Some Remarks on Averroes’ *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* Book Alpha Meizon

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**Abstract:** Averroes, considered to be the greatest Aristotelian commentator in the Middle Ages, has written three different types of commentary on almost all the works of this great philosopher: short, middle and long. These commentaries have been translated into Latin and Hebrew in the early period, and profoundly influenced both Medieval Europe and Jewish thought for centuries. The effect of Averroes in the West was to spread the whole of Europe under the name of Latin Averroism. The text what you have consists of some remarks about the translation of the commentary on the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’, the second book of Averroes’ *Tafsîr Mâ Ba’d at-Tabî’a*.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Averroes, Metaphysics, Long Commentary, the Book Alpha Meizon, linguistical aporias, conception.
Introduction

This paper aims at explaining about the commentary on the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’, the second (in original Greek, first) book of Averroes’ Long Commentary on the Metaphysics.1 The only Arabic manuscript of the work is found in the Leiden University Library.2 The Arabic text of the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’ used by Averroes has been translated by Naṣīf b. Yumn (second half of the tenth century). This book begins from A.5, 987a6, that is, at the end of Section 5. Neither does the translation of the first five sections of this book nor the commentaries written on them find. Besides, there are no missing parts of the great commentary in the Latin and Hebrew translations. Walzer held that the beginning of the Book Alpha Meizon was no longer available in twelfth-century Spain.3 According to Bertolacci, Naṣīf’s translation was to complete probably missing in Ustāt’s translation.4 When Ibn al-Nadīm narrated the men who translated philosophical works into Arabic, he did not mention Naṣīf.5

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1 Averroes, Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1990). Expressions in the work such as [T] and [C] that are located in the translation are made up of the first letters of the Latin terms ‘Textus’ and ‘Commentus’, and are set by Maurice Bouyges. The first of them points to the Arabic text of Metaphysics and the latter to Averroes’ comments. It was used symbols like [a], [b], [c] and so on for Averroes’ citation to Aristotle, and [A] to refer to the relevant part of the ‘Book Alpha Meizon’. Expression [987a...], have been sent to numbering in the text of Aristotle made by Immanuel Bekker.

2 MS Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Or. 2074. For presentation to MSS, see Maurice Bouyges, “Notice”, Averroes, Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, xxvii ff.


1. Averroes’ *Tafsīr* and the Book Alpha Meizon

Arabic *Metaphysics* (ما بعد الطبيعة) begins with the Book Alpha Elatton (مقالة الألف الصغرى) instead of the Book Alpha Meizon (مقالة الألف الكبرى). The first book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is attributed to Theophrastus by Albert the Great. He claimed that the statement “All men by nature desire to know” at the beginning of *Metaphysics* did belong to Theophrastus and this book was not crucial in Arabic translation, as exemplified al-Fārābī for this. Albert’s thesis does not include any evidence; on the contrary, the most works on *Metaphysics* in Arabic philosophical tradition mention either the Book Alpha Meizon or its content. Furthermore, Theophrastus’ metaphysical work is available in Greek, Arabic and Latin, and when we compare it with Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, it seems that this cannot belong to Theophrastus. Therefore we are going to discuss this by quoting passages from Avicenna and al-Shahrastānī. Also, it shows us that *The Book on the Science of Metaphysics* by Abdallaṭīf al-Baghdādī opposed to this claim.

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8 Dimitri Gutas published it including in Greek text and Medieval Arabic translation, English translations of Greek and Arabic texts with introduction, commentaries and glossaries, as well as the Medieval Latin translation, and with an excursus on Graeco-Arabic editorial technique. Theophrastus, *On First Philosophy (Known as His Metaphysics)*, ed. and trans. Dimitri Gutas (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

The subject of generation and corruption is frequently emphasized in the Book Alpha Meizon. Even though Aristotle argues that this subject belongs to natural science, he covers this issue in his *Metaphysics* because Ancient Greek natural philosophers made subject ‘things that come-to-be and pass-away’ for metaphysics. Whereas coming-to-be and passing-away represent potentiality, metaphysics does actuality. For Aristotle, there is a big difference between being ‘potential’ (δυναμεις / بالقوة) and being ‘actual’ (ενεργειαι / بالفعل). According to him, while the actual is what comes-to-be and passes-away, the potential is not.

It is necessary to be coming-to-be for a passing-away, and also for coming-to-be an act, namely motion. For this reason, while the matter is potential in itself, the things that come-to-be from the matter are the actual. Because, as Avicenna points out, something is not the potential in every respect, that is, there is no potency for what is impossible to be actual. For Aristotle, actuality is more superior qualification than potentiality, because potentiality makes possible ‘not being’ at the same time. However, since the actual always represents the existent, and since eternality and necessity require to actuality, the actuality regarding Aristotle already holds itself to be potential in itself. According to him, actuality is prior in a stricter sense also; for eternal things are prior in substance to perishable things, and no eternal thing exists potentially.

Aristotle says that Empedocles’ views of ‘love’ (φιλία / محبة) and ‘hate’ (νεῖκος / عدارة) are less contradictory than other philosophers in regards to reasons and principles. Empedocles put to
love and hate the four elements and tried to explain coming-to-be and passing-away of beings in the universe by mingling and alteration of these elements. Aristotle mentions in his *On Generation and Corruption* that Empedocles does not accept any form of coming-to-be and passing-away except for mingling and alteration of the elements.\(^{14}\) Birth and death also occur in that way.

Averroes uses the word ‘muthul’ (مثَل), commonly used in Arabic in acknowledgment of Greek ‘forms’ (εἴδος / ἴδεας), in the sense of ‘prototypes’, and suggests the term ‘ṣuwar’ (صور) for Plato’s forms. Averroes knows that Plato used mathematical things borrowed from Pythagoreans as an intermediate entity between the ideal world and the real world, and makes a distinction between forms and mathematical objects. It is also seen that the same sensitivity is observed in Latin translation and that the word ‘forma’ was used instead of forms and ‘exemplaria’ instead of prototypes.\(^{15}\)

2. Some Linguistical Aporias in the Book Alpha Meizon

Translations made in the early period had problems linguistically. Since the Greek philosophical concepts have not yet formed in Arabic, translations were carried out in ordinary language, and sometimes the usage of this terminology caused to some mistakes. For this reason, in some translations, Greek concepts were transferred to Arabic as they are and Arabicized. For instance, in the first translations made from Greek into the Arabic language, the term ‘element’ was translated into Arabic as ‘устъкус’ (عَسْتَوْكَس) instead of ‘عَنْصَر’ (عنصَر) in the form of the Greek word ‘stoikheos’ (στοιχεῖος).

By the term ‘scientific philosophy’ (الفلسفة العلمية), Averroes re-


fers to the manner of ‘apodictic’ / ‘burhānī’ (ἀπόδεικτικη / برخاني) based on clear evidence. In Latin, it was used ‘philosophia speculatia’ correctly.\textsuperscript{16} Again, the term ‘forms’ (eίδη) in Greek is translated into Arabic as ‘anwā’ (أنواع), which means ‘species’. Although this translation is sometimes accurate, it can cause wrongness in some places. Much as the Arabic translation used the predicate ‘genus’ for Plato’s \textit{Form of the Good} and ‘species’ for other forms, because of participating from that Form and coming under it for each of them, this distinguishing based upon the genus-species distinction in the logic cause not to be understood. Again, Averroes uses the expression ‘mathematical species’ (الأنواع التعليمية) instead of ‘mathematical objects’ (τὰ μαθεματικὰ). Regarding this passage, Avicenna’s expression ‘mathematical things’ (الأمور التعليمية) states the matter more accurately.\textsuperscript{17}

Arabic translation of \textit{Metaphysics} used by Averroes is not a variance with Aristotle’s text sometimes. For example, the name Cratilus in the original text, who is the teacher and friend of Plato, was mistakenly written Democritus in Arabic translation.\textsuperscript{18} Passages quoted by al-Shahrastānī are correctly called Cratilus.\textsuperscript{19} Again, regarding Socrates, it is stated that he is not interested in the universals. In Aristotle’s text, however, it is mentioned that Socrates seeks after the universals in ethical matters.\textsuperscript{20} Averroes, on the other hand, in his \textit{Short Commentary on the Metaphysics}
says that in the time of Socrates, philosophers maintained that there were eternal and universal intelligible and taught that they existed outside the soul in the same way as they existed in the soul, yet simultaneously they maintained that these intelligible were the principles of sensible substance. Alexander of Aphrodisias said that Socrates occupied himself with ethical questions and seeking the universal, he paid no attention to natural things, but he was the first to concern himself with definitions. Thomas Aquinas remarked that Socrates was unwilling to make any investigation into the nature of physical things, but only busied himself with moral matters. And in this field, he first began to investigate what the universal is, and to insist upon the need for definition. Suárez claimed that Socrates applied “what things there are above us, don’t matter to us”. And he would also counsel “search not things higher than yourself”.

One of the greatest fault in the translation is to translate the ‘earliest philosophy’ (πρώτη φιλοσοφία) at the end of the Book Alpha Meizon as the ‘first philosophy’ (الفلسفة الأولى) namely metaphysics. Aristotle here means the natural philosophy in the early period, but the translator, Naṣif b. Yumn, misunderstands this conception, afterward, the translator mistranslates the statement onward. Accordingly, this leaded Averroes to make a misleading comment. But Averroes could not take care of the use of the term ‘first philosophy’ that Aristotle gave the name of ancient philosophy worked by the first philosophers or physi-
cians. It is bizarre for a philosopher like Averroes to be deceived to such a translation, although he knows Presocratic philosophers could not improve on the material cause. Averroes repeated this kind of misconceptions in the “Proemium” to the ‘Book Lambda’, by explaining the book names of Metaphysics, such as used the ‘Book Iota’ (Yā’) instead of the ‘Book Kappa’ (Kāf).

3. Sample Passages Concerning the Subject

3.1. Some concepts from Averroes’ commentaries on the 
Metaphysics (Arabic and English)

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I 55

لما كانت القدماء الأول من الطبيعيين قد اتفقوا على أن المبدأ لجميع المكونات واحد من الأساطللا الأربعة، فبعضهم كان يضع أن النار، وبعض أنه الهواء، وبعض أنه الماء، ما عدا الأرض.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I 56

وإناما قال "...كأنه نوع هيولي..." لأن الهيولي بالقوة وهذه الفعل، ولأن الهيولي بالحقيقة هي التي لا تكون ولا تفسد، وكل واحد من هذه كائن فاسد، وهؤلاء لم يشعروا من الأسباب إلا بالسبب الذي على طريق الهيولي.

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.6a, I 66-7

اعتقد أن المعاني التي توجد لأنشخاص نوع نوع

Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, C.1a, I 55

Since the first ancients of the naturalists had agreed that the principle of all the existents was one of the four elements, some of them used to put it as fire, some as air, and some as water, except the earth.

He said “...like the material species...”, since the matter is potential while these [principles] are actual, and since yet the matter, in fact, does not come-to-be and pass-away while each of these [principles] come-to-be and pass-away. They did not comprehend causes except for material cause.

He believed that the meanings

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26 Averroes, Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabī’a, III Proe., 1393-1405.
One among them, which are the things which necessarily exist outside the soul and are called them forms and examples, that is, they are forms of the sensible things and examples of nature.

Talkhiş Mā Ba‘d aţ-Ṭab‘ī‘a, 51

فَلَمَا كَانَ فِي زَمِّنِ سَقِيرَةَ وَأَرَأَوْا أَنَّ هَذَا مُعْقُولَاتٌ أَرْبَابِ، قَالُوا بِوُجُودِهِمْ خَارِجَ النَّفْسِ عَلَى الْجِهَادِ النَّفْسِ الَّتِي هِيَ عَلَيْهِا فِي النَّفْسِ، وَأَرَأَوْا أَنَّهَا مَعَ ذَلِكَ مَبَادِئَ الْجُوْهُرِ المَحْسُوسِ.

٣.٢. مَقارنة مِن نَصِّ ترَنِيدُ رُوسَٰٰ بِنِيّد مِن نَصِّ نَازِف لِغَةَ عَرَبِيَّةٍ (إِلَّا أَوْقَاتٍ)

Metaphysics, 987a29-b2 (Naẓīf)

[Tafsīr Mā Ba‘d aţ-Ṭab‘ī‘a, T.5]

After the systems aforementioned existed the philosophy of Plato, whose philosophy was following those [philosophers] in most respects, but in some, his philosophy was agreeing on the Italians. The first thing that occurred after Democritus was the views of Heraclitean philosophers about the fact that all the other things have a constant flux and there is no knowledge about them; these opinions he held even later. As for Socrates, he spoke of only ethical
matters, not something of the universal nature...

[In Arabic translation b3-4 is missing]

Metaphysics, 987b14-6 (Naẓīf)
[Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, T.6]

But they disputed about the sensible things and the mathematical species, saying of the latter that they are intermediate between those things. Some of the sensible things are permanent and non-moving, the species that [predicate] to many things. The species is that thing existed for each thing.

Metaphysics, 988a8-15 (Naẓīf)
[Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, T.9]

He has used two causes that of the essence of a thing and the material cause. The species are the cause of essence of all other things. As for the species, [their cause is] the one; and what the matter is of which the species are predicated on them, and of which is asserted in the species. For the essence of the dyad is great and small. Again, he has assigned the cause of the good and the praised to the elements, one to each other. Those are what we said in the investigation actualized about the firsts.

ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions.

Metaphysics, 987b14-6 (Ross)
[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]

Further, besides sensible things and forms he says there are the objects of mathematics, which occupy an intermediate position, differing from sensible things in being eternal and unchangeable, from forms in that there are many alike, while the form itself is in each case unique.

Metaphysics, 988a8-15 (Ross)
[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]

He has used only two causes, that of the essence and the material cause (for the forms are the causes of the essence of all other things, and the one is the cause of the essence of the forms); and it is evident what the underlying matter is, of which the forms are predicated in the case of sensible things, and the one in the case of forms, viz. that this is a dyad, the great and the small. Further, he has assigned the cause of good and that of evil to the elements, one to each of the two, as we say some of his predecessors sought to do.
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Metaphysics, 993a15-6 (Naẓīf)
[Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, T.50]
It is worth for the first philosophy to investigate the view of all things because it contains to all principles and on what the first is.

3.3. Comparison of Averroes’ Tafsīr with other books (Averroes vs. Avicenna and al-Shahrastānī)

Averroes, Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, C.31d, I 125
He means that the substances of this separated forms are not one of the substances of these sensible things. Because, those [forms] are the eternal, while these [sensible things] come-to-be and pass-away. Thus, it is not possible to be reasons for them, neither have the forms nor the efficient causes.

Averroes, Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, C.6g, I 69
Some people opposed to the Heraclitean doubt that disappearance of knowledge about sensible things and things in the sensible that are the mathematical.

Metaphysics, 987a32-b2 (Naẓīf)
[Tafsīr Mā Ba’d at-Ṭabi’a, T.5]
The first thing that occurred after Democritus was the views of Heraclitean philosophers about the fact that all the other things have a constant flux and there is no

Metaphysics, 993a15-6 (Ross)
[The Works of Aristotle, VIII]
For the earliest philosophy is, on all subjects, like one who lips, since it is young and in its beginnings.

Avicenna, al-Ilāhiyyāt min Kitāb ash-Shifā’, IV.3, 189
As for the particular things which comes-to-be and passes-away, on what they said, the potency in them is before the action in time; and as for the universal or eternal things that do not pass-away, if particular, they do not advance potential things at all.

Avicenna, al-Ilāhiyyāt min Kitāb ash-Shifā’, VII.2, 321
As for the mathematical, in his opinion, they are the meanings between the forms and the material things.

al-Shahrastānī, Kitāb al-Milal wa an-Nihal, II 288
Aristotle, in the Treatise Alpha Meizon of the Book Metaphysics reported that Plato frequented Cratylus during his youth, and wrote down at his dictation what
knowledge about them; these opinions he held even later. As for Socrates, he spoke of only ethical matters, not something of the universal nature...

[In Arabic translation b3-4 is missing]

he related from Heraclitus namely that all the sensible things are corruptible, and knowledge does not embrace them. Then, after him, he frequented Socrates, whose doctrine was to seek definitions without investigating the nature of sensible and other things.

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