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Averroes, a witness to truth (1126-1198)

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Introduction

Born in Cordoba, Abū l-Walīd Muhammad Ibn ‘Ahmad Ibn Rušd or Averroes (1126-1198) was a physician, judge and philosopher. His grandfather was a chief judge. Averroes served the Almohad caliph Abu Ya‘qub Yusuf, who imposed a religious rigour that led to Averroes being exiled for a time to the city of Lucena. At that time, philosophy had not acquired a dominant intellectual position in the Andalusian cities. Averroes fought to promote Greek philosophy (the *falsafa*) in the Arab-Muslim world by showing that this philosophy, called “of the Ancients”, is fully justified by the scriptural message carried by Islam. In this struggle, logic takes a fundamental place. Averroes’ commentaries take three distinct forms: abridged versions containing the essential messages of the commented work, medium-length commentaries which resolve the enigmas left on reading the particular work, and finally the long commentaries, which move on out from the existing commentaries to plot new interpretative paths.

The three methods: rhetoric, dialectics, demonstration

Averroes finds in the Quran verse: “Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation; and reason with them in the better way”¹, a way of spotlighting the three methods

by which knowledge is deployed: “wisdom” refers to demonstration; “fair exhortation” is a form of rhetorical persuasion and “reason” is dialectical in nature.

Rhetorical assent is that given by a general public which is content with rudimentary reasoning, often elliptical and mainly false, without seeking all the thought-through mediations which justify such assent. Such reasoning directly affects the way people live together and conduct the business of the city.

Dialectical assent rests on widely held premises. This too involves sticking to what is commonly accepted. But the dialectics assumes two aspects: one which opens the way to science, that is arguing to arrive at “the best way”, and the other which is polemical and where disputation is sought for its own sake. For Averroes, theologians have a passion for ambiguity and rush into dialectics with disputation as their sole purpose.

Assent to demonstration is the real place where knowledge is produced. What we have here is the theoretical syllogism, the one that relates to the knowledge which leads to it. It includes at least one universal proposition and it is this that gives it its demonstrative character. This is why Averroes considers it as epistemically more constraining than the legal syllogism which is based on the assimilation of one legal case to an-

¹ Quran, 16, 125, cited in § 17, Averroes, *Decisive Treatise* (English translation: <https://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Online/texts/316/ibn-Rushd.%20DecisiveTreatise.pdf>)

other legal case: here one does not rise to the universal. If the analogical or legal syllogism is accepted by all, *a fortiori* the same should hold also for the one that offers a greater guarantee of validity, namely the theoretical syllogism. No matter, adds Averroes, if it was discovered and practised by non-co-religionists, the Greeks in this case: what matters is not the origin of knowledge but its validity.

Wisdom, philosophy, religion: truth and validity

For Averroes, the wisdom of which the Quran speaks refers to the highest degree of knowledge and this knowledge is the demonstrative knowledge in which Aristotle excelled. This man “deserves to be called divine rather than human, and that is why the ancients called him divine [...] We address endless praise to him who predestined this man (Aristotle) to perfection, and who placed him at the highest degree of human excellence, to which no man in any century has been able to attain; it is to him that God alluded, saying: ‘This superiority, God grants it to whomsoever he wills’.”²

As we can see, the reference to Aristotle is invested with a strong religious charge and his philosophy is a “wisdom” of the type that the Quran recommends us to seek. This notion of wisdom is strategic insofar as it allows Averroes to place philosophical practice under this label. As the word “philosophy” does not exist in the sacred texts of Islam, it is important to equate the notion of philosophy with that of wisdom, which is very present in the scriptural texts. It is under the guise of wisdom that the study of philosophy is legitimized in this world largely structured by scriptural texts. With “wise” being one of the ninety-nine names of God, it is a good banner to work under. Given that philosophy can be presented as a rival system to religion, and a pagan system to boot, labelling it as “wisdom” was important in order to be able to practice it. This Averroes does, placing in the title of his *Decisive Treatise* the word “wisdom” (*al-hikmah*) and not “philosophy”, whereas it is actually of the latter that the body of the text treats.

Among the reasons for worshipping God, there is, according to Averroes, the way in which God operates in nature. It is the Aristotle’s physics that makes it possible to apprehend such operations. Various Quranic passages are cited by the philosopher to support this idea. “So learn a lesson, O ye who have eyes” (Quran, 59, 2) indicates that man must make use of his rational capacities, in particular his ability to use syllogisms.

The following verse: “Have they not considered the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and what things Allah hath created” (Quran 7, 185) justifies the study of physics and metaphysics.³ This verse is also cited in *Exposition of the Methods of Proof Concerning the Beliefs of the Community*, as a prerequisite for knowing God: “It is incumbent on the one who really wants to know God to know the substances of things, in order to apprehend the true creation through beings as a whole, because the one who knows not the reality of things knows not the reality of creation.”⁴

On the compatibility of secular knowledge derived from scientific demonstration with scriptural knowledge relating to truth, three cases arise according to Averroes:

- either (i) nothing is said in the sacred text about an existing thing, and then everything is allowed in initiating a (profane) demonstration about it; or
- (ii) the sacred text agrees with what the demonstration says and then there is nothing to say about it either; or
- (iii) a ‘divergence’ exists between the two legacies, then there is room for an interpretation, which can be undertaken only by those who are the most capable, that is to say those who are familiar with the demonstration.

In this way Averroes seeks to avoid the interpretations of the theologian-politicians who follow the rigorism of the Almo-had dynasty, casting anathemas on the practice of philosophy practice or on other religions. Let us not forget here that the Jewish philosopher and rabbi Maimonides had to flee Andalusia with his whole family at the very time when Averroes was writing. On the side of knowledge, Averroes points to the methodological weaknesses of theologians who conceive of creation as being *ex nihilo*, made from nothing. He points out that nowhere in the Quran does it say that God exists with the void, creating the world out of nothing: “It is not said in fact in religion (*al char*) that God was ever with pure void, this is nowhere stated.”⁵ On the other hand, many verses indicate something already exists prior to the formation of the world: “And He it is Who created the heavens and the earth in six days – and His Throne was upon the water” (Quran 11, 7). This passage underlines by its use of the past tense, that “something existed prior to existence as we know it today.”⁶ Theologians, with their passion for ambiguity, sow confusion

² Preface to the *Physics*, quoted by E. Renan, *Averroès et l’averroïsme*, in *Œuvres complètes*, Calmann-Lévy, 1852 (1st ed.), re-ed. 1949, Paris, p. 60.

³ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, op.cit., § 3.

⁴ *Exposition of the Methods of Proof Concerning the Beliefs of the Community*, French text in Averroes, *Islam et la Raison*, GF, Paris, 2000, translated from Arabic into French by Marc Geoffroy, § 75, p. 112.

⁵ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, op. cit., § 33.

⁶ *Ibidem*

among the greatest number, going as far as destabilizing the faith: "To expose any of these interpretations to someone who is unable to apprehend them – in particular the demonstrative interpretations, because of the distance which separates these from common knowledge – leads both the one to whom it is exposed and the one who exposes them to infidelity."⁷ Whoever "exposes them" risks forgetting that "Religions (*al charâ'i*) aim at the education of all", whereas philosophy tends "to make happiness known among reasonable people."⁸ The learned elite is a single society with the common mass, and for this reason needs to take into account the religious habits which make the social bond: "If this elite declares its doubt as to the tenets of the religion in which it was brought up and if it gives an interpretation that deviates from and contradicts what the prophets teach – prayers of God on them! – then it is with good reason that the common people accuse it of infidelity, and inflict on it a punishment provided for by the religion in which it grew up."⁹

It is not appropriate to tear society apart, nor to divide truth into religious truth relating to the sacred sciences, and into philosophical truth, relating to secular sciences: truth does not contradict itself, it is under a regime of consistency. There is a misconception and a controversy over the concept of "double truth" that the Latin Middle Ages attributed to Averroes, under the effect of the condemnation of Averroes' theses by Bishop Tempier. Averroes never supported the idea that there were, side by side so to speak, a truth of faith and a truth of reason or philosophical truth. Truth is one; even if there can be multiple access paths to this truth. Truth always testifies for itself "So now I ask the brethren who will read this book to write down their questions, for perhaps through this we will find the truth, if I have not yet found it. And if I have found it, as I would like to imagine, their questions will only make it clearer. Indeed, as Aristotle says, the truth agrees with itself and is its own witness."¹⁰

Does man think?

The other thesis lent to Averroes and condemned by Bishop Tempier is that Averroes purportedly maintained that man did not think. What Averroes actually says is that the intellect is one, that it always thinks and that it thinks by itself.

Man does not always think, he is distracted by his dreams, he sometimes sleeps, he has an imagination that individualizes him. It is only at rare moments that man succeeds in hoisting himself to this intellect which is of divine nature. Most of the time, he thinks, but does not intellect. "The intellect in us" (*al 'aql minna*) differs from the constantly active intellect in that it does not always think. Averroes goes so far as to trace a strict equality between way both God and man grasp things intellectually, an equality which is a true condition for a sharing of temporality between men and God: "This is why we consider that, if the pleasure that God knows in grasping his own essence is equal to the pleasure that we find ourselves at the moment that our intellect grasps its own essence, that is to say at the moment when it strips itself of its power, what exists for us for a certain time exists for God eternally."¹¹

For man, the intellect exists "only for a certain time." This does not mean that man does not think as affirmed in Tempier's condemnation of 1277. The notion of "thought" (*fikr*), distinct from that of intellect, is indeed a human activity. It is the rational imaginative power, which is connected with the intellect, but which is not the intellect in its entirety. In human beings, the ability to grasp intentions from the perception of the external senses is a form of internal sense different from the other two internal senses: imagination and memory. The cogitative power, the *fikr* is a form of reason that only human beings possess. It contributes to the development of a rational soul without being strictly speaking an intellectual power.

The intellect always thinks, and man, to the extent of his effort, does or does not join it. It is not man who is the source of the intellect, but the latter invests man to the extent of his effort. This thesis, condemned in the form "man does not think", was opposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, for whom the intellect is one of the powers of the human soul: "The agent intellect is not a separate substance but something of the soul."¹² For Averroes, intellect operates in man, for Thomas, man is mainly intellect¹³. Thus, the soul has an action of its own, it does not come from elsewhere. But because it has this action of its own, it is also limited and cannot attain the vision of God. For Averroes on the other hand, the soul, not having this limit, because it does not have and is not in its

7 Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*. French translation: *Discours décisif*, GF, Paris, 1996, traduit de l'arabe par Marc Geoffroy, p. 157.

8 Averroes, *Inconsistency of inconsistency*, French translation: *Incohérence de l'incohérence*, Editions Bouyguès, Beirut, 1992 (3rd ed.), p. 582.

9 Ibidem

10 Averroes, *Long commentary on De anima*, Book III, in *L'intelligence et la pensée. Sur le De Anima*, presentation, translation into French and notes by Alain de Libera, GF, Paris, 1999, p. 69.

11 Long commentary on the Lambda book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1072 and following.

12 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles II*, English translation: https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Contra_Gentiles,_FN.pdf

13 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's de Anima*, English translation <https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DeAnima.htm>: French translation as *Commentaire du traité de l'âme d'Aristote*, translated by Jean-Marie Vernier, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 1999, p. 340.

own right the intellect, there is no obstacle in principle to sharing with God, even if this is only at rare moments (this is the commentary he gives to Aristotle's passage in the *Lambda metaphysics*, 1072a26 and following¹⁴), a divine thought which reveals itself as the supreme beatitude.

Human action and care

It would therefore be totally wrong to attribute to Averroes the idea that man does not think, still less to associate him with the thesis of *fatum mahometanum*, that is to say of a human destiny placed under a divine cloche, in which deliberation has no part. In reality, according to Averroes, we are constantly pushing away a possible evil, and taking steps with a view to acquiring goodness. Of course, you have to deal with external causes, that is one has to concede something to the divine decree. Already Aristotle, in the famous passage on contingent futures in his treatise *Interpretation*, denounced the necessitarian theses according to which man has no part in the domain of the possible. According to the necessitarians, our life is too short to be able to say that we achieve anything on our own. Averroes takes up this discussion of Aristotle when he comments on this text, using an *reductio ad absurdum*: "If a man, deliberating on an event, decided that it would happen, for example, in ten thousand years and adopted among the various causes those which affirm its occurrence and its generation during this long period (if a man lived it) and if another, during this very period, deliberated to prevent the arrival of this event and considered the various causes which prevent it from happening, the act of each of them would be vain and absurd and the deliberation would be foreclosed and meaningless."¹⁵ Is this a simple commentary on Aristotle's text or are these Averroes' own theses?

By comparing this passage with another passage taken from the *Exposition of the Methods of Proof Concerning the Beliefs of the Community*, we can better understand Averroes' conception of action. To tackle the difficult question of man's freedom in his actions, Averroes begins by setting out the arguments for and against the free choice of his actions. "In the Quran," he tells us, "there are many verses stating generally that everything happens according to a decree (*bi qadar*) and that man is constrained (*majbûr*) in his acts.

But there are also many verses indicating that man acquires something by his acting and that he is not forced to act in the way he does."¹⁶ These two paths must be taken into account: "We say: it appears that the intention of revelation is not to dissociate these two beliefs, but to bring them together in a middle position which constitutes the truth in the matter."¹⁷ There is our will and there are the external causes, and there is our will in a situation to act, in context, it is not an empty will: "Our will is held by external things and linked to them. And it is to this that the divine statement alludes: 'Angels are attached to man's footsteps; in front of him and behind him: they hold him, by order of God'."¹⁸

This concern for human action is illustrated in the medical field. How does one maintain one's health? What should one eat? Averroes issued medical opinions, so-called "*fatwas*", this word meaning expert opinion, and these opinions were valued in his time as Ibn Farhûn attests: "Ibn Rushd had an inclination for the science of the ancients; he was master of it unlike the people of his time, and his *fatwas* in medicine were prized as its *fatwas* in *fiqh*, with the right amount of grammar, literature and wisdom."¹⁹ In these opinions, he indicated the role of the doctor who, by his know-how, is able to "derive" (*istanbata*) what best suits a particular organism. Since healing and things relating to health in general involve both nature and technique, since we are in a sort of middle ground, it behoves the physician to respect the natural purpose of everything while administering the remedy: that which is appropriate at a given moment for a particular organism. Ignoring the order and arrangement of the organs, not taking into account the purpose of nature in the way of deriving the means of healing can only give rise at best to accidental cures and, in the worst of cases, which are however the majority, to the administration of a remedy worse than the malady.

Averroes was very sensitive to medical errors and to self-medication: he was constantly criticizing these two situations. The power of persuasion, and therefore rhetorical power, can help to bring about these two situations. It then becomes difficult to combat them. This happens when "someone advises someone else to take a medicine because so-and-so has taken it for profit; he thus persuades him by example, or when he says to him: "you have this or that malady". This is the case for everything that relates to conversation between people."²⁰

14 Averroes, *Long commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, Lam-Lambda Book*, English translation by Charles Genequand, as *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics*, Brill, Leiden 1984: <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/books/ir-meta.pdf>, p. 148 ff.

15 Averroes, *Middle Commentary on the De Interpretatione*, introduction, translation into French and notes by Ali Benmakhlouf and Stéphane Diebler, Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 2000, p. 106. English translation by Charles Butterworth: Princeton University Press, 1983. Quote in text is from French version.

16 *Exposition of the Methods of Proof Concerning the Beliefs of the Community*, French translation in: *L'islam et la raison*, op. cit., § 284, p. 131.

17 Op. cit., § 298, p. 136.

18 Ibid. and Quran, 13, 11.

19 Ibn farhûn: *al dîbâj al madhab fî ma'rîfati a'yân ulamâ' al madhab*, Cairo, 1351 AH [1973], p. 284.

20 Averroès, *Abrégé de rhétorique*, in *Averroès Three short commentaries on Aristotle's "Topics", "Rhetorics" and "Poetics"*, edited and translated by Charles E. Butterworth, Albany State University of New York Press, 1977, § 2, p. 169).

In medicine, as in politics, choice, deliberation, and taking the context into account reveal themselves to be of major importance. Neither Averroes nor his predecessors among the Arab philosophers had access to Aristotle's *Politics*. But, like other Arab philosophers, he had Plato's *Republic*, to which he devotes a middle commentary. This text of Plato is analysed according to an Aristotelian method. Thus politics is characterized as a practical science which differs from the speculative sciences in both object and purpose. The object of politics resides in the things of the will, the realization of which is incumbent upon us, the principle of these voluntary things being choice, while the principle of physics is nature, and that of metaphysics is God. By its purpose, politics aims at action alone, while the theoretical sciences aim at knowledge alone. By aiming for action alone, politics is an art takes into account the way habits are rooted in the soul and how they are coordinated to achieve the best resulting action. And at the same time as commenting on Plato, Averroes quotes the Eastern dynasties and the Andalusian caliphates. He compares the model city and the real cities, establishes correspondences between Plato's philosopher-king and the imam, literally the one who leads prayer, and by way of extension, the guide in a Muslim city. The imam is, for Averroes, the one we follow by virtue of the perfections that he realizes in himself.²¹ Averroes constructs a model of the philosopher-imam,

a model which certainly does not exist in reality, but which serves as a standard of measurement for understanding and acting. After describing the conditions for the emergence of a model city ruled by virtuous men, he recognizes that the existence of such men is a rarity, and this is the "reason why it is difficult for such a city to come into existence."²²

Conclusion

Whether in the practical field of action or in the theoretical field of knowledge, Averroes deploys a rigour and technicity of statement which remain a source of pleasure to philosophers today. The presence of his philosophy in the Latin world, from the beginning of the 13th century, upended ways of relating to thought, to truth, to the scriptural text, and to the status of secular knowledge in societies where the religious model dominates. Not wishing at any time to make philosophy a docile servant of theology, Averroes drew the wrath of both his own and of Christian communities. Maimonides, who lacked access to his works until very late and only after already completing his *Guide for the Perplexed*, pays homage to him. With him he shares the idea that the salvation so sought after by religions passes through the knowledge and the tools that Aristotle put in place, among them the syllogism, or reasoning, under its triple facets of rhetoric, dialectics and demonstration.

²¹ *Medium Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Edited and translated by E.I.J. Rosenthal, Cambridge University Press, 1969 (3rd ed.), p. 177.

²² *Ibid.* p. 180.

CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

VUB Crosstalks and Moussem set up a lecture series on critical thinking within Islam. In their ideas about Islamic civilisation both Muslim extremists and Islamophobes go back to an originally 'pure' Islam, which was supposedly born 1400 years ago, but in reality did not really exist. Islam was never one block, one movement. On the contrary, it has always been a very diverse culture, strengthened by acculturation and by coming in contact with the Greek, Persian, Indian, African culture etc. A history that is also full of dissidence, heresy and rebellion. These sects and alternative theological currents are at the root of a fascinating culture of debate. Philosophers from the golden age of Islam such as Al Farabi, Averroës, Avicenna, Abu Al Alaa Al Ma'ari Abu Bakr Al Razi, Omar Khayyam, Abu Hayyan Al Tawhidi... are founders of a culture based on reason and science. In today's complex world, attention to these forgotten thinkers is more than necessary.

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