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Differentiating Averroes' Accounts of the Metaphysics of Human Epistemology in his Middle and Long Commentaries on Aristotle's De Anima

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*Differentiating Averroes' Accounts of the Metaphysics of Human Epistemology in his Middle
and Long Commentaries on Aristotle's De Anima*

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Contents

Introduction	2
The Dispute on Chronology and its Implications	3
Averroes Position in The Long Commentary	4
Averroes Position in the Middle Commentary	6
The Middle and Long Commentaries Present Differing Accounts	7
The Differences Between the Middle and Long Commentaries Are Substantive	8
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	11

Introduction

Averroes discusses the metaphysics of human epistemology extensively.¹ Several of his works, most prominently his three commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima*, attempt to explain how finite, particular minds interact with universal, eternal intelligibles.² These three commentaries are named (according their lengths): the *Short Commentary*, the *Middle Commentary*, and the *Long Commentary*. Current scholarship focuses on the two longer commentaries, likely because the *Short Commentary* is too short to provide ground for discussion and does not articulate Averroes' mature position on the metaphysics of human epistemology. There is no consensus as to which of the two longer commentaries presents Averroes' final articulation of the metaphysics of human epistemology.³ Those who maintain that Averroes wrote the *Middle Commentary* last tend to minimize the differences between the two accounts.⁴ This paper does not take a position on the chronology of Averroes' works. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that, even if Averroes wrote the *Middle Commentary* last, the accounts of the metaphysics of human epistemology in the *Middle* and *Long* commentaries differ substantively.

¹ A version of this paper first appeared in *Dialogue* Vol. 59, No. 2-3, pages 269-273.

² Richard Taylor, "Averroes: Religious Dialectic and Aristotelian Philosophical Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190.

³ Richard Taylor, *Averroes*, 190-192; Alfred Ivry, "Averroes' Middle and Long Commentaries on the 'De anima'," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy: A Historical Journal* 5, no. 1 (1995).

⁴ Alfred Ivry, introduction to *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Alfred Ivry (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), xvii.

The Dispute on Chronology and its Implications

Most scholars who publish on Averroes' metaphysics of epistemology either assume or argue that the *Middle Commentary* was written before the *Long Commentary* and that these accounts differ substantively.⁵ However, one of the leading scholars in the field, Alfred Ivry, compellingly argues that textual evidence indicates the *Middle Commentary* was composed after the *Long Commentary*.⁶ In the introduction to his translation of the *Middle Commentary*, Ivry describes the *Middle Commentary* as an overview, written for lay-people, where Averroes simplifies the concepts he expounds upon more fully in the *Long Commentary*.⁷ Ivry does not deny that the *Middle* and *Long* commentaries contain differences, but he minimizes their significance.⁸ He writes: "In the *Middle Commentary*, Averroes discreetly shows in various ways that he is aware of his own social and political context. He has presumably wrestled the text to the ground to his own satisfaction, and is now prepared to present it to a wider audience, in an abridged and more 'politically correct' format."⁹ Ivry explains that when he mentions social and political pressure he is suggesting that Averroes sought to accommodate to Islamic conservatism when he wrote the *Middle Commentary*.¹⁰ The question is, Are the differences between the *Middle* and *Long*

⁵ Taylor, *Averroes*, 190-192; Deborah Black, "Conjunction and the Identity of the Knower and Known in Averroes," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1999), accessed October 7, 2016, http://rx9vh3hy4r.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info%3Aasid%2Fsummon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info%3Aofi%2Ffmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Ajournal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=Conjunction+and+the+identity+of+knower+and+known+in+Averroes&rft.jtitle=AMERICAN+CATHOLIC+PHILOSOPHICAL+QUARTERLY&rft.au=Black%2C+DL&rft.date=1999&rft.pub=AMERICAN+CATHOLIC+PHILOSOPHICAL+ASSOC&rft.issn=1051-3558&rft.eissn=2153-8441&rft.volume=73&rft.issue=1&rft.spage=159&rft.epage=184&rft.externalDBID=n%2Fa&rft.externalDocID=000081438700007.

⁶ Ivry, *Averroes' Middle and Long Commentaries*.

⁷ Ivry, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's*, xvii.

⁸ Ivry, *Middle Commentary*, xvii.

⁹ Ivry, *Averroes' Middle and Long Commentaries*, 86.

¹⁰ Ivry, *Middle Commentary*, xxvi.

commentaries substantive, or are they explained by Ivry's theory of abridgement, simplification, and political and religious correctness? This question will be answered by surveying each account individually and comparing the two accounts in light of their political and religious context.

Averroes Position in the Long Commentary

Two concerns drive Averroes' discussion of the metaphysics of human epistemology in the *Long Commentary on De Anima*: 1) the nature of the theoretical intelligibles and 2) the nature of the material intellect.¹¹ These two concerns play out in three questions: a) Are the intelligibles generable and corruptible or eternal?, b) How can the material intellect be one while numerous people actualize intelligibles in it?, and c) If the material intellect is neither prime matter nor form, what is its nature?¹² He frames this discussion by describing the material intellect as: "That which is potentially all intentions . . . of the universal material forms, but it is not any of the beings in act before it itself intellects [any of them]."¹³ It is important to note that this description does not include any mention of the soul.

Averroes explores two possibilities regarding the relationship between human minds and the material intellect. The first is that each particular person possesses his own material intellect. Averroes rejects this possibility because, among other things, this would imply that no two people can grasp the same truth.¹⁴ The intelligibles received by two different individuals could be related, but could not actually be identical. However, it is apparent that, when two people

¹¹ Taylor, *Averroes*, 192.

¹² Ibn Rushd, "Long Commentary on the Soul: Book III," in *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Jon McGinnis and David Reisman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 342.

¹³ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 335-336.

¹⁴ Taylor, *Averroes*, 192.

grasp a truth (for example, $2 + 2 = 4$), they are grasping the same truth, not just similar truths. Thus, it does not seem possible that the material intellect is particular to each individual.

The second possibility is that the material intellect is universal for all intellecting beings. Averroes reasons that, if all humans are linked to the same material intellect, then, if one person actualizes an intelligible, all persons, due to their connection with the same material intellect, would also receive this intelligible. Because it is clear that one person can grasp an intelligible without all other people grasping that intelligible, Averroes rejects the possibility that there is one material intellect conjoined to all humans.¹⁵

Averroes resolves these difficulties by positing that: “Obviously a man does not actually intellect except because of the conjunction of the actually intelligible with him.”¹⁶ This actual intelligible must be one matter-form (he uses these terms analogously) unit. Thus, the conjunction of a person with this actual intelligible can occur either through the aspect of this actual intelligible which is like matter (the material intellect)—a possibility which he has already ruled out through the *reductio ad absurdum* arguments outlined above—or through the aspect which is like form, the imagined intentions. The imagined intentions are particular to each individual, but can be actualized by the Active Intellect, and made to be “actual movers”¹⁷ of the material intellect. Throughout the *Long Commentary* Averroes portrays the Active Intellect as independent and separate from the particular human. This reading is supported by the translator’s decision to capitalize the term, “Active Intellect” in the *Long Commentary*.

¹⁵ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 344.

¹⁶ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 345.

¹⁷ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 346.

Thus, Averroes answers the three questions above: a) The actual intelligibles are generable and corruptible only to the extent they are related to the imagined intentions.¹⁸ b) The material intellect can be one while numerous people actualize intelligibles in it because they are not conjoined to these actual intelligibles through the material intellect, but rather through the imagined intentions.¹⁹ c) The material intellect is not form, matter, or the union of the two, but is rather a “fourth genus” whose nature is receptivity.²⁰

Averroes Position in the Middle Commentary

Averroes begins his discussion by comparing the views of previous commentators and concluding that the material intellect is made up of “of the disposition found in us and of an intellect conjoined to this disposition. As conjoined to the disposition, it is a disposed intellect, not an intellect in act; though, as not conjoined to this disposition, it is an intellect in act; while, in itself, this intellect is the Agent Intellect.”²¹ In addition to this receptive capacity, the soul also possesses the capability to produce intelligibles. This is the capacity which is called “agent.”²² Throughout *The Middle Commentary*, Averroes compares the intellect and its reception of intelligibles to sense perception. He argues that the rational faculty, unlike the sensory faculties, remains unmixed with that which it receives.²³ The Agent Intellect, according to this account,

¹⁸ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 343.

¹⁹ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 349.

²⁰ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 348.

²¹ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Trans. Alfred Ivry (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2001), 111.

²² Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 112.

²³ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 113.

intellects intelligibles when conjoined with humans and intellects itself when not conjoined to humans.²⁴

The Middle and Long Commentaries Present Differing Accounts

The differences between the *Long* and *Middle* commentaries on *De Anima* can be seen in two passages. The *Long Commentary* reads:

Therefore, to say of the child that he potentially intellects can be understood in two ways: one of which is because the imagined forms that are in him are potentially intelligible, whereas the second is because the material intellect that naturally receives the intelligible of these imagined forms is a potential recipient and potentially conjoined with us.²⁵

Here, while the imagined intentions are associated with a particular person, their being made actually intelligible is expressed passively because, as expressed more explicitly elsewhere in the *Long Commentary*, they are only made actually intelligible by an independent (separate from individual persons) Active Intellect.²⁶ Additionally, the material intellect is only potentially, not necessarily, conjoined to the particular human.

A key passage in *The Middle Commentary* reads: “It is clear that two functions exist in our soul, one of which is the producing of intelligibles and the other is the receiving of them. By virtue of producing intelligibles, it is called agent, while, by virtue of receiving them, it is called passive, though in itself it is one thing.”²⁷

These two passages show that Averroes describes both the active and potential intellects differently in his two accounts. In the *Long Commentary* he ascribes the ability to make

²⁴ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 117.

²⁵ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 345.

²⁶ Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary*, 346.

²⁷ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 112.

imagined intentions actual intelligibles to a power separate from the particular human, while he locates this power within the soul in the *Middle Commentary*.

The contrast is more pronounced with respect to the material intellect. In the *Long Commentary* Averroes speaks of the material intellect as only potentially conjoined to an individual. He dedicates a major portion of his argument to establishing that the material intellect is a fourth genus, separate from the particular mind and one for all of humanity, whose nature is receptivity. But in the *Middle Commentary* Averroes locates the receptive capacity within the particular soul, and rejects the possibility of a substance whose nature is receptivity. He writes: “This view [of the other commentators] also entails an absurd position: that there should be a separate substance, the existence of which occurs in disposition and potentiality.”²⁸ To avoid this absurdity he posits that the material intellect only exists as conjoined to a human.²⁹

There are differences in Averroes’ two accounts, not just in individual passages, but also in argumentative thrusts. Are these differences substantive or only a result of a shift in how Averroes presents his ideas?

The Differences Between the Middle and Long Commentaries Are Substantive

While Ivry’s theories of abridgement and simplification are somewhat plausible (the *Middle Commentary* is both shorter and simpler), they cannot explain away the directly conflicting argumentative thrusts of the two works. Moreover, if, as Ivry argues,³⁰ Averroes was influenced by a desire to be politically and religiously correct between writing the *Middle* and *Long* commentaries, he would not have tweaked his account in the way he did.

²⁸ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 111.

²⁹ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, 111.

³⁰ Ivry, *Middle Commentary*, xxvi.

If the *Long Commentary* were composed before the *Middle Commentary*, then the drift of Averroes' thought would have been against, rather than in accord, with political and religious pressure. The religious and political pressure Averroes experienced is epitomized in Averroes' interaction with al-Ghazali, a thinker whom he devoted a whole work to refuting.³¹ One of the major emphasis of al-Ghazali's religiously conservative thought is a focus on the doctrine of divine power and its ensuing total causality.³² If Averroes were going to come more in line with this pressure, he would have moved from a position which emphasized particular human involvement in the epistemological process in the *Long Commentary* to one which emphasized divine causality in the *Middle Commentary*. Rather, if Ivry's chronology is correct, the exact opposite is the case. He moves from emphasizing the role of intellects which transcend the particular human in the *Long Commentary* to a portrayal which endows humans with more power and involvement in the epistemological process in the *Middle Commentary*. This move is against, rather than in accord with, political and religious pressure, so it seems only a genuine conceptual change would lead Averroes to change his portrayal in this way.

Conclusion

Most scholars see real differences between Averroes' two main treatments of the metaphysics of human epistemology. Ivry's understanding of the order in which Averroes wrote his commentaries on *De Anima* leads him to attempt to explain away the differences between the *Middle* and *Long* commentaries. He fails in this attempt because his arguments from abridgement and simplification are inadequate, and his argument from political and religious pressure

³¹ Ibn-Rushd. "The Incoherence of the Incoherence: First Discussion," in *Classical Arabic Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Jon McGinnis and David Reisman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 295-308.

³² Michael Marmura, "Al-Ghazali," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 137-154.

highlights, rather than minimizes, the differences between the *Middle* and *Long* commentaries.

The differences between the two accounts are substantive, not superficial.

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