεβηκότα καθ' αὐτό* of the ten categories, such as actual and potential, the one and the many, and the "Contraries," and the finiteness of the four causes, and their relations to one another. Time will not allow me to enter into details, and I must proceed to a very brief sketch of the fourth chapter.

All that preceded has led up to this last chapter, in which Averroes proves from the eternity of motion the existence of eternal immaterial movers existing actually, and a single principle, which is God, existing as the cause of the latter and of the universe.

His proofs are based upon the twelfth book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, except that he develops in detail what Aristotle has left in broad outline. I shall therefore assume Aristotle's scheme as known and say a few words about that which is peculiar to Averroes.

In deducing the number of motions and of movers of the celestial sphere (55), Aristotle prefaced his discussion by disclaiming any dogmatism in the matter, saying that the subject is one of probability, not of certainty, and that he was willing to adopt the conclusions of the astronomers of his day, modifying them as he saw fit, and leaving an open door for later revision consequent upon better knowledge. He thus adopts Callippus's

correction of Eudoxus as to the number of the spheres, which he further revises by the addition of the counteracting spheres.

Averroes, who was also somewhat of an astronomer, takes this hint from Aristotle, ignores the schemes of Eudoxus, Callippus, and Aristotle himself, and adopts *provisionally again*, the system of Ptolemy as the best that was known at the time, saying that the whole matter was still uncertain, owing to the difficulty of the subject and the imperfection of the instruments. He thus adopts the view that there are 38 motions, 5 each in the upper three planets, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars, 5 in the moon, 8 in Mercury, 7 in Venus, and one in the sun, on the hypothesis of an eccentric and not of an epicycle, for that would make two. This is the number (38) if we suppose that the mover responsible for the diurnal motion is the same for all. If a different one is required for each of the 7 planets, there will be 45 movers, or separate intelligences, in all.

It is interesting to note here a suggestion of Averroes, that it is possible that instead of Saturn receiving its motion from the sphere of the fixed stars and the others from Saturn in the traditional order, the sun comes next to the fixed stars, then Saturn and the rest in order. This idea commends itself to him from the observation of the dependence of the other planets upon the motions of the sun in speed and proximity. Would it be too much to call this an adumbration of the heliocentric theory? It would seem to have been original with Averroes, as he does not mention any authority for the statement.

Aristotle does not discuss in detail the functions and characters of the movers of the spheres, or their relations to each other and to the *primum movens*, or God. Of the latter he says that he is pure reason contemplating himself eternally, and that the heavenly bodies move eternally, not because he moves them directly, but because they are prompted by a love and a desire for God.

Averroes supplies the deficiency.

The movers of the spheres are pure intellects, the upper being the cause of the lower. The heavenly bodies are endowed with life and reason, and their motions are a result of conception and desire. They conceive the good, which is their perfection, and

desire to become like unto it. Inasmuch as motion is better than rest, since motion is life, they are constantly in motion. The movers not only move the heavenly bodies, but they give them their forms in virtue of which they are what they are, and hence they are thus *agentes*, in a sense. The forms of the heavenly bodies are what they conceive of the movers above them.

As to the movers, or principles, they are pure intellect and their function is knowing, conceiving. They are immaterial and immovable. Judging from our own intellect, which knows itself, we infer that each of the separate intelligences knows itself. To know itself, it must know that upon which it depends, hence it must know its cause, which is its perfection, *i. e.*, the mover next above it, though not in the same way in which the latter knows itself, or they would be identical. The cause, however, does not know its effect, which is inferior to it, hence the last mover, or God, having no cause higher than himself and not knowing the lower movers, knows himself only.

If Averroes stopped here he would be denying all knowledge in God of things below, and hence all Providence. He is not ready to do either. It is absurd, he says, that anything should emanate from a knower *qua* knower without the latter knowing it, and an observation of nature is all that is needed to recognize Providence. He therefore compromises on his previous deductions and argues again from the human mind to prove that the upper intelligences do have a knowledge of the lower. Since our intellect, he says, is nothing more than a conception of the order and method of this world and its parts in reference to its causes, proximate and remote, the essence of the intellect producing ours (one of the movers of the lunar sphere) cannot be different, except that it comprehends the same thing in a superior manner. The same holds true of the intelligence next above this, and so on to the first intelligence, or God. It follows then that God knows the same things as we know, but in a superior manner. These two deductions are both true. 'God's knowledge of himself is identical with his knowledge of the Universe. But *his* knowledge is not *our* knowledge.

Upon this compromise Averroes bases his theodicy. God is

not responsible for evil, for evil is a concomitant of matter, and *that* God does not know. *Not* to know some things is better than to know them, and argues no defect or imperfection, rather the contrary. To make God know the particular and save him from responsibility for evil by saying that good and evil are only in relation to us, that to God they do not exist, is a dangerous doctrine.

It would seem as if all great men who do epoch-making work require as a stimulus, in addition to the cause of truth, an embodiment of a deviation from it in the shape of a personal opponent against whom they may sharpen their wit, thus rising to greater heights than the smaller men about them. Aristotle had his Plato, Abelard his William of Champeaux, Kant his Wolff, and Averroes his Avicenna. He finds no less than eight occasions in this little book to signify his disagreement with the latter, and in one instance declares that Avicenna can never be relied upon when he goes a-hunting after original views.

The Mutakallimun, or Arabian Scholastics, were another bug-bear to his rigid Aristotelianism, and he does not treat them with great gentleness. "They do not carry on their discussion," he says, "by means of syllogisms composed of two premises, nor do they make use of essential predicates." This condemnation of their unphilosophical, because unlogical, method is only equalled by another in which he says of them: "they do not hold these views (such as the denial of causation and the like) because they are led to them by investigation, but in order to verify by their means opinions about which their minds are made up in advance, and refute principles opposed to them." Maimonides speaks of them almost in the same words. We should have had more information about their system if Averroes had written the fifth chapter which he promises on the subjects of the special sciences.

Though the reputation of Averroes for orthodoxy did not rank high, still he takes the opportunity to quote the Koran in a few instances in confirmation of his philosophical views, such as the unity of God, his knowledge of things in the world, and the importance of knowing the human mind before studying to understand the nature of God.

Many and varied have been the opinions regarding Averroes as a commentator and exponent of Aristotle. He was once glorified by Jews and Christians alike as *the* commentator *par excellence*. He was as much depreciated later in the time of the Renaissance, and hated by a man like Petrarch with almost a passionate hatred. Then he was simply ignored and forgotten. In Solomon Munk he has found a defender who thinks we may still consult him with profit at the present day. It will be near the truth, I think, if we recognize that for his day he *was* the best exponent of Aristotle, better than any of his predecessors ; that considering he was twice removed from the original text, the Syriac translations having stood between the Greek and the Arabic, he was as efficient and penetrating a commentator as can be imagined ; and while there is no need of consulting Averroes now when we have Aristotle's text and the Greek commentators, and Bonitz's index and the other works of Bonitz, and Trendelenburg, and Waitz, and Zeller, and others, we may study him as one of the sources of mediæval philosophy, who will help us to understand men like Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, William Occam among the scholastics, and Gersonides, Falaquera, and Caspi among the Jewish philosophers of the later middle age.

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