

Averroes's Method of Re-Interpretation

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ONE CONTENTIOUS ISSUE in contemporary interpretations of medieval Islamic philosophy is the degree of esotericism espoused by its proponents, and therefore the degree of interpretive effort required by its modern readers to ascertain the author's real beliefs. Readers who have imputed extreme esotericism to Islamic philosophical works find widespread dissimulation in these works and detect in them pervasive traces of an intense struggle between philosophy and religion. One philosopher who has been most often accused of such extreme esotericism is Averroes (Ibn Rushd), particularly because he is quite explicit in distinguishing among the different types of reasoning appropriate to different classes of people: philosophers, theologians, and laypersons. But on closer inspection Averroes appears to have at his disposal some subtle strategies for achieving partial reconciliation between religion and philosophy, strategies which do not actually involve falsifying the views of either side, although that is how it might appear at first sight. These polemical devices appear most clearly in his exchanges with the theologians (*mutakallimûn*) of the Ash'arite school, of which Ghazâlî is the most original representative. In this paper I will examine Averroes's position on two sensitive matters, the creation of the universe and the possibility of miracles, in order to illustrate the use of what may be called his "method of re-interpretation," whereby certain key terms are interpreted in such a way as to emphasize the agreements between the two sides while downplaying the differences.

I. AVERROES ON THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

There is a familiar distinction between a purely verbal disagreement and a disagreement in theory. If the meaning of a term in one person's lexicon differs from that of the same term in another's, one should be able to find *another* term by which to gain the semantic agreement needed for discussion; or if that fails, one can come up with a new term, a neologism, which corresponds to the term from the second lexicon. These cases are commonly known as "semantic disagreements" or "differences in meaning." They are unlike differences in theory in that they are non-substantive and are eliminable by a simple transposition of terms or by the introduction of a new term. In a well-known passage from his *Kitâb Fasl al-Maqâl*,¹ Averroes claims that the long-standing disagreement between the philoso-

¹Ibn Rushd (Averroes), *Kitâb Fasl al-Maqâl*, ed. George F. Hourani (Leiden: Brill, 1959); hereafter *KFM*, page followed by line(s). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are from *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. George F. Hourani (London: Luzac, 1961). All page and line references are to the Arabic edition.

phers and the theologians on the issue of whether the world is “pre-eternal” (*qadîm*) or “originated” (*muhdath* or *hadîth*) is “almost resolvable into a disagreement about naming (*yakâd an yakûn râjî’an lil-ikhtilâf fil-tasmiyah*).”² Immediately this claim should raise certain questions in the mind of anyone who has some acquaintance with classical Islamic thought. For the world’s pre-eternity was one of the most contentious issues in the debate between philosophers and theologians. Since Averroes himself devotes the first and longest Discussion in his *Tahâfut al-Tahâfut* to arguing for the philosophers’ position, it seems unlikely that he thought that the disagreement was trivial.

Two ways of resolving this issue should be bracketed at the outset. The first is that Averroes is being disingenuous in this exoteric text and deliberately misrepresenting the nature of the disagreement. This conclusion, which saddles him with an extremely esotericist position, should be drawn only as a last resort, and an attempt at reconciliation should be made before imputing any such inconsistency. The second resolution is that, when Averroes talks about “a disagreement about naming,” he means something entirely different from what I have characterized above as a non-substantive, semantic disagreement. This possibility seems unlikely when one considers the larger context. The *Treatise* in question is devoted to showing the “harmony of religion and philosophy,” and Averroes wishes to conclude that the two sides are, as far as possible, in accord on this issue. That would not be the case if their disagreement were a fully-fledged, substantive one, but it is made more plausible if their disagreement is merely semantic—or nearly so.

This last qualification is important because it provides what I believe to be the beginning of an answer to the puzzle. For Averroes need not be claiming that the dispute between the philosophers and the theologians is *entirely* without substance. Indeed, he is careful to say that the disagreement “is almost” (*yakâd an yakûn*) one about naming. In order to justify his position, he distinguishes the following three categories of being, each of which in turn possesses three characteristics. The first category includes any being that is (a) brought into existence from something other than itself, (b) brought into existence by something, and (c) preceded by time. The second category includes any being that is (a) not made from anything, (b) not made by anything, and (c) not preceded by time. The third includes any being that is (a) not made from anything, (b) brought into existence by something, and (c) not preceded by time.³ As for the names of each of these categories, Averroes states that the first is called “originated” (*muhdath*) by the theologians (Ash‘arites) and philosophers alike and includes water, air, earth, animals, plants, and so on. Meanwhile both camps call the second category “pre-eternal” (*qadîm*), and both regard it as including God. He then points out that the third class of being bears some resemblance both to the first and to the second because it shares with the first kind of being the fact that it is made *by* something and with the second kind both that it is not made *from* anything *and* that it is *not* preceded by time.⁴

²KFM 11.16–17. The adjectives *muhdath* (or *hadîth*, or *hâdith*—the three appear to be used interchangeably in the sources) and *qadîm*, which are translated respectively as “originated” and “pre-eternal,” may also be used in the broader sense of “new” and “old,” respectively. But it is clear that they are being used here in more technical senses, a claim which will be corroborated towards the end of this section. The associated nominal forms are *hudûth* (origination) and *qidam* (pre-eternity).

³KFM 11.20–12.8. I have re-arranged the attributes slightly for ease of comparison.

⁴Compare this with the view that al-Ghazâlî attributes to the philosophers about the circular move-

Accordingly, Averroes says, those who have been impressed by its resemblance to the first class have called the third class “originated,” and those impressed with its resemblance to the second have called it “pre-eternal.” But as he goes on to say, it should not, properly speaking, be lumped with either class since it is distinct from both. This third category includes the entire universe, that is, “the world as a whole.” Since the theologians and the philosophers allegedly agree on its properties but disagree about how to label it, Averroes concludes that their disagreement is one about naming.⁵

At the most basic level Averroes can be said to be defining the terms “originated” and “pre-eternal” by giving three characteristics for each category of being. In this context the Arabic terms *qidam* (pre-eternity) and *hudûth* (origination) are associated with complex philosophical theories, and we cannot simply rely on the commonplace understanding of the terms. While this point seems sound, the questionable assumption made by Averroes appears to be that the attributes of the third class of being are not in question among philosophers and theologians. In particular it might be thought controversial to assume that the Ash‘arite theologians and other *mutakallimûn* would agree with the philosophers that time does not precede the creation of the universe. Perhaps, it might be said, the adherents of creation *ex nihilo* would prefer to say that the world *is* preceded by time. To be sure, Averroes does not seem to think that the theologians would agree with him *outright*, for he qualifies his claim by saying: “or rather this is a necessary consequence for them” (*KFM* 12.10). Presumably this follows from their beliefs about the nature of time, for time cannot precede the creation of the universe because it is something that accompanies motion and bodies—and there was no motion and there were no bodies prior to the world’s creation. But must the theologians accept this (implicit) argument? Might they not stand their ground and say that God simply *created* time before creating the universe, thus ensuring that the universe *was* preceded by time?

In order to gain more insight into this question, we must turn to the *loci classici* for the debate on this issue, namely, the First Discussion of Ghazâlî’s *Tahâfut al-Falâsifah* and Averroes’s replies in *Tahâfut al-Tahâfut*. A perusal of texts vindicates Averroes’s claim that the theologians and philosophers agree on the point that the world was not preceded by time, although they elaborate on it in very different ways. Averroes explains that “Most people who accept a temporal creation [*hudûth*] of the world believe time to have been created with it [*hudûth al-*

ment of the outer sphere of the heavens: “in one respect it resembles the pre-eternal [*al-qadîm*], and in another respect it resembles the originated [*al-hâdith*], for it is both constant and renewing [*thâbit mutajaddid*]. . . .” Al-Ghazâlî, *Tahâfut al-Falâsifah*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, intro. Majid Fakhry (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1990) p. 64; hereafter *TF*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

⁵Averroes seems quite right to say that the third class of being should be kept distinct from the first two and should not simply be lumped with either of the other two. But the suggestion which he goes on to make, that “the really originated is necessarily perishable,” is questionable. It introduces an entirely new attribute different from and independent of the three attributes used to define the three classes of being. This remark will therefore be ignored since his argument stands firmly without it. The other suggestion, that “the really pre-eternal has no cause,” is more legitimate since it comes almost directly from his definition of the second class of being, namely, (b) brought into existence by something. See *KFM* 12.15–21.

zamân ma'ahu].”⁶ Indeed, this claim is confirmed when one turns to the work of Averroes’s main theological opponent. According to Ghazâlî: “Time is originated and created [*hâdith makhluq*], and before it there was no time at all. When we say that God is prior to the world and to time, we mean that He existed without the world, then He existed with the world” (*TF* 66). This suggests that Ghazâlî does not think that the world was preceded by time but that the world and time are simultaneous. Of course, the following question might still arise. Since, if God existed prior to the world and time, this “prior to” itself signifies the existence of time, was the world perhaps preceded by time after all? This is one of the objections to which Ghazâlî responds, saying that our propensity to imagine a past time “prior to” the creation of the world and time is similar to our propensity to imagine something, either another body or empty space, at the outer limit of the universe.⁷ He points out, however, that the correct view (as the philosophers would agree) is that there is neither occupied nor empty space outside the limit of the universe. Similarly, there is no time before the creation of the world and time, so he concludes ingeniously that the world was not preceded by time.

The textual evidence thus corroborates the claim that at least one of Averroes’s theological opponents, Ghazâlî, shares his view that the world was not preceded by time. There are, however, many niceties with which Averroes does not choose to burden the readers of this *Treatise*. He has correctly identified three attributes which, at least some theologians and philosophers would agree, can be predicated of the world. What he does *not* mention is that there are a number of other properties about which they would disagree.⁸

For a clear example of the latter, we can turn to a short treatise which Averroes devoted to this specific question.⁹ The position can be summarized by saying that Averroes is intent on showing that the world cannot be said to have had a beginning and yet denies that it has existed through an infinite period of time. On the first score he clearly differs with the theologians, but on the second he clearly agrees. For the uninitiated in philosophical discussion, these two claims which Averroes considers to be consistent would seem *prima facie* to be contradictory. Accordingly his solution is a complex one which involves maintaining that the nature of time is essentially circular and that, like a circle, it therefore has no absolute beginning and yet is not infinite in length.

⁶Averroes, *Tahâfut al-Tahâfut*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beyrouth: Dar el-Machreq, 1992) p. 32; hereafter *TT*. Unless otherwise indicated, English translations are taken from *Averroes’ Incoherence of the Incoherence*, trans. and ed. Simon Van Den Bergh (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969). All page references are to the Arabic edition.

⁷He writes: “All this is due to the inability of the imagination to understand a beginning without conceiving of a ‘before’, and this ‘before’ of which the imagination cannot rid itself is regarded as a really existing thing, namely time. This resembles the inability of the imagination to conceive of a limited body, for example, overhead, except with something above it . . .” (*TF* 67).

⁸For instance, some of the theologians would want to say that either the world and God are simultaneous or God is prior to the world, whereas for Averroes this disjunctive claim does not make sense. As he explains: “It is not true in comparing the Eternal to the world that He is either simultaneous with it [*ma’an*] or prior to it [*mutaqaddiman ‘alayhi*] in time and causation because it is not of the nature of the Eternal to be in time and it is of the nature of the world to be in time” (*TT* 65, my translation).

⁹See Barry S. Kogan, “Eternity and Origination: Averroes’ Discourse on the Manner of the World’s Existence” in *Islamic Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984). The treatise survives only in a Hebrew translation that was recently translated into English by Kogan.

For our purposes here it is not particularly important whether Averroes's position is satisfactory or not; rather, what is important is how it relates to his remarks in *Kitâb Fasl al-Maqâl*. The complexity and abstruseness of these issues, even when they are quickly summarized in this fashion, illustrate what Averroes is up against. Given the fact that few laypersons would have the time or inclination to fathom the nature of the disagreement between the philosophers and the theologians, Averroes is willing to gloss over their differences without pretending that there is complete accord on every point. He does this by re-interpreting terms so as to heighten the agreement and minimize the disagreement between the two camps. To be sure, contradictions remain, as Averroes would have to admit. For example, the theologians maintain that the world had a beginning, but the philosophers deny it. When the terms "initiated" and "non-initiated" are introduced to denote respectively the two categories of having a beginning and not having a beginning, the contradiction is as clear as ever.¹⁰ One side states that the universe is initiated and the other that it is non-initiated. Thus Averroes does not appear to have succeeded in creating harmony between the religious and secular camps or in showing that their disagreement is merely about naming.

So is Averroes being disingenuous? Does *disharmony* in fact prevail between religion and philosophy on this issue? I would argue that at least the first question should be answered in the negative. Although one can still derive a contradiction between the beliefs of the theologians and those of the philosophers, the matter is not nearly as inflammatory as the initial presumption that Averroes was up against. Initially the dialectical situation seemed highly polarized. To the uninitiated it might have appeared as though the philosophers were setting up the universe as a rival to God, whereas the theologians were demoting it to the level of a mere physical object. Averroes's analysis, however, points out that both camps agree that the universe has two things in common with God (it was *not* made *from* anything and was *not* preceded by time) and that it has one thing in common with physical bodies (it *was* made *by* something). Consequently, neither camp puts the universe wholly in the category of God or entirely in the category of mere objects, as might seem at first to be the case or as some of Averroes's sensationalist contemporaries might have claimed on certain occasions.

The introduction of new terms or the re-interpretation of existing terms cannot *create* agreement or disagreement—it can only emphasize or draw attention to agreement and disagreement where they already exist. This is consistent with Averroes's initial assertion that the disagreement is "*almost . . . one about naming*" (emphasis added). On a charitable reading this can be taken to mean that the disagreement is *partly* a semantic one—that is, the disagreement is minimized by the introduction of new terms. Once the naming issue is resolved, the area of substantive disagreement is found to be less important than it appeared at first. Accordingly, the disagreement that remains can be ignored by the exoteric audience to whom this *Treatise* is addressed, and its significance can be consigned instead to writings intended for a more specialized, esotericist audience. Thus we can see why Averroes characterizes the disagreement as (in part) semantic, without reading him as an extreme esotericist.

¹⁰Indeed, these terms might correspond to the "loose" senses of the terms "pre-eternal" and "originated," as Hourani suggests (*Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, p. 100 n105).

In his introduction to the translation of the *Treatise*, George Hourani states that Averroes “analyses the positions of the two parties, using an ‘ordinary language’ method, of the type brought into prominence in our day by Wittgenstein, Ryle and their contemporaries in England.”¹¹ Now, the so-called “ordinary language philosophers” generally tried to draw philosophical morals from the common or ordinary usage of linguistic terms. But if that is so, Hourani’s statement is not an apt characterization of Averroes’s method. None of Averroes’s points rests crucially on the ordinary or dominant meanings of the terms involved; nor does it matter to him how these terms are used in common parlance. His point is not to reclaim the original senses of the terms *qidam* (pre-eternity) and *hudûth* (origination). In fact, the ordinary meaning may just be what Hourani, in his notes to the translation, calls the “loose meaning.” In that case Averroes is correcting the loose meaning and replacing it with a more precise one. He argues that in philosophical usage, in contrast with ordinary usage, *neither* of the key terms can be properly applied to the world (*i.e.*, to the universe as a whole). This point is clearer if one notes that for Averroes and other philosophers the world can be both finite *and* have no beginning. Intuitive notions that seem contradictory on the surface can be reconciled, given an appropriately sophisticated theory about the nature of the world and of time itself. Indeed, Averroes’s point could be made by saying that the attribute *qadîm* should be reserved for a being that is infinite in duration and that the attribute *hadîth* or *muhdath* should be reserved for a being that has a beginning. In that case it is even clearer that the world is, properly speaking, neither pre-eternal nor originated. This additional move would have involved a more explicit philosophical appropriation of the two key terms in the debate, although such an appropriation would not have been too presumptuous since it is clear that the terms were already being used in a technical sense even before Averroes chose to join the debate.

II. AVERROES ON MIRACLES

Averroes’s method of re-interpretation can be further illustrated by examining another instance in which the same basic strategy is employed, although his use of it is not as explicit. In Discussion 17 of the *Tahâfut*, in the section on the Natural Sciences, the issue between Ghazâlî and Averroes is whether the causal connection is necessary or not. Ghazâlî makes clear why he wants to deny that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect. He needs to deny this because he wants to maintain the possibility of miracles; he also needs to deny that there is a limit on the power of God. For Ghazâlî the existence of miracles can be maintained only if one denies the necessity of the connection between cause and effect. He enumerates three kinds of miracles, all of which involve prophets or certain extraordinary individuals. With regard to the first, an individual’s imaginative faculty observes the Indelible Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfûz*) upon which all future events are inscribed. Accordingly, the “forms of future particular events become imprinted on it, which occurs in the waking state for prophets and during sleep for other people . . .” (*TF* 192). The second type of miracle simply involves a kind of direct intuition or “intellectual acuteness” (*hads*) whereby a keen-sighted person

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 31.

becomes aware of the proof of a problem as soon as the problem is mentioned to him. This is again a quality of the soul of the prophet who has a “miraculous speculative faculty [*muʿjizah min al-quwwah al-nazariyyah*]” (TF 192–93). The third kind of miracle, however, is clearly the most problematic as far as the debate with Averroes is concerned. For Ghazâlî holds that the prophet’s psychological faculty can also influence the external world, in much the same way that the soul generally acts on the body. He observes that, when a man’s soul imagines something, his limbs respond and move in the required direction; likewise, when a man imagines something tasty, his mouth begins to water and he salivates. This happens, according to Ghazâlî, because “bodies and bodily faculties were created to be subservient and subordinate to the soul . . .” (TF 193). But it is also possible for the power of the soul to reach such a pitch that it is obeyed not just by a man’s own body but also by the natural power of things outside his body. That is why a prophet’s soul can “control the gusting of wind or the pouring of rain, or the striking of lightning or the quaking of the earth,” which occur “without the presence of an apparent physical cause . . . but only in matter which is ready to receive them. . . .” Ghazâlî goes on to explain what he means by this last qualification: such occurrences cannot lead to a piece of wood becoming animate or to the splitting of the moon (TF 193–94).

Although Averroes does not say so explicitly, he seems to deny this third type of prophetic miracle according to which a prophet is able to control downpours and thunderbolts. He allows that it is possible for a body to change through something that is not a body (that is, a soul) but adds that “not everything which in its nature is possible can be done by man . . .” (TT 515). By contrast, Ghazâlî wants to maintain that “the connection between that which is thought by habit [*fil-ʿâdah*] to be the cause and that which is thought by habit to be the effect is not a necessary one for us. . . .” That is so because the connection can be thwarted by God, who is able “to create satiety without eating, and to create death without decapitation, and to extend life despite decapitation, and so on. . . .” In maintaining this Ghazâlî clearly indicates that he subscribes to a doctrine of *occasionalism*: God is the only cause of events in the world, and actual existents with their properties and natural dispositions are merely occasions for God to cause things to happen. For example, when fire burns cotton, fire is not the only agent that cannot abstain from burning by its very nature; rather, God is the agent of burning, either through the mediation of the angels or by some other means.¹² Against this Averroes admits that it is not absolutely necessary that fire cause burning since sometimes certain hindrances

¹²TF 195–96. At some points Ghazâlî appears to espouse a non-occasionalist theory of causality in the same discussion of *Tahâfut*, and some of what he says seems to be inconsistent with occasionalism. At one point he grants that inanimate things have causal powers and that these powers proceed from their natures. Then he explains that, when miracles occur, God puts an impediment in the natural process or speeds up a process that normally takes longer, by intervening at the right moment. This theory affirms the causal efficacy of created things, which the occasionalist theory does not. Marmura argues that Ghazâlî puts forward this theory partly in a polemical spirit in order to show that, even if things have unalterable natures, God is *still* able to intervene to produce a miracle, and partly in order to give Muslims who want to maintain a belief in natural causation and fixed essences another option. See Michael E. Marmura, “Al-Ghazali’s Second Causal Theory in the 17th Discussion of His *Tahâfut*” in *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (New York: Caravan Books, 1981) pp. 106–07. Most commentators agree that Ghazâlî’s considered view was the same as the Ashʿarite one, namely, an occasionalist theory.

appear, for example, talc. But this is not a subversion of the causal nexus; it is a case in which another cause thwarts the fire (*TT* 521).

Averroes's principal objection to Ghazâlî's view of causation appeals to the correspondence between causation, on the one hand, and knowledge and intelligence, on the other. If essential causes alone can make something understood and human intelligence is nothing but the perception of things with their causes, then the denial of causes is tantamount to the denial of knowledge (*TT* 522). Moreover, this applies not just in the human realm but also in the divine realm. The same congruity exists between God's knowledge and the nature of existents, but in the divine case God's knowledge does not merely correspond to the cause of a thing—it *is* the cause of that thing (*TT* 532). Ghazâlî is aware of the objection that the denial of causes is tantamount to the denial of knowledge, and he addresses it at length. He says that, if we admit that there is no necessary dependence of effects on their causes, then it might be objected that we would always have to say: "I do not know what there is at present in my house. . . ." We would have to admit that, although we left a book there some time ago, it might have turned into a horse that has soiled the library with its urine and excrement in the interim. Ghazâlî's reply to this, however, is that God has also created in us the knowledge that these things will not happen, by and large, except when miracles occur. So, although it is possible for God to turn the book into a horse while we are out of the house, God has previous knowledge that he will not do this and he creates us with this knowledge also.¹³ But for Averroes this foreknowledge is not enough since it means that there is no fixed standard for God's will. Such a deity, he writes, would rule existents like a "tyrannical prince who has the highest power, for whom nobody in his dominion can deputize . . ." (*TT* 531). Instead, Averroes seems to think that God rules the universe not like a despot but like a law-abiding authoritarian who subjects himself to the same laws which he himself has laid down.

It is reasonable to conclude that Averroes denies miracles in the sense of occurrences which somehow thwart the natural causal nexus, affirming as he does the necessary connection between cause and effect and conceiving of God as laying down inviolable laws that are never transgressed. While Averroes never *explicitly* denies miracles in the sense of a break in the order of causes, it is clearly difficult to reconcile his view of both natural causation and the relation between causation and knowledge with the possibility of events that disrupt the causal order. But this makes problematic some of his apparent avowals that miracles exist, for he states that "such things [*i.e.*, miracles] must not be examined and questioned . . . and the man who inquires into them and doubts them merits punishment," adding that "the existence of all these [*i.e.*, miracles as well as other religious principles] cannot be doubted" (*TT* 514). As in the previous example, the possibility that he

¹³*TF* 199. This raises an interesting question as to how Ghazâlî can affirm demonstrative science yet deny necessary causal connections. This issue is taken up in Michael E. Marmura, "Ghazali and Demonstrative Science," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3 (1965) 183–204. Marmura explains that, according to Ghazâlî, "nature's uniformity is not due to any causal qualities inherent in natural things. The uniformity is decreed by the divine will 'that can undergo neither substitution nor change'" (p. 196). He goes on to note: "To say this about the divine will does not mean that what the divine will decrees is always uniform: it also decrees exceptions to the uniform pattern, the miracles" (*ibid.*). A miracle for Ghazâlî "is an actual disruption of the orderly sequence of events, not an unexpected event that in principle can be explained along natural causal lines" (p. 201).

is dissimulating cannot be dismissed out of hand, but first we should look for possible alternatives.

An alternative explanation can be built upon some claims by Barry Kogan, who comments on this exchange by saying that miracles in Averroes's sense are not disruptions of the causal order but what Aristotle calls "spontaneous events." According to Kogan such events "arise from the intersection of causal sequences at unexpected points."¹⁴ By this he seems to mean certain unusual events that occur when a variety of causes come together to issue in a rare type of event. This interpretation would accord with the only clear example that Averroes gives here of a miracle, namely, the *Qur'an*. In calling it a miracle, Averroes means that it is a very unusual, superlative work of divine inspiration, which need not involve a violation of the causal nexus. While I would agree with Kogan's overall interpretation of Averroes, I would differ with him on the degree of dissimulation involved. Kogan thinks that in this text Averroes is trying to conceal his true view of miracles, but a more charitable reading can be given. Averroes does not deny miracles but rather attempts to re-interpret what a miracle is. Thus there is no real concealment of his true opinion of the matter; rather, as in the previous case, there is an emphasis on the points of agreement and a bracketing of the points of contention. But a question now arises concerning Averroes's warrant for assuming this to be a new understanding of what a miracle is rather than a denial of the existence of miracles or an attempt to define them out of existence. An opponent may well level this charge against Averroes, claiming that this particular example clearly demonstrates that the method of re-interpretation is a sophistical device designed to deny the existence of disagreement where it exists, not a way of identifying an area of agreement and emphasizing it.

Two replies can be made to defend Averroes against this charge. First, even Ghazâlî does not reserve the use of the term "miracle" to events that subvert the causal relation. His second category of miracles, events involving intellectual acuteness, clearly does not involve a subversion of causality since it concerns merely a variety of quick-wittedness or a knack for proceeding from premises to conclusion. Even his first category of miracles, which involves prognostication based on some exposure to the Indelible Tablet, may not involve a causal subversion. Ghazâlî does not clearly explain exactly how this comes about, but some causal mechanism could conceivably be found that enables humans to foretell the future. It is therefore only the third category of miracles, as classified by Ghazâlî, that would pose a problem for Averroes's account. In light of this, Averroes can claim that he is restricting the term "miracle" to certain events that conform to the causal order, while withholding it from those that do not (since there are no such events on his account). He could cite Ghazâlî in order to suggest that even his opponents do not apply the term "miracle" exclusively to causally subversive phenomena. This would justify his re-applying the term and at the same time avoid the charge that he has changed the subject altogether. It is impossible for Ghazâlî to reply to Averroes by saying that miracles are *by definition* subversions of the causal nexus. Since Ghazali himself does not subscribe to such a view, Averroes can say that the dispute between the theologians and philosophers is merely over *which* miracles can occur, not about whether miracles exist or not.

¹⁴Barry S. Kogan, "The Philosophers al-Ghazâlî and Averroes on Necessary Connection and the Problem of the Miraculous" in Morewedge, p. 128.

Second, the objection can be countered by adverting to the broader context of this debate. Averroes is concerned to single out events that demonstrate God's power at work in the natural realm. If miracles are understood primarily as paradigmatic instances of this kind of event or phenomenon, then the *Qur'an* qualifies as one such phenomenon. For Averroes divine power and glory need not be demonstrated by a subversion of the causal order since the *Qur'an* constitutes a sufficient demonstration of God's intervention in the natural realm. As Kogan explains Averroes's view, the *Qur'an* is clear evidence of such intervention since its miraculousness consists in its capacity "to enable men to attain virtue and happiness in all generations in the most effective way."¹⁵ This intervention into the natural world clearly does not constitute a subversion of the causal nexus, but it gives rise to events that are in accordance with the laws of nature, albeit unlikely. Moreover, it reveals God as a law-abiding authoritarian rather than as a despotic tyrant. Therefore the method of re-interpretation is deployed again here in order to re-appropriate a term to which Averroes believes he is entitled and which he is not willing to surrender to the theologians. Since the larger purpose behind the examination of miracles is to single out events that are theologically significant, Averroes can claim to have done this.¹⁶

III. CONCLUSION: THE PURPOSE OF RE-INTERPRETATION

I have attempted to explicate and justify Averroes's "method of re-interpretation" in the two cases examined by saying, in part, that Averroes is dealing with specialized terms in an abstruse theoretical context in which laypersons may be led astray by the technical terms employed by specialists. He therefore engages in re-interpreting the key terms, while implying that he is still talking about the same thing and has not changed the subject entirely. In the case of the creation of the universe, he re-interprets the terms "pre-eternal" and "originated" in such a way that neither strictly applies to the universe, and in so doing he narrows the disagreement between the theologians and philosophers. In the case of miracles, he re-interprets the term "miracle" in such a way that it does not apply exclusively to events that subvert the causal nexus, thus enabling him to maintain a belief in miracles and again to effect a reconciliation with his theological opponents.

One question that arises concerns the limits of this method of re-interpretation and the legitimacy of employing it here. If one were to allow this as a completely general approach to narrowing disagreements, it would presumably lead to absurdities. To take a trivial example, consider an argument about unicorns: one party denies their existence, and the other affirms it. The first party could say that both agree that unicorns exist, provided that a "unicorn" is defined as a one-horned animal, since one party believes that rhinoceroses exist and the other that unicorns (in the old sense) do. It may even be said that Averroes himself argues in a similar

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁶Kogan admits that Averroes's conception of miracles upholds their theological role, noting that his conception preserves their status as extraordinary phenomena. Thus Kogan allows that they play something like the role that miracles are supposed to play as they are conceived by other, more traditional authors: "Such events, as [Averroes] has repeatedly stressed, are the principles on which religion is based, on which both the learned and the masses are brought to virtue and salvation, and on which any theoretical understanding of God as the Artisan of the universe is rendered possible" (*ibid.*, p. 128).

fashion in the above examples. I have tried to show, however, that on both occasions Averroes has some reasons for laying claim to the contested term and applying it somewhat differently than his opponents (*i.e.*, refraining from applying both “created” and “pre-eternal” to the universe and refraining from applying “miracle” to a subversion of the causal order while applying it to the *Qur’an*). In each case a closer examination of the theologians’ position and a look at the larger context provide some warrant for Averroes’s polemical technique. A change in the interpretation of a term is not automatically a change of subject; different theorists can apply a term differently and still be talking about the same thing. That is not to say that Averroes is successful in both of these cases in re-interpreting the term while retaining its meaning, for it is not clear that these terms can withstand this degree of re-interpretation. But like many inquirers, he at least makes a valiant attempt to apply words somewhat differently; it is then up to his peers to determine whether the new way of applying them catches on.

What, therefore, can we conclude about Averroes’s esotericism and the general purpose of his method of re-interpretation? After looking at these arguments in some detail, it has become apparent that there is less dissimulation in his writings than might have appeared at first glance. In both works examined there are points at which he chooses to emphasize the agreement between the theologians and philosophers by re-interpreting key terms. He thereby minimizes the disagreement between them. Averroes’s method of re-interpretation was designed not so much to deceive as to defuse some of the tensions surrounding these contentious debates. His overall purpose in employing the method of re-interpretation might be to intimate that the issues between the Aristotelians and Ash‘arites were more *recherchés* and minor than might appear to those uninitiated in philosophical discourse, yet without actually falsifying the philosophical positions to make them seem more palatable. Anyone versed in the finer points of these debates would have realized that Averroes’s remarks leave the content of the positions unaltered. At the same time, however, his re-interpretation of key terms serves to delimit the scope of the debate. In keeping with his general view that disagreement over theoretical matters is permissible and excusable from the religious point of view, Averroes is concerned to make these disagreements appear less momentous to the public at large. According to the position outlined in the *Treatise*, “those who disagree on the interpretation of these difficult [theoretical] questions earn merit if they are in the right and will be excused [by God] if they are in error” (*KFM* 13.17–18). One reason which he gives for this view is that it is not possible to achieve unanimity on theoretical matters except for such basic religious principles as acknowledgment of God, of the prophetic missions, and of happiness and misery in the afterlife (*KFM* 14.20–21). Beyond these fundamental principles the religious community need not, nor should it expect to, achieve agreement since the demonstrative class of people who can understand proofs based on first principles is unlikely to convince the dialectical and rhetorical masses who cannot apprehend such proofs. Since the religious community cannot hope to achieve consensus on abstruse theoretical matters which require demonstration, these matters are irrelevant when it comes to assessing religious orthodoxy. The method of re-interpretation therefore serves to put the disagreement between philosophers and theologians in perspective and to underline its relatively limited and innocuous nature. It supports Averroes’s view that dissent on theoretical questions is a disagreement among those who share the same basic religious precepts and is not tantamount to heresy.