

## AVICENNA THE COMMENTATOR

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A commentator should provide all the premises that are needed, and omit nothing but the obvious and the superfluous, for the most incompetent commentator is he who uses in his commentary premises more cryptic than, or as cryptic as, the premises of whatever he is commenting upon. These commentaries which [purport to] bring us the truth conceal in fact the theses better than the original texts, while what they conceal most is errors.<sup>1</sup>

Avicenna has never had high standing as a commentator on Aristotle. In the scholarly world today, he, like any other Islamic medieval philosopher, has the automatic curse of not working from the original Greek in critical editions. He has the additional stigma of having received as Aristotle's work various spurious works, including Neoplatonist treatises by Proclus and Plotinus like the *Liber de causis*.<sup>2</sup>

Even in the medieval Islamic culture, his encyclopedic *Aṣ-Šifā* (the *Healing* or *Cure*), where he did write on many of Aristotle's works, was not viewed as faithful commentary. Consequently, so the story goes, Averroes was asked by Abū Ya'qūb to write a set of commentaries more textually based.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, this assessment of Avicenna has some merit. He often departs from the text of Aristotle even when commenting upon it. He does so in various ways. (1) He states sometimes that Aristotle is just wrong, for instance, in his doctrine that in thinking the thinker becomes identical to the object thought.<sup>4</sup> Again, when commenting upon

<sup>1</sup> "Memoirs of a Disciple [of Avicenna] from Rayy," §10, trans. Dmitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden, 1988), pp. 71–2.

<sup>2</sup> For this standard story cf. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Medieval Philosophy* (New York, 1972), pp. 106–7; F. Van Steenberghen 1970, *Aristote en occident* (Louvain, 1946), trans. as *Aristotle in the West*, trans. L. Johnston (Louvain, 1970), pp. 17–9; É. Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1955), pp. 181–2.

<sup>3</sup> Dominique Urvoy, "Ibn Rushd," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. S. Nasr & O. Leaman (London, 1996), pp. 330–345, p. 332. This story cannot be completely true, as we now know that prior to Avicenna there were many faithful commentaries written in Arabic on Aristotle's works, especially at the *bayt al-hikma*. See n. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Soul* 420a19–20; *Fī Nafs*, ed. G. Anawati (Cairo, 1962) 212,12–213,8.

the ontological square, the fourfold division of beings in *Categories* 2, Avicenna rejects it and replaces it with a fivefold division.<sup>5</sup> In such cases Avicenna is offering his own views as substitutes. (2) Other times, he omits discussing what Aristotle says. Thus, in his *Al-Ilāhiyyāt* (*Metaphysics*) Avicenna ignores some books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, like Book IV. Again, Avicenna's *Physics* hardly has the organization of Aristotle's. (3) Other times, he adds on a lot of material purportedly consistent with Aristotle's text, with the aim of defending or elaborating on it. Thus, in *Al-Ilāhiyyāt* Avicenna adds on discussions about the necessary being and prophecy. Likewise the organization of the *Qiyās* hardly follows that of the *Prior Analytics*, although Avicenna does end up covering most of the material there, while adding much more. (4) In some cases his attempts at a literal commentary fail ludicrously, as in his discussion of the *Poetics* where he attempts to describe Greek tragedies without having ever read or seen one.<sup>6</sup> (I shall not be discussing this last type as it hardly gives Avicenna a claim for being a pre-eminent commentator. For it consists of standard, literal commentary, just done badly.)

The first three types of cases differ significantly. In the first type Avicenna goes where, he believes, the truth leads him at the expense of what Aristotle has said. As a result, we have an explanation inconsistent with Aristotle's doctrines. In the second and third types, we have material being introduced or omitted so as presumably to increase our understanding of the material being discussed by extending its doctrines. Such additions and omissions can remain consistent with Aristotle's doctrines. As for the omissions, Avicenna generally does discuss that material somewhere: he has just reorganized their presentation. Thus he does discuss the material of *Metaphysics* IV in various places: e.g., what is meant by genus, species, difference, etc. appears in his commentary on Porphyry (the *Logica* of the *Avicenna Latinus*); in his summaries as well he explains the meaning of many terms and reorganizes Aristotle's doctrines quite a lot.<sup>7</sup> We can then find some justification for a commentary deviating from the text in the second or

<sup>5</sup> *Al-Maqūlāt*, eds. G. Anawati et al. (Cairo, 1959), pp. 18,4–20,3. See Allan Bäck, "Avicenna's Ontological Pentagon," *The Journal of Neoplatonic Studies* 7.2 (1999), 87–109.

<sup>6</sup> Avicenna, *Aṣ-Šīr*, ed. 'A. Badawī (Cairo, 1966). See my Review of Averroes' *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. Charles Butterworth, *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* (1990), 92–101.

<sup>7</sup> I am thinking of *An-Najāt* (*Salvation*), *Al-Ishārāt* (*Pointers*), and the Persian *Dānešnāme* (trans. Morewedge as *The Metaphysics of Avicenna*).

third way: the commentator is rearranging the material so as to make it more comprehensible. Yet the first way, rejecting what Aristotle says outright, hardly looks like a commentary at all, but instead an independent work. So too we might make this assessment for the so-called “*Glosses*” of Abelard on Porphyry.

Nevertheless I wish to explore the option that Avicenna remains a “faithful commentator” of Aristotle. For, if a commentary has the function of helping us to understand the material and the issues being discussed, and Avicenna presents materials that increase our understanding beyond what Aristotle has said, perhaps then he is writing commentaries of high value. To be sure, a commentary also has the function of helping us to understand the text being commented upon and its author’s intentions, context etc. in its own terms and on its own standards. Avicenna does not focus on such tasks, and when he does, he has no special claim to excellence (as in the example of the *Poetics* just mentioned. Such literal commentary amounts to parsing or paraphrasing and giving historical background. Yet, on the other hand, if we understand the issues being raised by a text in terms other than those given in the text, we might then be able to appreciate that text more so than if we had stuck to a literal *explicatione de texte*. We can understand what, say, Aristotle was struggling with and what he was trying, in a pioneering way, to get at. Pioneering efforts often have clumsy features, as the path of terminology, theory, articulation of detail etc. has not yet been laid down for those coming later to follow.

So I do not find it obvious just what constitutes a “good” commentary. I will start by discussing the attitudes of the person being commented upon about commentaries. For Aristotle himself commented upon the work of other philosophers, and wrote, if not “commentaries” in the customary sense, at the least critiques like the *Peri Ideōn*. Let us consider what The Philosopher does here.

#### *Aristotle as Commentator*

...our duty [is] for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a14–7.

In what sense would Aristotle himself understand ‘commentator’? Look at how Aristotle himself commented upon his predecessors—notably Plato. Certainly in his *Metaphysics* Aristotle thinks that he is giving the history of first philosophy. He comments upon the theories of his predecessors, mostly with the goal of showing how his own theory incorporates all their insights without their shortcomings.<sup>9</sup>

Earlier Aristotle scholars generally accepted Aristotle as a reliable chronicler and commentator. For instance, W. D. Ross generally takes Aristotle to give an accurate history of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Burnet, and Guthrie may have had occasional doubts but generally concurred.<sup>11</sup>

However it has now become a commonplace among scholars of Aristotle’s predecessors to assert that Aristotle misunderstands their views badly. For example, Kirk, Raven and Schofield claim that “his judgments are often distorted by his view of earlier philosophy as a stumbling progress to the truth that Aristotle revealed.”<sup>12</sup> Thus they suggest that Aristotle is mistaken about the significance of Zeno’s arrow paradox.<sup>13</sup> If you look at random for other recent discussions of Aristotle in the treatment of the Presocratics, you will routinely find many such remarks.

Now if this current assessment of Aristotle’s scholarly abilities holds, Aristotle fails by his own standards. For he relies heavily on an endoxic method. We begin our scientific study, he says, from looking at phenomena and *endoxa*.<sup>14</sup> As with astronomy, all the sciences must preserve the phenomena.<sup>15</sup> For him the phenomena are the things as they appear to us, at times contrasted with how they are in themselves. The *endoxa* are the opinions that are generally or mostly accepted by anyone and, even more so, the opinions of the experts.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Metaphysics* 988a18–23.

<sup>10</sup> *Metaphysics*, vol. I, pp. xxxv–li,

<sup>11</sup> A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford, 1911), pp. 84–7; J. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (London, 1920), vol. I, pp. 230–7; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1983) p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 273.

<sup>14</sup> *De Caelo* 306a5–17; *Analytica Priora* 46a 17–22. Aristotle also seems at times to identify this mathematical method with a “dialectical” method. Cf. *Physica* 204b4, and Allan Bäck, “Aristotle’s Discovery of First Principles,” in *From Puzzles to Principles*, ed. May Sim (Lanham, Maryland, 1999), 163–182.

<sup>15</sup> William Wians, “Saving Aristotle from Nussbaum’s *Phainomena*,” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy V*, eds. A. Preus & J. Anton (Albany, 1992), p. 135.

<sup>16</sup> *Topics* 100b21–3. See J. D. G. Evans, *Aristotle’s Concept of Dialectic* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 77–8 on difficulties of translating ‘*endoxon*’. I shall just use ‘*endoxon*’.

Even in the sciences Aristotle uses *endoxa*. As Owen made well known, Aristotle complicates his conception of phenomena considerably.<sup>17</sup> In his ethics he begins his discussion of *acrasia* (incontinence) by rehearsing “the phenomena.” Yet he does not make observations of human behavior. Rather, he identifies these phenomena with the *endoxa*, the reputable opinions. [1145b2–6] On account of this, Owen claims that Aristotle uses ‘phenomena’ ambiguously: on the one hand to designate the empirical, given by sense perception, and on the other to designate the dialectical, given by widely accepted or reputable opinion. Indeed, in some texts Aristotle opposes phenomena and *endoxa*, and in others he assimilates them, even in his treatises on natural science.<sup>18</sup> At times the contrast between phenomena and *endoxa* seems to disappear. Aristotle himself identifies the phenomena with the *endoxa* in his ethical investigation of *acrasia*. Again, in his study of the first principles common to all sciences in his science of being *qua* being, Aristotle examines *endoxa* dialectically by way of establishing them as first principles. Also, in justifying particular concepts in his *Physics*, Aristotle again appeals to *endoxa*, e.g., for his concept of place. [211a4–11] Aristotle blurs their difference even more when he distinguishes *endoxa* from “apparent *endoxa*” (φαίνομένων ἐνδόξων).<sup>19</sup>

Nussbaum offers a way of thinking of Aristotle’s conceptions of phenomena and *endoxa* consistently.<sup>20</sup> If we understand Aristotle to hold Quine’s view, that even sense perceptions are a theory-laden part of the fabric of our web of belief, then the empirical and the dialectical both concern opinion. We have no hard facts, just our beliefs about the world. Some beliefs may have a stronger tie to the stimulus meaning of sensation than others, and so are more empirical. Still scientific knowledge, like all other conversation, falls within the hermeneutical circle of our society and its ideology.

In any event, Aristotle does not equate *endoxa* in the dialectical inquiry of philosophy and science with majority opinion. He weights expert opinion more.<sup>21</sup> Insofar as common people themselves defer to the opinions of experts, we might say that deferring to experts agrees

<sup>17</sup> G. E. L. Owen, “*Tithenai ta Phainomena*,” in *Logic, Science, and Dialectic*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, 1986), p. 240.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., *Generation of Animals* 725b5–6; 729b9–10; 760b27–33; *Parts of Animals* 648a20ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Topics* 100b25.

<sup>20</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 244; 274–5.

<sup>21</sup> C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 35–6.

with common opinion, especially when the subject concerns something about which common people have no firm opinion (e.g., the sex life of nematodes), but when the expert and the common opinions diverge, Aristotle weights expert opinion more. Yet this weighting narrows the gulf between the phenomena which are true and the *endoxa*, which seem to be true. Too, phenomena themselves are literally appearances, how the world appears to us. As we judge, categorize, and reflect upon our sensations, the phenomena may well be thought to end up amounting to give what seems to us to be true, with special reliance on those who have observed carefully and repeatedly.

In our terms, Aristotle recommends doing a survey of the literature and critique of past theories if available before proceeding to do scientific research via direct observation and experiment and theory construction. Now, if Aristotle so radically misunderstands his predecessors, he is failing in this dialectical task and in his science.

We might use caution in accepting the opinions of current scholars on Aristotle as commentator, especially when their work focuses on Aristotle's predecessors. One always has the suspicion of people cheer-leading for the philosopher on whom they have devoted so much time. Moreover, it is curious, if Aristotle fails so badly in understanding his predecessors, why those who followed and critiqued him did not seize on the point more than they do? For many of the Greek commentators were Neoplatonists. They may modify Aristotle's doctrines, but generally accept his views of his predecessors.<sup>22</sup> Even Plotinus proceeds in critiquing Aristotle not so much by showing how he misunderstands Plato but by defending Plato's views and picking holes in Aristotle's objections and own positions.

In any case, I am focusing here not on Aristotle's actual prowess as a commentator but rather on the standards he has for good commentary, regardless of whether he meets his own standards or not. So, putting *caveats* on his excellence as a commentator aside, let us concentrate on what Aristotle offers, or at any rate uses, as criteria for a commentary. For him a commentary is both a report and critique on certain *endoxa*, the opinions of the experts, preferably their opinions as recorded in written form. We can see Aristotle himself writing such commentaries. Aristotle went to great lengths to collect descriptions of phenomena, customs etc. We need only think of his collection of constitutions with

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<sup>22</sup> The commentaries of Simplicius and Alexander (pseudo and real) for instance.

accompanying analyses, his collections of observations of natural phenomena (including ones that he did not make himself, e.g., on elephants and the gymnosophists),<sup>23</sup> and his reviews of past theories whenever starting a scientific inquiry. These reports then should be accurate. Note, however, that Aristotle, like the historians of his time, tended not to insist on the historical accuracy of exact quotation, description of social and linguistic context, archival research etc. required by the historians of our times. Still, I suppose his accounts of his predecessors have about as much accuracy as the speeches that Thucydides puts into the mouths of Spartans and Persians.

Unlike modern historians and commentators, Aristotle insists also upon critiquing the views being commented upon. For he intends to use this material to seek the truth on the subject matter, and not ultimately the truth about who said what. We see a similar situation in his ethics. He wants to have a theory of what is the highest good but not merely for the sake of theory: “we are inquiring not in order to know what excellence is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, even modern historians organize their remarks and use the available primary historical data selectively, according to an ideology or according to a certain method, making many background foundational assumptions.<sup>25</sup> Yet they tend to avoid making assessment of value. In contrast, as Aristotle writes commentaries in order to use their results, his remarks have a certain focus largely absent in our modern commentaries. We separate theory and use, pure and applied science, scholarship and philosophizing, more sharply than he does.

#### *Avicenna as Commentator*

How then would Avicenna fare as a “commentator” in the Aristotelian tradition?

Let me first dispose of the standard complaints against Islamic commentators on Aristotle that I have mentioned at the beginning. To be sure they were Greek-less, although they had some contact with people

<sup>23</sup> E.g., the discussion of elephants in *History of Animals* I.10 and of the naked sophists in Fr. 35—if that is not genuine, just use another of Aristotle’s remarks on India.

<sup>24</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1103b26–9.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. P. Putnam (New York, 1953).

fluent in Greek. However, I find the Arabic translations of Ḥunayn Ishāq quite accurate for most technical points in Aristotle's texts. Moreover, the Islamic philosophers themselves were sensitive about problems of translation. Even before Avicenna, Islamic philosophers like al-Fārābī had long, sophisticated discussions about the various grammatical structures in Arabic, Greek, Persian, Syriac, Soghdian—as far as their linguistic resources permitted.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Avicenna is no naïve reader, misled by having received Neoplatonist works by Proclus and Plotinus as written by Aristotle. He himself expresses doubts about the authenticity of the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, known now to be spurious.<sup>27</sup> I give further examples below. So, I submit, let us not dismiss Avicenna's commentary on *a priori* grounds; instead, let us look at the contents of his works.

Avicenna claims to have written commentaries in his youth explicating Aristotle's thought.<sup>28</sup> These seem to have followed Aristotle's texts fairly closely, giving explications of his views. These early, fairly standard commentaries were apparently lost. Still we can perhaps get some sense of what they were like, or even what they actually were, by looking at some parts of his extant works. For, as Gutas has shown, Avicenna tended to recycle parts of earlier works into his later works. Thus some parts of the *De Anima* material of *Aṣ-Šhiḫā* seem to have been written before.<sup>29</sup> Again, the *Poetics* portion of *Aṣ-Šhiḫā* mentioned above may have been recycled, for it is a fairly literal commentary that seems to proceed by using a translation of the *Poetics* along with its attendant *marginalia* so as to produce an explication as best as can be without having any independent knowledge of Greek theater.

However, Avicenna wrote another sort of commentary later in his career. These followed the text much less closely and paraphrased far less. For in Hamaḍān around 1016, Avicenna's students had asked for him to replace these lost early commentaries.

The hope of ever obtaining his lost works having dimmed, we asked him to write them and he said, 'I have neither the time nor the inclination to occupy myself with close textual analysis and commentary. But if you

<sup>26</sup> See my "Islamic Logic," forthcoming.

<sup>27</sup> "Letter to Kiyā," section 3, in *A. Badawī, Aristū 'inda l-'Arab* (Cairo, 1947), pp. 120,9–122,8; trans. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Namely, *Al-Ḥāsil wa-l-Maḥṣūl* (*The Available and the Valid*) probably in 1002 or 1003, following Gutas' dating.

<sup>29</sup> Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 104–5.



would be content with whatever I have readily in mind [which I have thought] on my own, then I could write for you a comprehensive work arranged in the order which will occur to me.’ We readily offered our consent to this and urged that he start with physics.<sup>30</sup>

Avicenna states clearly that in these commentaries—comments if you will—he will not be explicating Aristotle’s thought and so will not be writing the usual sort of commentary. Rather, he shall be giving his own thoughts and theories on the topics and positions brought up by Aristotle:

...if you would like me to compose a book in which I will set forth what, in my opinion, is sound in these philosophical (sciences), without debating with those who disagree or occupying myself with their refutation, then I will do that.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, in his *Aṣ-Šhiḫā*, some parts of which constitute the *Avicenna Latinus*, Avicenna set out to “comment upon” a great portion of Aristotle’s works, including the whole of the logic, much of the works on the natural sciences, and the *Metaphysics*. He completed this massive undertaking in but a few years, from 1016–27, if we are to believe the historical testimony—although it is likely that he used some earlier writings as some parts of *Aṣ-Šhiḫā*.

In *Aṣ-Šhiḫā* Avicenna has respect but not reverence for Aristotle. On some topics, Avicenna thinks that Aristotle has the whole truth. For instance, concerning Aristotle’s classification of the fallacies, Avicenna says:

...after almost one thousand three hundred and thirty years, was this goal reached by anyone who blamed Aristotle for being deficient, and who was right in identifying a defect in him because Aristotle was in fact deficient in such and such a matter? And did there appear after him anybody who added anything at all to this art [*sophistics*] beyond what Aristotle said? Certainly not; for what Aristotle did is complete and perfect.<sup>32</sup>

In such parts of *Aṣ-Šhiḫā* as the *Sophistics* then it is not surprising that Avicenna, perhaps using or borrowing from his earlier literal commentaries, if he had them available, offers something resembling a

<sup>30</sup> Introduction to *Aṣ-Šhiḫā*, Section 3, translated by Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> *The Life of Ibn Sina*, ed. and trans. W. Gohlman (Albany, 1974), 54.1–5.

<sup>32</sup> *As-Safsāṭa*, ed. A. Ehwany (Cairo, 1958), 114 §7; trans. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 37.

usual commentary. Yet, even in such cases where Avicenna thinks that Aristotle has the right theory, he often proceeds to a critical discussion of it. Here we may agree with Gutas:

Avicenna presents himself in the prologue to the Cure not as an anti-Aristotelian despite himself, as al-Jūzjānī would have it, but as a conscious reformer of the Aristotelian tradition, an attitude which is also apparent in the Introduction to *The Easterners* and shared by other disciples of his...<sup>33</sup>

However, in other parts of *Aṣ-Šifā* Avicenna has a much harsher attitude about what Aristotle says. First, in general, Avicenna holds Aristotle's logic to be defective, at least in the sense of needing to be supplemented.<sup>34</sup> Unlike Kant, Avicenna did not think that Aristotle had completed the whole of formal logic. For instance, following the Stoics, Avicenna devoted a lot of effort to working out the syllogistic for various sorts of hypothetical statements in his *Qiyās*. Second, and more particularly, on the *Categories*, Avicenna follows the lead of the Greek commentators who doubt the authenticity of some passages of the *Categories* and who stress its use as a work for the beginner.<sup>35</sup> He too doubts the authenticity of the *Categories* as a whole.<sup>36</sup> Yet, more than his predecessors, Avicenna stresses that the *Categories* is not so much for the philosopher as for the common people: not too technical nor of much use.<sup>37</sup>

Even here, though, Avicenna is not rejecting Aristotle's views so much as reorganizing and extending them—perhaps, as I shall suggest below, following the lead of al-Fārābī. For instance, Avicenna imports much of the material on substance found in *Metaphysics* VII into his discussion of substance in *Categories* 5. Indeed, Avicenna discusses some of Aristotle's doctrines in the *Metaphysics*, like focal meaning and the relation of substance and form, more in this commentary on the *Categories* than in his “commentary” on the *Metaphysics*, *Al-Ilāhiyyāt*. Avicenna has the general habit of reorganizing the sequence of materials found in Aristotle, and *Al-Maqūlāt* is no exception.

<sup>33</sup> Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., Porphyry, in *Cat.* 134, 28–9; Ammonius, in *Cat.* 13, 20–8.

<sup>36</sup> *Al-Maqūlāt* 8,11–5. So did earlier Islamic commentators, and to some extent Greek ones like Simplicius, in *Cat.* 18, 7–9. Cf. I. Madkour, *L'Organon d'Aristote dans le monde arabe* (Paris, 1934), pp. 78–9.

<sup>37</sup> *Al-Maqūlāt*. 35,10–11; 35,20–36,2; 189,8–9; 264,7; 265,17.

Avicenna viewed his audience to consist solely in the elite philosophers. Rather like Confucius, who wanted only students who could bring back a square when given only a corner of it [*Analects* 7:8], Avicenna would expect his audience to be able to reconstruct his position from a few remarks. For him, the common people should not read philosophy. Like Plato, Avicenna wanted only the philosophers, and the worthy ones at that, to read his work. Avicenna believed Aristotle to hold the same view, due to a letter ascribed to Aristotle and written to Alexander. According to it, Aristotle was deliberately obscure in order to ward off the common people.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, al-Fārābī, whom Avicenna admired greatly, says:

Our style used an obscure way of expression for three reasons: First, to test the nature of the student in order to find out whether he is suitable to be educated or not; second, to avoid lavishing philosophy on all people but only on those who were worthy of it; and third, to train the mind through the exertion of research.<sup>39</sup>

Religious traditions in Islam too had the custom of withholding knowledge from the *hoi polloi* and reserving it for the select few:

I have forbidden all my friends who would read [this treatise] to squander it on an evil or obdurate person, or show it to them, or to deposit it where it does not belong, and bound them [by an oath]...<sup>40</sup>

Like Maimonides later, Avicenna writes only for those who deserve to read. We know that he withheld his writings from many of his contemporaries.

In short, Avicenna deliberately writes commentaries for the worthy few, the elite among the philosophers. Such an audience requires commentaries not of the usual sort. Such a commentary need not introduce and explicate the text to be commented upon. Rather, it needs to illuminate that text, to give a perspective whereby its reader will be helped in assessing the merits of that text. I have suggested that we view Aristotle as a “commentator” in the same way.

<sup>38</sup> Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 20,5,11–2, in *Aristoteles, Privatorum Scriptorum Fragmenta*, ed. M. Plezia (Leipzig, 1977), 28. Cf. Simplicius, in *Cat.* 7, 6–9.

<sup>39</sup> Mabādi, *Al-Falāsafah Al-Qadīma* (Cairo, 1910), p. 14, trans. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 227.

<sup>40</sup> Avicenna, *Al-Mabda' wa-l-Ma'ād [The Provenance and Destination]*, ed. 'A. Nūrārī (Tehran, 1984), Ch. 16.3; trans. in Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 33.

Yet, even if we accept such criteria for a commentary, surely the text of Avicenna is so difficult and even convoluted so as to rule it out as a good commentary. Let me then comment upon Avicenna's style and on his writings.<sup>41</sup>

Avicenna deliberately takes on an oracular style. We can see this just from the titles of his works: *The Cure*, *The Salvation*, etc. He does so for various reasons: 1) on his own view, he has achieved an enlightenment stemming from the activation of his active intellect and its permanent, actual connection to the intelligibles;<sup>42</sup> 2) what he is doing is better than the popular, vulgar prophecy of religion anyway;<sup>43</sup> 3) he is an elitist.

Avicenna has a style a bit like the Greek commentators: a rather cryptic, oracular, enigmatic utterance followed by some more mundane explanation. Alexander, Ammonius and Themistius have similar styles. Or, perhaps better, we may compare the writing style of Avicenna to that of Plotinus. In both cases too we might wonder how well the text was corrected and proofed. Likewise, in both cases it is hard to distinguish when the author is presenting a position given by somebody else and its implications from when he is giving his own position; to determine when a question ends and its answer begins.

Moreover, Avicenna's cavalier attitude towards his own writings does not help the quality of the text that we have. He generally would write extremely quickly. His own account has him writing fifty pages per day of the metaphysics and physics of *Aš-Šhiḫā*.<sup>44</sup> After writing something, he would give the copy to whom it was promised, or put it away for showing to the worthy few. Often, due to his frequent moves and the religious and political turmoil, his writings were lost or damaged.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Discussed and supported more in the Introduction to my translation of *Al-Maḳūlāt*.

<sup>42</sup> *Fī Nafs* 212,4–9. Cf. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 161 n. 30; 175.

<sup>43</sup> Like al-Fārābī, Avicenna held that religious customs for the common people differ from those for the elite philosophers. For instance, for Avicenna prayer had as its goal the finding of middle terms; drinking wine is forbidden to the people but good for those of "powerful brains." Cf. *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 28,2–5; 54,7–9; *Al-Qānūn* I.169.26–9. For a spirited discussion of this issue, cf. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, pp. 181–8.

<sup>44</sup> *The Life of Ibn Sina*, 58,2–8.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Jūzjānī, "Introduction" to *Aš-Šhiḫā*, §2, trans. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 40: "I have heard, however, that these were widely dispersed in that people who owned a copy of them withheld them [from others]; as for him, it was not his habit to save a copy for himself, just as it was not his habit to make a copy from his archetype or transcribe [an archetype] from his rough draft: he would only either dictate or himself write the manuscript and give it to the person who had commis-

Consequently, we have the situation that Avicenna probably proofread little, and what copies there were were made haphazardly under hasty circumstances. Aside from the contingencies of the political turmoil, we can see here perhaps echoes of Plato's attitude toward written philosophy as expressed in his "Seventh Letter." Written philosophy is dead philosophy, relics to be discarded as trinkets for those allowed to be souvenir hunters.

Again, Avicenna was a Persian, and not a native Arabic speaker or writer. At any rate, let me say that he is quite careless about the antecedents for his pronouns! I should also remark that at points we have some possible wordplay.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from these reasons—the haste of composition, the state of the manuscript, these elitist tendencies, possible language problems—there are other reasons why reading Avicenna is difficult. To be sure, Avicenna can write clearly. Yet often he writes quite obscurely, regardless of the language in which the text is read. Perhaps this obscurity comes in part from Avicenna's trying to say something new, for which there would not naturally lie ready to hand extant phrasing. We can see similar obscurities in many original works: Abelard—or Aristotle himself—is a good example.

Above all, in reading works like *Aṣ-Šhiḫā*, we have the problem of context. Avicenna is reacting not only to Aristotle's text but also to the other writings on it—commentaries, notes, *marginalia*, some of which surrounded the Arabic translation that he was using. Avicenna was probably using some revised version of Ḥunayn Iṣḥāq's translation, the standard Arabic one of the time, with lots of *marginalia*.<sup>47</sup> Avicenna himself says about his studies in his youth that resulted in the more

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sioned it from him. Moreover, he suffered from successive misfortunes, and disasters destroyed his books.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>46</sup> E.g., at *Al-Maqūlāt* 248,17–8.

<sup>47</sup> F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs* (New York, 1968), pp. 59–63; 160. It seems clear that, at least in some cases, Avicenna was not following Iṣḥāq's translation (edited by Badawi, the eleventh century one with *marginalia* at the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris) closely. Cf. Aristotle's *Categories* 1a24–5, discussed in *Al-Maqūlāt* 28,4ff with the current Oxford translation: "By 'in a subject' I mean what is in something, not as a part, and cannot exist separately from what it is in." If Avicenna is quoting and not paraphrasing loosely, he is not using Iṣḥāq's translation. Again, cf. *Al-Maqūlāt* 28,4–5: the terminology for the category of having is not the same as Iṣḥāq's either. Likewise, at 57,19, the translation for the Greek "boxer": Iṣḥāq's translation has 'boxer'; Avicenna has 'wrestler'. However, Porphyry, *in Cat.* 135, 9–11, has the example of the wrestler as well as that of the boxer, and it is true that wrestling was and is far more prominent in Islamic cultures than boxing.

textual commentaries, now lost: “Then I began to read the books [of the *Organon*] by myself and consult the commentaries until I had mastered logic.”<sup>48</sup> So he had read some commentaries, more than marginal notes. At this point, we can make only educated guesses about what commentaries Avicenna used. For Avicenna hardly ever cites any others by name. Moreover, he need not have read those whom he does mention. Likewise, when al-Fārābī names Archytas [of Tarentum], he probably picked this name up from Simplicius.<sup>49</sup> As for *Al-Maḳūlāt*, the Greek commentaries on the *Categories* by Porphyry, Simplicius, Ammonius, Philoponus, and likewise Plotinus (especially *Enneads VI*), insofar as they were translated into Arabic, are plausible candidates for Avicenna’s sources, at least indirectly.<sup>50</sup> By the time of Avicenna, there were also very many Islamic commentators and glossers, most of which have not been studied carefully yet.<sup>51</sup> By his own testimony, Avicenna considered the commentaries of al-Fārābī the most important of these.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Avicenna, *Autobiography* §5.

<sup>49</sup> al-Fārābī, *Greater Commentary on De interpretatione*, eds. W. Kutsch and S. Morrow (Beirut, 1960), 157, 19–20; trans. F. W. Zimmermann (London, 1981), p. 152. Cf. Simplicius, in *Cat.* 86,28–30; 206,20; 408,11–2; 409,1–5. Archytas was a Pythagorean contemporary of Plato; the commentary on the *Categories* is presently thought to be a first-century (A.D.) forgery. Cf. T. A. Szlezák, *Pseudo-Archytas über die Kategorien* (Berlin, 1972).

<sup>50</sup> Gerhard Endress, “Die wissenschaftliche Litteratur,” in *Grundrisse der Arabischen Philologie*, ed. H. Gätje, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1987), pp. 416–31; Julius Weinberg, *Abstraction, Relation and Induction* (Madison, 1965), p. 91. On Greek texts available to Avicenna and not preserved today, see A. Badawī, *La transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe* (Paris, 1968); “New Philosophical Texts Lost in Greek and Preserved in Islamic Translations,” in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. P. Morewedge (Albany, 1979), pp. 3–13; H.-J. Ruland, *Die arabischen Fassungen zweier Schriften des Alexander von Aphrodisias: Über die Vorsehung und Über das liberum arbitrium*, diss. Saarbrücken 1976; “Zwei arabischen Fassungen der Abhandlung des Alexander von Aphrodisias über die universalialia,” *Nachr. der Akademie der Wiss.* In Göttingen, 1979 no. 10. Again, Porphyry’s lost commentary *Ad Gadalium*, was probably available at the time of Avicenna. Cf. Michael Chase, ed. & trans., *Simplicius: On Aristotle’s Categories 1–4* (Ithaca, 2003), p. 96.

<sup>51</sup> The number of these works is staggering. On those on the *Categories*, cf. F. E. Peters, *Aristoteles Arabus* (Leiden, 1968), pp. 7–11; H. Daiber, “Review of Peters,” *Aristoteles Arabus*, *Gnomon* 42 (1970), p. 542; Gerhard Endress, “Die wissenschaftliche Litteratur,” in *Grundrisse der Arabischen Philologie*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1987), pp. 402–34; Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, p. 151. For secondary literature and more updates see *Grundrisse der Arabischen Philologie*, ed. H. Gätje, vol. 2, pp. 481–502.

<sup>52</sup> “Letter to Kiyā,” in *Aristū ‘inda l-‘Arab*, ed. Badawī (Cairo, 1947), 120,9–122,8, §3, trans. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 64: “At the present moment it is impossible for me [to rewrite it]: I do not have the free time for it, but am occupied with men like Alexander [of Aphrodisias], Themistius, John Philoponus, and their likes. As for al-Fārābī, he ought to be very highly thought of, and not to be weighed in the same skill with the rest: he is all but the most excellent of our predecessors.” *Re al-Fārābī on the Categories*, we have chiefly (extant today) al-Fārābī’s epitome on

In sum, on current estimates, the commentaries that Avicenna used most are those by Simplicius and al-Fārābī.<sup>53</sup> Given Avicenna's choice of issues, I suggest adding Porphyry to the list; Avicenna would have known of Porphyry's views on homonymy at least indirectly via their presentation in Simplicius.<sup>54</sup>

Consequently, the text of *Aṣ-Šhiḫā* is not self-contained. Avicenna is often replying to arguments and doctrines that he does not state fully. Many of these arguments can be found in the Greek commentaries or in later Islamic ones. However, we do not yet have many accessible editions or translations of the commentaries written in Arabic, even by such as those by al-Fārābī.

Moreover, Avicenna uses a technical vocabulary, inherited from the Greek traditions and his Islamic predecessors. This appears most clearly at first glance in his use of various prepositions which seems to flout or at least stretch ordinary Arabic usage. Aristotle himself in the *Categories* and Simplicius even more in his commentary on it did the same with Greek.<sup>55</sup> Avicenna continues this tradition by making up terms or transforming the meaning of existing terms in order to express his own theory.<sup>56</sup> For Avicenna also is engaged in constructing his own

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the *Categories* (*Al-Mantiq 'inda l-Fārābī*, ed. R. Al-Ġam, vol. 3 (Beirut, 1986); trans. as "al-Fārābī's Paraphrase of The Categories of Aristotle," *Islamic Quarterly* (1957), 158–97, and more original discussions in the *Kūṭāb al-Hurūf*, ed. M. Mahdī (Beirut, 1970) and *Kūṭāb al-Alfāz al-Musta'mala fī l-mantiq*, ed. M. Mahdī (Beirut, 1968). See Gerhard Endress, "Die wissenschaftliche Literatur," in *Grundrisse der Arabischen Philologie*, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden, 1992), p. 53, nn. 185–7.

<sup>53</sup> Ilsetraut Hadot, "La vie et oeuvre de Simplicius d'après des sources grecques et arabes," in *Simplicius: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa survie*, ed. I. Hadot (Paris, 1987), p. 36; Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 150; Michael Chase, ed. & trans., *Simplicius: On Aristotle's Categories 1–4* (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 2–3. In regard to the *Al-Maqūlāt* proper, it is suggestive that, like Ammonius but unlike Simplicius, Avicenna does not discuss chapter 15 on "having", although Avicenna might have omitted this on his own initiative. Also, like Philoponus, in *Cat.*, 126,9, Avicenna discusses the Resurrection example, and so maybe Avicenna is following him at 153,15ff.

<sup>54</sup> Concetta Luna, "Commentaire," pp. 65; 82. In addition to the extant commentary in *Cat.* in the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* and translated by S. Strange (Ithaca, 1992), there is a lost commentary *Ad Gedaliūm*, probably available at the time of Avicenna. Cf. M. Chase, *Simplicius*, p. 96.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Richard Gaskin, trans. & comm., *Simplicius, On Aristotle's Categories 9–15* (Ithaca, 2000), n. 628.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 10. Afnan, *Philosophical Terminology in Arabic and Persian*, p. 33, says, wrongly, "A significant feature which was not of the language but which cramped philosophical vocabulary in general and fossilized it almost permanently, was the lack of initiative on the part of the Falāsifah to coin special terms of their own." But then he is following Atkinson's *The Greek Language*, which says the same about Aristotle and Greek!

technical vocabulary for Greek technical expressions in Arabic. He uses some already made up, say by al-Fārābī. Still, he seems to be making up more himself, especially as his theory differs from earlier ones.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, Avicenna is not writing a commentary of the usual sort. Like his later works, we can say of those in the *Šhiḫā* that they contain many “Doubts about Aristotle”—although, to be sure, Avicenna also accepts much of what Aristotle and earlier Aristotelians said.<sup>58</sup> He is writing a commentary in the sense of following the order of Aristotle’s texts and commenting on what is being discussed. He often does not bother to explicate Aristotle’s text. Rather, he presents what he thinks on these topics. Although he does often agree with Aristotle, often he does not: for instance, in *Al-Maqūlāt* he disagrees with Aristotle in the *Categories* on homonymy, synonymy, and paronymy, on the ontological square, and on the number of categories. Still, many of the doctrines used by Avicenna to correct the doctrine of the categories can indeed be found in Aristotle’s works elsewhere. I have given some examples above.

We can find analogous “commentaries” in Abelard. His *Glosses on Porphyry* are hardly glosses; his commentaries on Boethius stray so far from the texts that we look in vain in Boethius for most of the doctrines Abelard puts forward. Like Abelard, Avicenna uses the text as a source of questions, topics, and problems that he then investigates and for which he provides the answers. Avicenna does indeed seem to have a style much like Abelard’s: always looking for alternatives, contemptuously dismissing views that he finds silly (here more with the verve of Roger Bacon). Avicenna differs from Abelard perhaps in having his own, final definite position on most issues.

### *The Case of Categories I*

What Avicenna does in his discussion of homonymy gives a good instance of his approach. In effect, he takes the materials from the Greek period and offers a new theory, perhaps with a wider compass than what

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Shukri Abed, “Language,” in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, eds. S. Nasr & O. Leaman (London, 1996), pp. 904–13.

<sup>58</sup> Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, p. 153. Cf. Dag Hasse, *Avicenna’s De Anima in the Latin West* (London, 2000), p. vii: “different stages in a continuous process of reworking his position with the Peripatetic tradition and eventually emancipating himself from it.”



we find in the (extant) Greek commentaries. For the Greek commentators tend to relegate parts of their discussion to different passages: the materials about rhetorical, dialectical, and fallacious homonymies do not appear much in the *Categories* commentary. In contrast, Avicenna incorporates their doctrines into a general theory of homonymy. He has a continuum, ranging from the merely ambiguous to the completely synonymous.

Just what did Avicenna get from al-Fārābī's discussions of the *Categories*? If we look at his extant works, we do not find much original doctrine. Moreover, Avicenna does not follow al-Fārābī, e.g., in discussing the category of having.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps what he found important in al-Fārābī's work was his method. For al-Fārābī does not follow the order of the text of Aristotle, even in his so-called *Paraphrase*. Instead, he gathers Aristotle's doctrines and writes a treatise with a clear, original organization.<sup>60</sup> So perhaps Avicenna got from al-Fārābī a new approach. This would fit with his remark that he did not understand Aristotle's *Metaphysics* until he had read al-Fārābī's work on it: that is, he did not understand the overall plan and structure of the *Metaphysics*.<sup>61</sup>

Along these lines, Avicenna begins his commentary on the text of the *Categories* not with homonymy as Aristotle and all the Greek commentators did, but with synonymy—presumably because synonymy is for science while homonymy is for sophistry. It is worth noting that in his later works like *Al-Najāt* and the *Ishārāt* Avicenna does not discuss homonymy at all, although he does discuss some other topics discussed in the *Categories*.

Moreover, al-Fārābī, like the Arabic translation of Ishāq [e.g., at *Cat.* 1 line 5], speaks of expressions in terms of having the same or different senses.<sup>62</sup> He also will speak of the essences themselves in terms of their being the same or different in their senses.<sup>63</sup> Such statements may well have suggested to Avicenna a general structure for homonymy based on senses. At any rate, as we shall now see, he does have such a scheme.

<sup>59</sup> al-Fārābī, in his *Paraphrase of the Categories of Aristotle* ed. & trans. D. M. Dunlop, *Islamic Quarterly* 5.1 (1959), 24,7–15 [trans. p. 40 §36], comments on the category of having and even distinguishes two types: a natural having, as a tree has its bark, and a voluntary having, as a man has his clothes.

<sup>60</sup> Likewise in *Kūtab al-Hurūf*, where he presents some of the doctrine of the *Categories*, al-Fārābī uses his own organization of the materials.

<sup>61</sup> *Autobiography* §9. So too Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, p. 239.

<sup>62</sup> *Kūtab al-Hurūf* §81 110,20–1.

<sup>63</sup> In *Kūtab al-Hurūf* §89 117, 8–10.

In order to understand Avicenna's text and to see just how he differs from the earlier commentators, I shall first discuss their doctrines.

The Greek commentators on *Categories* 1 all presented the same basic interpretation of homonymy with some variations. From the viewpoint of Aristotle's text, they provide too much commentary. For they develop, or augment, the few lines devoted to homonyms into a full-blown theory of homonymy incorporating many of Aristotle's doctrines found elsewhere. By comparison, their commentaries on synonymy and paronymy are much shorter.

The Greek commentators worry a lot over the subject to be discussed in the *Categories*. They have various answers, ranging from beings *qua* beings, to thought, to predicables, to predications, to significative expressions, to expressions *qua* expressions. [Simplicius, *in Cat.* 9,4ff.; Porphyry, *in Cat.* 59,10–33] Simplicius reports that Alexander of Aphrodisias proposed that it deals with thoughts. [10,11–9; 9,31–10,2] In contrast Porphyry, in both his extant commentary and in his lost commentary to Gedalius, says that it is about predicates, sc., about expressions signifying things. [57,6; 58,6–10 & 18–20; Simplicius, *in Cat.* 10,20–3] Simplicius ends up concluding that the *Categories* deals with significative expressions, but claims that this amounts to dealing with thoughts insofar as they signify. [10,4–5; 11,12; 12,1–4; 13,11–5; 21,7–9] At one point he likens these thoughts to the Stoic concepts, presumably the *lekta*. [10,2–4] As Aristotle holds at the beginning of *On Interpretation* that thoughts constitute a mental language that the spoken language directly, and the written language indirectly, signify, we can see why he would think these two positions equivalent. Aristotle seems to speak of words and propositions signifying definitions and “meanings” on this basis. [E.g., *An. Po.* 93b29–35]<sup>64</sup>

They all then proceed to divide up these items, the significative thoughts, let's call them, into those that signify homonyms and those that signify synonyms.<sup>65</sup>

They find this division exhaustive for the mental language. They add polynoms and heteronyms to the homonyms, synonyms, and paronyms

<sup>64</sup> David Charles, “Aristotle on Names and their Signification,” in *Language*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge, 1994), p. 43.

<sup>65</sup> In addition to those discussed below, there are also classifications by Boethius, *in Cat.* 166B–C, who follows Simplicius, and variant ones by Olympiodorus, *in Cat.* 34,3–35; David Elias, *in Cat.* 139,29–140,25; Sophonias, *in Cat.* 1,24–2,17. All these seem to have had no influence on Avicenna.

discussed explicitly by Aristotle to account for features peculiar to the spoken or written language. Polynoms have the same account but different names, like two mantles with respect to ‘cloak’ and ‘cape’. Heteronyms have neither the name nor the account in common, as a crow is named ‘crow’ while a dog is named ‘dog’. Simplicius distinguishes such cases, which he calls “merely other names”, from heteronyms proper, which have a common substratum. [22,30–1] In this sense, there is a single thing, say, a stair or a mountain, with two names, ‘ascent’ and ‘descent’. [23,31–3]<sup>66</sup> Simplicius gives two reasons why Aristotle does not discuss polynoms and heteronyms explicitly in *Categories* 1: either he found them obvious or he relegated their discussion to his rhetorical and poetical works. [23,6–19; cf. 36,25–31]

Porphyry presents a classification of homonyms given also by many other commentators. [*in Cat.* 65,18–66,21] Homonyms are: I) by chance, as ‘Alexander’ names both the son of Priam and the son of Philip; II) by intent, either 1) by similarity, as a man and a picture of a man are both named by ‘animal’, or 2) by analogy, as the term ‘ἀρχή’ (‘principle’ or ‘beginning’) can be applied to numbers and lines and rivers, or 3) from something (ἀφ’ ἐνόζ), as different items can be called medical as their names are all said from ‘medicine’ according to different accounts, or 4) relative to something (πρὸς ἔν), as things that are called healthy as said relative to health. He notes that some put what is from or relative to something as intermediate between homonymy and synonymy. [66,15–21] This would include, for instance, Alexander, where he locates focal meaning between homonymy taken in a narrow sense and synonymy. [*in Metaph.* 241,3–24]<sup>67</sup> Also Porphyry discusses the example of the foot of a bed or a mountain. He says that some, like Atticus, take this to come about by metaphor from the foot of an animal.<sup>68</sup> However he classifies it as homonymous by analogy. [66,34–67,32]

Simplicius gives the same classification and examples as Porphyry. [31,22–32,11] He adds only the remark that some combine II.3 & II.4 into a single type. [32,12–3] Still, given Aristotle’s discussion of the two examples in *Metaphysics* IV and the connection between paronymy and

<sup>66</sup> Also cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VIII.8.24.2–9, ed. Stählin, p. 95,5–26; Ammonius, *in Cat.* 16,24–17,3; Alexander, *in Top.* V,4 398,1–4; Luna “Commentaire,” p. 52.

<sup>67</sup> Also Porphyry, *in Cat.* 66,18; Syrianus, *in Met.* 57,18–20.

<sup>68</sup> Hans Wagner, “Über das Aristotelische ‘pollachos legetai to on,’” *Kantstudien* 53 (1962), 75–91, p. 75, observes that analogy became the main focus of discussions of homonymy in Latin medieval philosophy.

focal meaning discussed above, it is hard to see why the two types should be distinguished in the first place. To be sure, the ‘medical’ example concerns things used in the service of medicine, and so concerns the efficient or productive cause, while the health example concerns things for the sake of health and so concerns the final cause. Yet these differences look material and not formal. Perhaps we can find examples of focal meaning that do not involve paronymy. Of course, we could find terms having focal meaning that are not derived from a common base, like Aristotle’s own example of ‘excellence’ [*Cat.* 10b5–9], but then we would not have homonymy but some sort of heteronymy.

Following Alexander, Simplicius says that homonymy can hold between things under the same genus, like ‘equal’ for continuous and for discrete quanta, or between things under different genera, like ‘equal’ for *quanta* and for *relata*. [*in Phys.* 403,13–19] He is insisting on its being possible for homonyms to be in the same genus, as Aristotle says, for instance, that, when *differentiae* are in different species, there is homonymy. [*Part. An.* 643a1–7] This distinction might be correlated with a narrow and a broad conception of homonymy. Simplicius says also that a triangle and triangularity are homonyms with respect to ‘triangle’. [Simplicius, *in Cat.* 264,7–10]<sup>69</sup> However this position seems to come from his Platonist insistence that material triangles, not being perfect triangles, can be triangles in name only.<sup>70</sup>

Ammonius however gives a more elaborate classification. [*in Cat.* 21,16–22,10] Once again, homonyms are either I) by chance or II) by intention 1) “Some are homonyms of one another and paronyms of what they are called after”<sup>71</sup> a) from the efficient cause, as what is said ‘from something’, as with ‘medical’ b) from the final cause, as what is said relative to something, as with ‘healthy’ 2) “Others are homonyms of one another and also homonyms of what they are called after”, where the two things a) differ in the times where they have the name i) when one thing is named in memory of the other, earlier one, like calling a child by the name of his father or teacher ii) when two have the same name by chance iii) when the later one is named in the hope that it will have attributes of the earlier thing, like naming someone today ‘Plato’

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.3.2.2–4; also VI.II.1.

<sup>70</sup> Michel Narcy, “L’homonymie entre Aristote et ses commentateurs néoplatoniciens,” *Les Études Philosophiques* 1 (1981), 35–52, p. 47. S. Marc Cohen and G. Matthews, trans. & comm., *Ammonius: On Aristotle’s Categories* (Ithaca, 1991), n. 42, claim that this is Platonist.

<sup>71</sup> Trans. S. Marc Cohen and G. Matthews, p. 30.

b) do not differ in the times where they have the name, and are named i) by the similarity of the objects, as when the wise (*phronimos*) man is called wisdom (*phronesis*) ii) by participation, like ‘musical’ in musical woman and musical knowledge iii) by analogy, like ‘good’ applied to the bed and to the mountain *aa*) in virtue of similarity, as Gorgias and the river both have the name ‘Gorgias’, from moving rapidly *bb*) from the similarity of the shape *cc*) by metaphor, like the feet and crown of a mountain. Ammonius does not give many details, and may have run together different classifications into one.

Philoponus follows Ammonius somewhat, perhaps because his “commentary” was, it seems, his notes on Ammonius. Be that as it may, he offers two divisions.

The first one is: homonymy either I) by chance II) by intention 1) by memory 2) in hope 3) by analogy, as ‘foot’ for an animal and a hill 4) from something, like medical i) from a cause as a paradigm (—i.e., the formal cause?) as a picture of a man is called a man from the name ‘man’ being applied to the man ii) from the efficient cause, as a scalpel is called healthy 5) relative to one, like ‘healthy’ [and perhaps 6) not by proportion, namely, perhaps. a proportion suitable for making an analogy]. [*in Cat.* 16,22–17,10]

The second one is: homonymy is either I) by chance II) by intention 1) where one of the homonyms is named paronymously from the other a) from the efficient cause, as with ‘medical’ b) from the final cause, as with ‘healthy’ 2) where one of the homonyms is not named paronymously from the other when one thing is named in memory of the other earlier one. [21,14–22,11] This second classification resembles Ammonius’ one, but seems less organized, as Philoponus goes on to observe that the ‘from something’ and the ‘relative to something’ can be simultaneous or not, and that the ‘from something’ can be based on similarity or on the second having the shape of the first, as the picture has the shape of the man in the pictured and so both are called ‘man’. He also lists the difference of being said in hope or in memory. What we have here is basically Ammonius’ scheme, a bit more disorganized with a few other distinctions already made appended perhaps in haste.

Whatever its nuances, the interpretation of Simplicius *et al.* makes homonymy more a matter of the relationship between concepts about things, than about the things themselves.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps in this he has

<sup>72</sup> Concetta Luna, “Commentaire,” p. 41: “...une interprétation “conceptualiste” de l’homonymie: pour Simplicius, l’homonymie consiste dans le rapport entre un seul

become more Platonist, as Plato saw homonymy as more a matter of different beliefs people have about things than a doctrine about things and their names.<sup>73</sup>

I shall now make some remarks useful for understanding these classifications and Avicenna's use of them.

In surveying the corpus of Aristotle, the Greek commentators found a broad and a narrow conception of homonymy. Sometimes Aristotle calls any things said in many ways homonyms. Other times he distinguishes homonyms from things said to be relative to something. Some beings do not have the merely accidental unity of a name, but a real unity, sufficient to ground a science of being *qua* being as Alexander notes. In contrast to this scientific use of a sort of homonymy, Aristotle also names a fallacy one of "homonymy".

Still, on account of Aristotle's general use of 'homonymy', the commentators had reason to see how all these more particular ways in which things are said in many ways could fit into a general scheme of homonymy.

However, they tended to leave out, or at least deemphasize, some cases of homonymy from their general classification: analogy, metaphor, and the homonymy of the fallacy [which we might call, following Avicenna *et al.* 'ambiguity']. Accordingly, they explain that Aristotle did not discuss metaphor and analogy, and likewise heteronymy and polynymy, in the *Categories* as he relegated these topics to rhetorical and poetical works.

In some of these classifications of homonymy we see the appearance of paronymy. Simplicius even goes so far as to make paronymy intermediate between synonymy and homonymy. [*in Cat.* 37,3–4] No one gives a full explanation why, but we can construct one.<sup>74</sup> Accept

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mot et une multiplicité de représentations mentales produites par ce mot, plutôt que dans le rapport entre un seul mot et une multiplicité de choses."

<sup>73</sup> Concetta Luna, "Commentaire," pp. 56–7: "Comme l'a souligné J. P. Anton, la différence d'approche du problème de l'homonymie, entre Aristote et Platon, consiste en ce que pour Platon l'homonymie est une question d'opinions différentes (ce qui est cohérent avec la conception platonicienne de la philosophie comme dialogue), tandis que pour Aristote les ambiguïtés qu'il faut lever ne sont pas celles des opinions: le problème naît uniquement parce que certaines réalités ont le même nom que d'autres." Cf. J. P. Anton, "The Aristotelian Doctrine of Homonymy in the *Categories* and its Platonic Antecedents," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968), 315–326, p. 317.

<sup>74</sup> This is the charitable interpretation. The other leading candidate is that they confused in what ways the 'relative to something' and the 'from something' are related.

Aristotle's doctrine of focal meaning. Then there will be things having different definitions yet having the same name derived from the focal one. E.g., walking and having a temperature of 98°F are both called "healthy", a name derived from the name 'health'.<sup>75</sup> (Note that their having the same name is a feature accidental to particular natural languages, like English and Greek. Indeed Arabic with its more complex verbal system would tend to use different forms for names for 'being productive of health' and 'being a sign of health'.)<sup>76</sup> Here then we have a case of two things sharing the same name yet differing in account. So they are homonyms. Yet each of them is also a paronym relative to health. On this interpretation, health, the state itself, would not be a homonym relative to one of the things called "healthy".

Ammonius' classification, despite being expressed unclearly, falls along these lines. Some homonyms have a paronymous name in common; others do not. Thus Philoponus says, "for it (medical) is named paronymously from it (medicine), while [holding] homonymously to each other." [*in Cat.* 21,201; cf. Simplicius, *in Cat.* 264,7–10]<sup>77</sup> However, his use of 'from something' and 'relative to something' would be rather careless. For all homonyms having a paronymous name are said "from something". But then Ammonius goes on to subdivide these two into those having things named from the efficient cause, as being productive of, say, health, and into those having things named from the final cause, as for the sake of health. The problem is that he describes the former as "from something" and the latter as "relative to something". Yet these expressions also describe the structure common to all such paronyms. Ammonius himself admits that some combine these two types [*in Cat.* 21,21–2].

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Philoponus, *in Cat.* 15,7–10, although he is discussing names for things and for their essence.

<sup>76</sup> As Avicenna himself notes at *Al-Maqūlāt*, eds. G. Anawati, A. El-Ehwani, M. El-Khodeiri, & S. Zayed (Cairo, 1959) (Part One, Volume Two of *As-Šifā*) 16,12–17,14; *Al-ʿIbāra*, ed. M. Al-Khudayri (Cairo, 1970), (Part One, Volume Three of *As-Šifā*) 19,16–21,6. He is following al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Hurūf*, ed. M. Mahdi (Beirut, 1969), e.g., §§19–20, 71,2–15. On the structure of paronymy in Arabic see W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (Cambridge, 1967), Vol. I §195; Wolfdietrich Fischer, *A Grammar of Classical Arabic*, 3rd ed. trans. J. Rodgers (New Haven, 2002) p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Concetta Luna, "Commentaire," p. 149: "La langue grecque n'a pas deux termes pour désigner la triangularité et le triangle, comme elle en a deux pour désigner la courbure... et ce qui est courbe... On dit donc "τρίγωνον" à la fois pour désigner la propriété d'être triangle... et pour désigner le triangle écrit sur le tableau ou fait en bois (le poion). Cette double signification de "trigwnon" en fait un terme homonyme."

The doctrines of the Greek commentators passed into Islamic philosophy, just as the late Greek commentators themselves were exiled from a Byzantine Christian court but then invited to establish a school by a Muslim caliph.<sup>78</sup> Let us now see what Avicenna does with it.

Avicenna begins by discussing synonymy, whereas Aristotle starts *Categories* 1 with homonymy. The Greek commentators made a great defense of Aristotle's order of presentation (Cf. Simplicius, in *Cat.* 21,1–22,13). In contrast, Avicenna is rejecting it.

Avicenna holds that names have a relation to things via senses or concepts. We have seen some basis for such a conception of senses in Aristotle and the Greek commentators, as well as in the Arabic translation of the *Categories* and in al-Fārābī. There is also the Stoic concept of the *lekton*, which seems quite a close relative of Avicenna's conception of a sense (*ma'nan*). Aside from Stoic doctrines presented in the Greek commentators, it is hard to know what Stoic sources Avicenna had. Still, given his extensive treatment of hypotheticals in his formal logic (in *al-Qiyās*), he seems to have had some. In any case, for him the conception of a sense is fundamental. Also suggestive is the fact that Stoics tended not to distinguish synonymy and pluronymy, nor even heteronymy and homonymy.<sup>79</sup> This tendency would encourage Avicenna to see homonymy, synonymy etc. lying on a continuum.

Constructed on a conception of the sense, Avicenna's theory of homonymy is far simpler than those of the Greek commentators. Seeing its simplicity depends on having a certain interpretation of his conception of similarity. What makes things similar but not the same? We may say: because they share some but not all features. This holds even in a metaphorical comparison. A woman may be likened to a rose with respect to beauty but not with respect to having thorns or needing pruning in the winter. So too senses may have some similarity or overlap but not be the same. Thus, when Avicenna distinguishes homonyms, he says that homonyms of the second sort do not have the same sense but have a similarity. Now not having the same sense is compatible with having and with not having totally different senses. So we get cases like

<sup>78</sup> Gerhard Endress, "Die Wissenschaftliche Literatur," in *Grundrisse der Arabischen Philologie*, ed. H. Gätje (Wiesbaden, 1987), vol. 2, pp. 402–5.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Simplicius, in *Cat.* 36,8–12. Concetta Luna, "Commentaire," p. 115: "Dans l'usage stoïcien, "synonyme" a donc la même signification que "polyonyme" et, pourrait-on dire, il correspond tout à fait l'usage moderne de ce mot. Simplicius affirme que l'usage aristotélicien est plus approprié..." Cf. C. Douglas McGee, "Who Means What by 'Synonymy'?" *Inquiry* 2 (1959), 199–212.



similarity, such as Socrates and his picture both being named ‘man’. Avicenna will consider metaphors of the same type, like the leg of an animal and a bed, and analogies, like the ‘archē’ of number and line—apparently with analogy being a type of metaphor.<sup>80</sup>

Furthermore, it helps to view Avicenna’s classification of homonymy not as discrete but as continuous. In effect, he gives a continuum with one endpoint limiting the homonymous being the strictly synonymous and the other being the completely heteronomous (which he mentions at 11,4, and at 15,16–16,3 along with polynoms), having neither a common name, account, or sense. Inside this continuum, within each type of homonymy, he will discuss cases that satisfy its description more or less so. Moreover, because having disjoint, discrete types does not concern him, he does not fuss much over the classification but over the details of the structure of particular cases. So he has a continuum within his division, and perhaps implies this at *Al-Maqūlāt* 11,5–7; 14,6–15,15. But, for the sake of reference, I shall divide up and number the sorts that he does discuss.

His classification is threefold:

It may be said that everything that is not by way of agreement [synonymy] is by coincidence of the name [homonymy], and has three divisions: that is because either [I] the sense is one in itself, even though it differs in another respect, or that [II] it is not one, but between the two of them there is a similarity, or that [III] it is not one and there is also not a similarity between them.<sup>81</sup>

The first division [I] contains things that are not strictly synonymous but share a single sense. In light of the descriptions and examples, the first division includes those things said by Aristotle and the commentators to be named either “from something” or “relative to something”.<sup>82</sup> [II] The second division concerns cases where the things being named have a real basis of similarity for sharing the name, but not the same sense. From the examples, this type seems to include all cases based on a real resemblance, including metaphor, analogy, and similarity of appearance, like the example of Socrates and his picture. [III] The third division concerns cases where the things share only the name.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1457b6–16.

<sup>81</sup> *Al-Maqūlāt* 10,4–7; all translations from this are mine.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1030a32–b7; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b34–1148a2.

<sup>83</sup> A likely important source for this classification is al-Fārābī’s *Short Treatise On Aristotle’s De interpretatione*, trans. Zimmermann (Oxford, 1981), pp. 49–52, pp. 227–30.

Avicenna considers senses, the concepts in the mental language [cf. *Int.* 16a3–8], to exist in the mind via sense perception and abstraction. Such senses are given conventional names by imposition or stipulation in the written or spoken language. These senses differ from definitions or “accounts” (λόγοι) proper, as they contain all that is common to the individuals from which they are abstracted. Avicenna gives the example of people living in the Sudan: from them we would have the sense or concept of a human being as having black skin, even though the definition of human being, grounded upon *quiddities* in themselves accessed via intuition (νοῦς) does not include that characteristic.<sup>84</sup>

I now discuss each type of homonymy distinguished:

[I] Given what he says at 11,5, Avicenna divides homonyms sharing a name and a single sense into A) the absolute and B) the relative. Both the absolute and the relative sorts concern things with focal meaning. Avicenna says about all these cases that the two things could have instead been named by different names or expressions—presumably synonymous ones. Even in the absolute cases, we could have said, more precisely, e.g., ‘being that is prior’ and ‘being that is posterior’. Hence, even though only the relative cases use paronymous names as commonly understood, even the absolute cases use names having a whiff of the paronymous.<sup>85</sup>

[A] In the absolute sort, the name applies to the two things in the same sense. The name does not need a different sense when predicated of each. Yet it will need a different “account”, or perhaps definition, if the things are to avoid being synonyms.

1. [10,8–11] ‘Existent’ (being; ὄν) can be applied to substances, quantities etc. in the same sense and so is used absolutely.<sup>86</sup> Quantities and substances exist *in re* in the same sense. Yet they do differ in terms of priority and posteriority and this, as Aristotle had said, eliminates strict synonymy.<sup>87</sup> (Indeed Simplicius had brought up this issue later on in his *Categories* commentary. [418,19–419,6]) Also they differ in the sense that they have different modes of existence or being: as a substance, as a quantity etc. This fits with Avicenna’s metaphysics where the

<sup>84</sup> *Al-Burhān*, ed. Badawi (Cairo, 1954), 46,11–6 *et passim*. Cf. Avicenna, *Fī Al-Nafs*, ed. G. Anawati (Cairo, 1962), II.2. I thank Claude Panaccio for instigating this paragraph.

<sup>85</sup> As in Porphyry’s distinction II.2 perhaps.

<sup>86</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1030a32–b7.

<sup>87</sup> *Eudemian Ethics* 1218a1–8.

necessary being causes various *quiddities* to come to exist *in re* and to associate with other ones via acquiring *differentiae* and via some becoming accidental to others.<sup>88</sup>

2. [10,12–16] Avicenna also says that homonyms may have a name with the same sense and be simultaneous (being neither prior nor posterior), while differing in being primary and secondary. He gives no examples. I offer as possible candidates a triangle and an isosceles triangle both being named ‘triangle’ or being named ‘something having its interior angles equal to two right angles’. As Aristotle had said, such names hold of both triangle and the isosceles triangle, but of the former primarily and of the latter not so. [*An. Pb.* I.5]

3. [10,17–11,4] Other names keep the same sense and even the same account but differ in what they signify about the things they describe. Ivory and snow are not equally white. They are white understood on the same definition. Still ‘white’ when applied to ivory means ‘off-white’, let’s say, while, when applied to snow, it means ‘arctic white’. The Greek commentators do not mention this case.<sup>89</sup>

Why does Avicenna say that such homonyms have the same sense? Apparently, he is thinking of white as the genus, covering a range of whitish colors. These colors would be differentiated by specific *differentiae* like ‘off-’ and ‘arctic’ in the example above. They still share the same general, Aristotelian definition of whiteness: standing out in sight.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, they are not precisely synonyms with respect to ‘white’ it seems. For they are more or less white, and so have the name hold of them in different degrees. They also fall under the priority condition given by Aristotle,<sup>91</sup> like the first two cases (IA.1 & 2).

Avicenna also remarks, about this sort but presumably with general import, that in ordinary language names will be used imprecisely and their senses must be ascertained from the intention of the speaker. Indeed Avicenna regularly distinguishes an ideal, technical language from the ordinary vernacular. Perhaps he is thinking here of such cases as when ‘white’ is taken to describe varying colors of human skin.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> See Allan Bäck, “The *Triplex Status* and its Justification,” *Studies in the History of Logic*, eds. I. Angelelli & M. Cerrezo (Berlin, 1996).

<sup>89</sup> Possibly: *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b34–1148a2.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Ammonius, in *Cat.* 45,2; 40, 13–4.

<sup>91</sup> *Eudemian Ethics* 1218a1–8.

<sup>92</sup> See Allan Bäck, “The Ordinary Language Approach in Traditional Logic,” in *Argumentationstheorie*, ed. K. Jacobi (Leiden, 1993), pp. 507–30, pp. 511–2.

[B] [11,5–7] The relative sort concerns things having the same name said “relative to something” in Aristotle’s account of focal meaning. In this case the shared sense does not come from the name common to the two homonyms but from the thing relative to which they have a relationship. Thus the knife and exercise may have a common, paronymous name, ‘medical’. ‘Medical’ however is defined differently when predicated of the knife and exercise. The shared sense comes from the presence of ‘medicine’ in the different definitions.

Avicenna differs fundamentally from the Greek commentators and perhaps from Aristotle himself about what things he allows to share a single name in the same sense. He has a set of examples of names ranging from ‘existent’ to ‘white’ and ‘philosophy’ to ‘medical’ and ‘healthy’ and ‘divine’. He says that some of these names hold absolutely with different degrees of priority, primacy, or participation, while others hold only relatively. The fundamental point lies in his claiming that cases like ‘being’ and ‘medical’ have formal differences. Even Aristotle grouped these cases together in arguing for the unity of a science of being *qua* being. To put the point historically backwards, Avicenna has a position on transcendental terms more like Scotus’ than Aristotle’s.

II. [11,8–12,7] The type where the sense of the name is not one but the homonyms have a similarity is homonymy proper, in the narrow sense distinguished by Alexander. Avicenna runs together two examples commonly kept apart by the Greek commentators. (A) The first is the basic one from *Categories* 1, where an animal and its picture are homonyms with respect to being named ‘animal’. (B) The second is the standard example of a metaphor, of a leg of an animal and a leg of a bed.<sup>93</sup> Avicenna recognizes that the latter is a metaphor while the former is not. Still he observes that the metaphor was made on the basis of a perceived similarity—and so he does not use the usual Arabic word for ‘metaphor’ but instead calls this “a transferred name”: we might call it a *simile*.<sup>94</sup> In both cases the name is applied to one homonym primarily and to the other secondarily.

He also remarks that some of these homonyms are (C) fixed by itself (or *per se*) while (D) others are based on a “relationship” (*nisba*).

(C) The first sort seems straightforward. The very attributes of the two things involved fix the similarity. Thus the form of the animal and

<sup>93</sup> *Poetics* 1457b16–9; *Rhetoric* 1401a12–5.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Zimmermann, *al-Fārābī’s Commentary*, p. 227, nn. 2–3.

the form of its picture are similar, and so are the shapes of the legs of animals and tables because of attributes of the two things involved.

(D) The second sort is more cryptic. ‘*Nisba*’ can also mean ‘attribution’ or ‘proportion’. Avicenna seems to use it in a quasi-technical sense to signify a relationship between two things that does not fall into the category of relation.<sup>95</sup> From the Greek commentators we can see that the relationship here is analogy, which can be understood as a “proportion”. The example of ‘beginning’ (ἀρχή) is the standard one of analogy in Porphyry and Simplicius.

Some of the subdivisions of the classifications given by the Greek commentators might apply to this second sort, as I will discuss below. For example, Avicenna mentions Ammonius’ distinction [I.2.i–iii] of giving things a common name by chance, in memory, or in hope. [14,1–5]

III. [11,8–13.14] In the third main type, the two things have only the name in common, with no shared sense or similarity. Avicenna does not include metaphor here when it has a real basis—the transferred name or simile. However, when ‘dog’ is applied to a star and an animal, in the example from the *Rhetoric*, Avicenna thinks that there is no real similarity between stars and dogs, but only a merely mental one.<sup>96</sup> So Aristotle puts this example here. Paralogisms of the fallacy of homonymy would belong to this sort too.<sup>97</sup>

Avicenna does offer the option that, if such cases like the dog and the Dog star could be shown to have a real similarity, then they would belong to the second sort and be similes. [13,15–14,6] He uses the example of the name ‘*ayn*’ applied to an eye and to cash. He gives an etymological way to connect them up so that they have a real similarity, but seems to be ambivalent about whether or not there is indeed a real similarity. He distinguishes here the three causes for applying the name of an eye (‘*ayn*’) to cash that Ammonius had given: coincidence, memory, and hope. [II.2ai–iii] For Avicenna these would suggest that the naming had no real similarity. Still, he can also apply his remark about ordinary language use and the intention of the speaker here, so as to allow for a loose conception of the second type (II).

Avicenna settles on calling this third sort ‘ambiguity (*taškik*)’. Thus, when discussing whether being is a genus for the ten categories or whether it is “said in many ways”, he says:

<sup>95</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1148b7–10. See too 67,2–3; 79,5; 85,10;145,17. Cf. al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* §§37–40.

<sup>96</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* 249a19–25; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b34–1148a2.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. *Al-Safsata*, ed. A. Ehwany (Cairo, 1958), 45,5; 50,14.

And the multiplication of what is being talked about is in three modes: Either there is multiplication via agreement in its subjects, or a multiplication via a coincidence in inflection comprehending its similarity and participation [homonymy], or a multiplication via ambiguity. [59,10–1]

Apparently Avicenna means by “agreement in its subjects” here not synonymy (as ‘agreement’ normally means for him) but having the same sense. If so, we have the focal-meaning type of homonymy (I), homonymy in the narrow sense, the second type (II) of homonymy, and ambiguity as its third type (III). Avicenna, being interested in science and not sophistry, would have little use in his own philosophy for this third sort, and so would separate it out.

He distinguishes the second and third types of homonymy in the same way at 14,6–15,15. He goes on to observe that they agree in not having the same account but using a single name. He then gives a somewhat confusing discussion of the example where the name ‘leg’ is applied to both a bed and an animal. Above he said that this was a case of the second type. Here he suggests a way that it might, alternatively, be taken of the third type and be a case of mere ambiguity. The main idea is that the things could have the similarity of being three-dimensional bodies, but differ in being legs. For after all, Aristotle would say that a leg that is not alive is a leg only homonymously. [*Part. An.* 640b35–641a5; cf. *Metaph.* 1035b23–5; 1036b30–2] If this were the only similarity between bed and animal legs—and not also being a support for the main bulk of an object etc.—then ‘leg’ would indeed be used ambiguously. However the things being compared do seem to have such additional similarities. Thus the example looks contrived. It has the further problem that animal legs and bed legs are legs synonymously with respect to the name ‘body’—unless Avicenna is thinking of making it an instance of one of the sorts of the first type of homonymy (I). This entire discussion would then resemble the standard one in the Greek commentators about whether homonyms are synonyms: with respect to the name ‘homonym’ the things that are homonyms via another name are synonyms; with respect to that other name, they are homonyms.<sup>98</sup>

(Avicenna also considers but rejects an argument appearing in the *Sophistical Refutations* [165a10–3] that homonymy is inevitable as there

<sup>98</sup> E.g., Simplicius, in *Cat.* 30,16–31,21.

are an infinite number of things but only a finite number of words. This entire issue does not appear in the Greek commentators.)

In sum, Avicenna has a field of homonymy running the full spectrum of the phenomena: the linguistic data and the *endoxa*, the texts of Aristotle and the others, and the reputable common ways of talking. Strict synonymy, where the name has no change in inflection and the definition, gives one endpoint or limit to the spectrum. The things having the same name in the same sense but in different respects (I) lie on the boundary of homonymy closest to that endpoint. Mere ambiguity, where it has just chanced in a particular language that the same sign, spoken and/or written, happens to be used for two different objects without any common ground, provides the other boundary. Heteronymy, where two different things have two different names, senses, and definitions, provides the other endpoint or limit. Various changes of meaning, along with the respective texts in the Aristotelian tradition, can be fitted along the continuum of this spectrum within those limits.

Avicenna's division of homonymy does not match up with the standard one of the Greek commentators. Take their main one: homonyms by chance or by intention. Some of each of these types will fall into his third type, where there is no overlap in sense or in similarity. The same word may chance to name two different sorts of objects, like κλείς in Greek, *'ayn* in Arabic, and 'bank' in English, with no overlap. Yet likewise we can have such names intentionally: if I call my child 'angel' in hope that she will act like one, or my wastebasket 'Dubya' in memory of a U.S. President. One might object that in the latter cases there is an imagined similarity. But for Avicenna such fancies are for sophists; an imagined similarity need not be a real one.

Avicenna's scheme for homonymy has the advantage over the earlier ones of greater compass. He can include in it the fallacious, metaphorical, and ambiguous sort of homonymy that were omitted or left to one side earlier. He also has a greater range of texts from Aristotle, e.g., *Sophistical Refutations* 165a10–3, on the argument that homonymy is inevitable because things are infinite while words are finite.

Avicenna has a very complex terminology for 'homonymy'. The homonymous he indicates by two expressions, not necessarily similar in his own theory: "participating" or "sharing" (*ištirāk*), on the one hand, and "coinciding" (*ittifāq*), on the other. The latter appears in Iṣḥāq's translation of *Categories* 1. The former comes from Arabic philology and was used by al-Fārābī, who uses "participation in the name" when

speaking of two senses of ‘non-existent’.<sup>99</sup> These two expressions have the common notion that the things share the name, or coincide or agree in it, but not in the definition. In addition Avicenna adds ‘ambiguous’ (*mutašābih*) and ‘equivocal’ (*mušakuk*) to the mix, each of which might be used to signify homonymy. Many translators have ignored these differences and just translated most of these expressions by ‘ambiguous’ or ‘homonymous’.<sup>100</sup> Yet Avicenna does take some pains to keep all these terms distinct.

However, Avicenna perhaps has a technical usage for these different expressions, obscured by such translations. (I have noted that the Revised Oxford translation of Aristotle is not too precise either!) Now we have seen that the Greek commentators kept distinct various types of homonymy often signified by different expressions. Following their tradition, Avicenna distinguishes different types of homonymy too. Does he have a systematic vocabulary?

In light of Avicenna’s classification of homonymy, I suggest that Avicenna generally, albeit with exceptions, has the following usage: ‘coincident’, following Ishāq’s translation, signifies homonymy in general, and sometimes, in particular the narrow sort of homonymy discussed in *Categories* 1, i.e., type II. Likewise ‘equivocal’ when modifying ‘name’ would represent some sort of homonymy, such that the two homonyms have two different definitions or accounts relative to that name.<sup>101</sup> ‘Participating’ signifies the first type (I) of homonymy, based on focal meaning, and ‘ambiguity’ the third type (III) dealing with poetry, rhetoric, and sophistry. Thus, for instance he contrasts synonymy, homonymy by participation, and ambiguity.<sup>102</sup> So perhaps Avicenna has a systematic vocabulary as well as a systematic theory for homonymy.

How does Avicenna’s classification fare as an interpretation of Aristotle? Above all, his theory seems to differ, as he uses senses as well as

<sup>99</sup> *Kitāb al-Hurūf* 122,4; so too in Avicenna, *Safsata* 45,5; 47,1 when discussing the fallacy of homonymy. Cf. Zimmermann, *al-Fārābī’s Commentary and Short Treatise*, p. 228 n.3. This use of ‘participation’ may not be confusing Aristotle with Plato. Cf. Ammonius, in *Cat.* 22,2–10, on division of homonymy, incl. participation. S. Marc Cohen and G. Matthews, trans. & comm. Ammonius: *On Aristotle’s Categories* (Ithaca, 1991), n. 42, claim that this is Platonist.

<sup>100</sup> Goichon in her *Lexique* and the editors of *Al-Maqūlāt* in their Index of terms do give different translations for most but don’t explain the differences.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. *Al-Maqūlāt* 11,5; 94,13.

<sup>102</sup> *Al-Maqūlāt* 28,5–8.



names and “accounts” (or definitions) in his analysis of homonymy. Aristotle himself does not mention “senses” in his account—unless we accept the new Owenite orthodoxy that homonymy deals with meanings. So it depends how strongly we take Aristotle’s claim that homonyms have *only* a name in common. [*Cat.* 1a3]

Avicenna’s scheme fares better as giving a theory covering Aristotle’s uses and remarks on homonymy. The continuum gives a clear sense to Aristotle’s distinction between close and remote homonymy<sup>103</sup> in terms of being closer to or further away from having a relation of synonymy. That is, we can think of objects as having senses and then consider to what extent the senses overlap. For modern interpreters also have claimed that “the distinction between homonymy (complete difference in definitions) and synonymy (identity of definitions) is not a dichotomy because definitions may be partially identical, partially different.”<sup>104</sup>

Again, Hintikka also complains that Aristotle is not consistent in different passages in classifying analogical and metaphorical uses of a word.<sup>105</sup> Avicenna’s discussion about how metaphors can be taken as type II or III has some use here as he offers a way to put analogy and metaphor on a continuum.

We might compare Avicenna’s classification of homonymy with a modern one, given as an interpretation of Aristotle. Christopher Shields, who also attributes senses and meanings to Aristotle, takes homonymy in general to be “comprehensive homonymy”, where the homonyms are “not completely overlapping in definition”.<sup>106</sup> He divides comprehensive homonymy into the discrete and the associated.<sup>107</sup> The discrete has no overlap in definition, while the associated does.<sup>108</sup> Homonymy

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* 249a19–25; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b34–1148a2.

<sup>104</sup> Hintikka. “Aristotle and the Ambiguity of Ambiguity,” p. 141.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>106</sup> Christopher Shields, *Unity in Multiplicity* (Oxford, 1999), p. 11. Cf. T. H. Irwin, “Homonymy in Aristotle,” *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1981), p. 255 on connected and unconnected homonymy. Likewise, Hintikka. “Aristotle and the Ambiguity of Ambiguity,” p. 144: “We have to realize that the distinction between homonyms and terms with merely different applications often amounts to something rather different from distinction between complete and partial discrepancy of definitions.”

<sup>107</sup> Christopher Shields, *Unity in Multiplicity*, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> So too T. H. Irwin, “Homonymy in Aristotle,” p. 524, with “connected” and “disconnected” homonymy—i.e., Avicenna’s I & II versus III. He goes on, p. 528, to contrast homonymy where the term is predicated of both things strictly, from the “spurious cases, where only one is, while the second has the predication based on similarity—i.e., Avicenna’s I versus II.

of focal meaning is one sort of the associated, which Shields calls the core-dependent.<sup>109</sup> He also divides the associated into the accidental and the non-accidental, which seems to include the core-dependent.<sup>110</sup> (He also distinguishes seductive and non-seductive homonymy, as well as homonymy based on shallow and deep differences in signification, although he does not want these in his classification proper.<sup>111</sup> The former distinction contrasts homonymies easy to spot from those that are not; the latter does something similar by appealing to nominal versus real definitions.)

In the terms of the Greek commentators (whom he does not cite much) and Avicenna, Shield's comprehensive is homonymy in the broad sense (I–III), the discrete is homonymy in the narrow sense (I & II), the associated is that of the focal meaning sort (I), the accidental is homonymy by chance, and the non-accidental is homonymy by intention. So Avicenna does not have too different a classification from Shield's, except that his doctrine of shared senses gives more precision to "overlap", and his scheme gives Aristotelian philosophy more theoretical coherence. Indeed, if we are to follow the "new" orthodoxy of attributing senses to Aristotle, we might as well become followers of Avicenna. Anthropological trope theory today uses a vertical dimension of analogy similar to Avicenna's continuum.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, as for the contemporary treatment of fallacy, if Powers is right that all fallacies can be reduced to the fallacy of equivocation, Avicenna's classification may offer a start to a comprehensive theory.<sup>113</sup>

There are some semblances of scholarly and philological scholasticism, with regard to Aristotelian studies...but the hurricane of Avicenna's philosophy quickly swept such tendencies away.<sup>114</sup>

#### *Averroes as The Commentator?*

The Aristotelian tradition may have slighted Avicenna as a commentator on account of Averroes being given canonical status as 'the

<sup>109</sup> Christopher Shields, *Unity in Multiplicity*, pp. 37; 27.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40; 101–2. Cf. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* 182b25–7.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Friedrich, "Polytropy," in *Beyond Metaphor*, ed. J. Fernandez (Stanford, 1991), pp. 19–55, p. 40.

<sup>113</sup> Lawrence Powers, "Equivocation," in *Fallacies*, eds. H. Hansen & R. Pinto (University Park, 1995), pp. 293–301, p. 287.

<sup>114</sup> Dmitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, p. 55.

Commentator". In addition, Averroes depicts Avicenna as a deviant Aristotelian and a lousy commentator. Before assessing Avicenna's worth as a commentator, let me review this historiography.

Averroes is known in the West in two guises: first, as the Commentator on Aristotle's works (with the exception of a few like the *Politics*).<sup>115</sup> This appellation came about because he gave the most literal and extensive commentary then available, and because in large part the West received the works of Aristotle in Latin translation incorporated into Averroes' commentary. Second, as the leader of Averroism in the Renaissance, where, among other things, he was followed for his views on the active intellect. In his latter guise, his *Incoherence of the Incoherence* assumed prominence, where he debates with Al-Ghazālī over the orthodoxy of the views of the philosophers. Yet even here Averroes mostly follows the Greek commentators and occasionally earlier Islamic commentators like al-Fārābī or Avicenna.

Thus the medievals reckoned Averroes as "The Commentator" of Aristotle without equal. At any rate, so they appellated him. Why did he deserve to have this name so imposed?

The usual story is this: Averroes, that is, Abu'l Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd, was born at Cordoba in Andalusia in the twelfth century into a family of jurists and theologians of the literalist tradition. He himself became a judge, as well as a court physician and a philosopher. He was commissioned by the caliph, Abū Ya'qūb, to write a series of commentaries on Aristotle, so that the doctrine could be understood more clearly and used by the Islamic community.<sup>116</sup>

At the least this standard view of Averroes as The Commentator needs modification. For we know that there were many literal commentaries on Aristotle's works available before Averroes and indeed before Avicenna, notably in Baghdad. Perhaps the point remains that those in Spain did not have these works accessible, and so needed a set of Aristotle commentaries locally. However, Muslim Spain was not that isolated: recall that Maimonides managed to move from Spain to Africa to Egypt.

At any rate, upon his commission from the caliph, Averroes then wrote a series of threefold commentaries on most of the works of Aristotle.

<sup>115</sup> Oliver Leaman, *Averroes and his Philosophy* (Oxford, 1988), p. 179.

<sup>116</sup> George Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Philosophy and Religion* (Leiden, 1959), pp. 12–3.

For most of the works, he wrote an epitome, a medium-length or middle commentary, and a long commentary. For him, these commentaries had different functions: 1) the epitomes were designed for general use, and accordingly contained many remarks not to be found in the works of Aristotle, so as to relate the doctrines of Aristotle to the current conditions in Muslim Andalusia; 2) the middle commentaries were designed for the religious authorities, those who had a profound knowledge of Islam but were not philosophers; 3) the long commentaries were designed for specialists, sc., for the few, elite philosophers. This division of labor among the commentaries agrees with Averroes' theory of the threefold levels of truth: the rhetorical, the dialectical, and the demonstrative.<sup>117</sup>

Averroes' commentaries follow in the tradition of his native culture and jurisprudence: they are literalist. Despite the insistence of some on the brilliance of Averroes,<sup>118</sup> I can find nothing original in detail in Averroes that cannot be found in earlier philosophers and commentators, notably Alexander and Themistius. The exceptions concern general and not particular features, as I discuss next. We might call him not "the Commentator" as the medievals did, but 'the Paraphraser'. However, I am not certain that this is a criticism. For Averroes was a literalist. Further, at his time, given that many commentators on Aristotle, like Porphyry, Simplicius, and al-Fārābī, had injected Neoplatonic and Stoic influences, and others, like Avicenna, had departed greatly from the text, a literalist interpretation, intent on reclaiming the original Aristotle, had some value.

Moreover, Averroes did not paraphrase blindly all of Aristotle's works nor the earlier commentaries, especially of Alexander of Aphrodisias. For instance, take his commentary on the *Poetics*. Note that Islam had no tradition of theater. Accordingly, Averroes had no experience of plays, whether tragic or comic. Now, in writing his commentary on the *Poetics*, Averroes did not follow Avicenna's lead, of trying, pathetically, to explain what tragedies and comedies were on the basis, it seems, of *marginalia* in the Arabic translations of the *Poetics*. Instead, he looked for counterparts for tragedies and comedies in his own culture. He found them in the poetical traditions of eulogy and satire. His examples are not as silly as you might think. Indeed, they give some plausibility to the

<sup>117</sup> Hourani, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, pp. 64–6.

<sup>118</sup> E.g., Leaman, *Averroes* pp. 10; 110.

claim that Aristotle's philosophy, or, if you like, philosophy in general, has some claim to being transcultural.

Another instance of Averroes' independent thought concerns political theory. Averroes commented on most works of Aristotle. One big exception is the *Politics*. In its place, he commented on Plato's *Republic*. We can suspect various reasons for this. One is that Averroes is following the Islamic tradition of al-Fārābī *et al.*, who commented upon and extended the doctrines of Plato's *Republic* to Islam. Another is that he would have found Plato's political theory more relevant to the caliphate structure of government common in Andalusia. A third is that, given his own theory of the threefold levels of truth, he would have found Plato's view of the relation of philosophy and religion, with its supporting doctrines, more congenial or, at any rate, more explicit than Aristotle's. Still, on the whole, Averroes does little in his commentaries besides present Aristotle's texts in a close reading, with explications drawn from earlier commentators.

Averroes may though have had originality in his depiction of Avicenna. In his debate with Al-Ghazālī, largely unknown to the medieval West, he defended philosophy by offering Avicenna as a scapegoat. In general he asserts that Aristotle and the like do not have views antithetical to Islam. Rather only Aristotle as interpreted by Avicenna does. Averroes concedes the incoherence of *a* philosopher, *sc.*, of Avicenna's views, both with the text of Aristotle and with the truth, while defending the coherence of the other philosophers.

In this, Averroes may have been partly responsible for the Latin medievals' having an "Avicenne *fictif*," as well as an "Aristote *fictif*." For instance, he represents Avicenna as defining the possible as what has a cause and the necessary existent as what does not have a cause.<sup>119</sup> True, Avicenna does hold that the "possible existent" needs a cause to exist while the necessary existent does not.<sup>120</sup> Still, he holds too that the logically possible itself like the necessary needs no cause for being possible: it is possible in itself. Averroes makes other mistakes about Avicenna's doctrines, e.g., that he denied that there can be an infinite number of souls.<sup>121</sup> Again, Averroes accuses Avicenna of being wrong on the nature of the empirical agent, and sides with Aristotle. However,

<sup>119</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, pp. 164–6 [277–80].

<sup>120</sup> *Al-Ilāhiyyāt* I.6.

<sup>121</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, p. 163 [274], but see p. 14 n. 6; n. 1 and *Al-Ilāhiyyāt* IX.3–4.

he does not seem to have Aristotle's view correctly.<sup>122</sup> Again, Averroes may be making the same mistake in accusing Avicenna for introducing matter for incorporeal substances and not following Aristotle.<sup>123</sup>

Again, in his *Questions on Logic*, Averroes sees Avicenna as the odd-ball among commentators who has committed many errors both of interpretation and of philosophy. He insists, against Avicenna, that the copula serves merely to connect subject and predicate and not to make an assertion of existence.<sup>124</sup> He particularly dislikes Avicenna's analysis (derived from Sosigenes and Alexander) of necessary and categorical propositions into different types according to the duration of the existence of the subject and the time of predication.<sup>125</sup> However, Averroes' own views look peculiar. He says that the existence of individual men has no relevance to the truth of 'every man is animal' because "the universals are not generable."<sup>126</sup> That is, a universal proposition concerns universals and not individuals. This surely moves away from Aristotle's insistence on the primacy of individual substances. (Averroes may have been inclined to this view by his view of the copula.)

One circumstance that might explain Averroes' inaccurate portrait of Avicenna—and Aristotle?—concerns the philosophical community in Spain at his time. There were then some rather fervent followers of al-Fārābī and Avicenna.<sup>127</sup> Averroes might be attacking their interpretations rather than the tortuous texts of Avicenna.

We might further explain a lot of Averroes' claims in light of his political motives.<sup>128</sup> He wanted to make philosophy respectable to

<sup>122</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, pp. 108–9 [180–2]; 108 n. 1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1073a 28

<sup>123</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, p. 160 [270–1], but cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1069b 25

<sup>124</sup> *Quaestiones in libros logicae*, in *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis* (Venice 1562–74; repr. Frankfurt-am-Main, 1962), vol. Ib 78B. (I have consulted the Arabic text in D. M. Dunlop, "Averroes on the Modality of Propositions," *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962), when available: §§11–2, pp. 32–4).

<sup>125</sup> *Quaestiones* 79L; 80B. He says, 80B–C, that Avicenna has a different view in *An-Najāt* (so too Nicholas Rescher, *Studies in the History of Arabic Logic* (Liverpool) 1963, p. 104. But cf. the notes above: Avicenna seems there only to be summarizing and simplifying his doctrines. George Hourani, "Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence," *The Philosophical Forum* 14.1 (1974), p. 74, agrees.

<sup>126</sup> *Quaestiones*, 80C.

<sup>127</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Studies in the History of Arabic Logic*, p. 90.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. Barry Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation* (Albany, 1985), pp. 7; 12–5; 722–3. He says, pp. 52–3, that Averroes is concealing his real views in the *Tahāfut*. But where then are they? In his "commentaries" on Aristotle? Cf. too, Thérèse-Ann Druart, "Averroes on God's Knowledge of Being *qua* Being," in *Studies in Thomistic Theology*, ed. P. Lockey (Houston, 1996), p. 185.

Muslim fundamentalists perhaps at the cost of truth. Too, Averroes may be attacking some of his Avicennian contemporaries more than Avicenna himself. For many of Avicenna's current followers ascribe some of Alexander's doctrines to him: the world as a necessary eternal animal; the divinity of the heavenly animal.<sup>129</sup> Given also his political motives, Averroes may well be attacking them more than Avicenna proper.

At any rate, clearly Averroes has the goal of making philosophy respectable to Muslims. E.g., on miracles he says:

The ancient philosophers did not discuss the problem of miracles, since according to them such things must not be examined and questioned, for they are the principles of the religions, and the man who inquires into them and doubts them deserves punishment, like the man who examines the other general religious principles, such as whether God exists...<sup>130</sup>

Given Aristotle's (and Plato's!) contempt for popular religion, these claims have little truth.<sup>131</sup> But they would serve to clear Aristotle of heresy, as Averroes wanted. For, at the conclusion of his *Tahāfut*, Averroes says that Al-Ghazālī had accused the philosophers of heresy, and now he has cleared them of the charges.<sup>132</sup>

Averroes then may clear philosophy of heresy at the cost of making an Aristotle and an Avicenna *fictif*. Indeed he may have created one or more Averroes *fictifs* too! For his views in his various works do not agree.<sup>133</sup>

So what to make of Averroes? He did write reliable, literal commentaries paraphrasing Aristotle's texts and previous commentaries on them. He also misrepresents Aristotle's views, especially in his debate

<sup>129</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, p. 254 [421]. Averroes: *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, Simon van den Bergh, trans. & comm. (London 1954). The numbers in brackets are page numbers from the Arabic, Averroes, *Tahāfut at-tahāfut*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut 1930). Also I consulted Beatrice Zedler, trans. & comm., *Destructio Destructionum Philosophiae Algazels* (Milwaukee, 1961).

<sup>130</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, p. 315 [514]. Averroes approves of religion pragmatically, because religion causes virtue in men. Cf. too p. 359 [580–2].

<sup>131</sup> Alfred Ivry, "Towards a Unified View of Averroes' Philosophy," *The Philosophical Forum* 14.1 (1974), p. 108, says, "It seems well nigh impossible for Averroes to modify his position to accommodate the dogmas of religion or any particularist religion... in Averroes' view certain locutions [in the political sphere] are ones that are absurd outside that sphere." Ivry, pp. 109–10, has the implausible view that Averroes is struggling towards a view that the philosophical viewpoint is just as metaphorical and inadequate as the religious one.

<sup>132</sup> Van den Bergh, *Tahāfut*, p. 362 [587].

<sup>133</sup> Cf. George Hourani, *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London 1961), pp. 41–54; 77, who attributes two different views to Averroes.

with Al-Ghazālī, for the sake of making philosophy respectable in Islam. In doing so he caricatures Avicenna so as to offer him as a scapegoat for the devout to sacrifice instead of philosophy entire. This caricature may have distorted later views on Avicenna's worth as a commentator on Aristotle.

### *Conclusions*

I have some sympathy for Hintikka's complaint:

... those who have not themselves wrestled with serious conceptual issues tend to underestimate by orders of magnitude the extent to which a great philosopher has to struggle against confusion, contradictions, and other difficulties.<sup>134</sup>

One advantage medieval commentators have here over contemporary ones, despite their linguistic and historical poverty, lies in their having this same pragmatic interest: they seek to do Aristotelian science, not merely talk about it.

What sort of commentator would Aristotle himself have like to have had? Judging by how he treats his predecessors, including his friend and teacher Plato, he would have wanted someone who would comment on his writings in the way that he did upon Plato's writings.

His own student and successor Theophrastus did so upon his writings. Thus he disagreed with Aristotle on the validity of the mixed modal Barbara syllogism. He challenged Aristotle's account of the intellect and his astronomy. Hardly a tractable student.

Now certainly, like Theophrastus, Avicenna fits Aristotle's criteria for a commentator far more than Averroes does. At times Avicenna defends Aristotle's entire doctrine. At other times, he will reject Aristotle's teachings almost completely.

*Would Aristotle like this?* Certainly he treated his own teacher and his other predecessors thus. Yet we may distinguish choosing a successor of a school and a tradition from selecting someone to comment upon and preserve the original content of a member of that school. In this way, commentators are more like curators and historians, and less like those who wish to continue the tradition of the school.

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<sup>134</sup> Jaakko Hintikka, "The Development of Aristotle's Ideas of Scientific Method," in *Aristotle's Philosophical Development*, ed. W. Wians (Lanham, Md., 1996), p. 84.



*Should* Aristotle like this? Suppose Aristotle had been put in the position of designing his own ideal commentator. Should he choose one dedicated to preserving his legacy and prevent it from being corrupted by later interpolations, corrections and emendations? Or one who would take his results as starting points for future research—as is indeed done in the sciences, which themselves have an Aristotelian base in doctrine as well as in their organization? Let us have Aristotle playing the Creator of The Commentator. In *De libero arbitrio* III.16, Augustine argues that it is better for God to create beings with free will who may well disobey His precepts and the path that He has set for them than to create beings who will do the right, divinely prescribed thing without having to make choices on their own. Now, just on those grounds alone, Aristotle may well prefer commentators of independent mind. But in his case, as his own views do not have the divine guarantee of being the truth, he has the additional ground for preferring commentators following the truth where it leads them, that his successors might make better choices and get better results than he did.

So I submit that Aristotle would choose Avicenna, not Averroes, to comment upon his works. Now we pedants may prefer the style of paraphrase and footnote. And of course such a style has its uses for those seeking to become familiar with a text—for students, be they beginning or advanced. Yet this approach does not make the philosophy being commented upon a living enterprise capable of growth and progress, but rather an antique curiosity suitable for custodians and gawkers. Averroes may rightly have been The Commentator for the Latin medievals just beginning to study Aristotle. Yet, judging by the citations of Avicenna at key points in discussions by Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham *et al.*, Avicenna was The Commentator for these working, creative philosophers. Perhaps we *moderni*—or *post-moderni*—also should take stock and reconsider what we want in a commentator.

