

Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe, ed. by Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni, Dordrecht: Springer, 2013, 405 pp.

The charismatic Averroes, this trouble-maker (Jean-Baptiste Brenet),¹ this party-pooper (Alain de Libera),² remains one of the most divisive and politically charged figures in the history of philosophy, an icon of the intellectual left. Youssef Chahine's 1997 film *Le Destin (Al-Massir)* sums up the current perception of Averroes as the embodiment of an enlightened Islam, an unlikely champion of secularization—a position he achieved even though his more personal works on the status of philosophy, law, and theology in Islam (e.g., the *Decisive Treatise*) have been ignored by both the Latin and Arabic cultures for centuries. Arguably the most important influence on Western thought after Aristotle and Plato, Averroes has remained a prisoner of his uncharitable ethnic background: with virtually no posterity in the Arabic world, the typical Western student only encounters him in Arabic studies, while scholars have to be versed in both Arabic, Latin and Hebrew in order to get a grasp on his work, translations remaining incomplete.

However, this is a book on Averroism, not on the figure of Ibn Rushd, as one of the two editors states in the "Introduction." The history of academic medieval philosophy began with an obsession with the thirteenth century and with Averroism (a mark which the field still bears, if we look at the amount of research still being done on the overly interpreted Parisian condemnations of the 1270s). While Averroes was regarded with suspicion throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we know that the heyday of Averroism is to be sought in a century of intense intellectual activity in Renaissance Northern Italy. From roughly 1480 to 1580, Averroes's books were printed and reprinted every year, mostly together with those of Aristotle himself, and his teaching was scrutinized to an unprecedented level of detail. A synthesis of Averroism in the Renaissance, however timid, still awaits a courageous scholar. At the current stage of research, one can imagine it as analogous to the incomplete, tentative, but very useful work that Zdzisław Kuksewicz did in the 1960s on medieval Averroism.³ In the meanwhile, this collection of essays brings us a wonderfully rich and multifaceted view that does justice to the elusive character of Averroes's figure and to the extent to which it has shaped Western culture.

The book is divided into three parts: the most extended one, on Renaissance Averroism, comprises nine essays that cover topics as varied as Averroes's

¹ J.-B. Brenet, *Averroès l'inquiétant*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2015.

² A. de Libera, "Averroès, le trouble-fête," *Alliage*, 24-25 (1995), pp. 60-69.

³ Z. Kuksewicz, *De Siger de Brabant à Jacques de Plaisance. La théorie de l'intellect chez les averroïstes latins des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles*, Warsaw: Polish Academy, 1968.

refutation of Avicenna's doctrine of spontaneous generation, the Giunta edition, Ficino, Cardano, two essays on Nifo, and a substantial essay on Averroes's theory of imagination; the second part covers topics in what is traditionally labeled as early modern philosophy: the Cambridge Platonists, Averroes's fortune in the Jewish tradition (Elijah Delmedigo and Spinoza), his perception by early modern historians of philosophy, and a timely essay on Averroism in German Enlightenment; a third part covers topics devoted to the historiography of Averroism (Renan, Leo Strauss, and the search for the "real" Ibn Rushd). Among the Averroist doctrines covered by these essays, the lion's share is given, naturally, to various aspects of Averroes's noetics and its influence, which is the concern of most of the essays. Anticipating the reader's needs, Mr. Giglioni offers in the "Introduction" a useful synthetic presentation of Averroes's difficult theory of the intellect. Only one essay covers natural philosophy (Bertolacci) and another one, the so-called doctrine of the "double truth" (Carlos Fraenkel). The reader is left wanting more on Averroes's influence in the Jewish tradition or the European Enlightenment (which Mr. Giglioni labels as the prime era of Averroism), and perhaps more on the aftermath of other aspects of his doctrine, such as his discussions of occasionalism, emanatism, natural causality and determinism, his cosmology and his natural philosophy in general, or the influence of his political philosophy (although the fact that the book ignores the long debates in France during the 2000s over Averroes's political philosophy and over its status as a progressive figure may count as a virtue).

Presumably, one should be able to find in the Renaissance the full-blown Averroists that Renan, Mandonnet, or Steenberghen sought in vain in the thirteenth century. Mr. Giglioni's "Introduction" summarizes Renaissance Averroism as a set of definite doctrines: one on the nature of the soul, personal identity, and on immortality; one on the relationship between faith and reason; and one on natural determinism. The dangers of these doctrines are palpable: the risk of objectifying or reifying thought, so that the act of thinking is something that is being done somehow outside the human being; an elitist attitude towards religion, a separation between "true religion" and a sort of edulcorated opium for the masses; and the determinism governing the sublunary world. This definition of Averroism stands as a neat check-list, but reading through the essays, one finds oneself in the position that tortured Mandonnet and Renan: hardly any figure discussed teaches these doctrines. The noetics of the Renaissance Averroists is as much influenced by the medieval debates on the nature of the soul as it is by Averroes's views. None of the figures discussed defended Averroes's version of monopsychism for its own sake, and as belonging to Averroes, but only as a possible interpretation of Aristotle; none of them, as far as I can see, professed natural determinism, before Spinoza. The only common denominator of the Renaissance Averroists seems to be a rather implicit attachment to the doctrine of the double truth—the idea that faith

and reason are not necessarily reconcilable. However, this doctrine itself is not something that one can attribute to Ibn Rushd, but merely a construct of “Averroism,” a byproduct of historiography reflecting on the Roman Church’s affirmation of authority during the Middle Ages. In this sense, at the risk of sounding predictable, I believe we should learn our lesson from the historiography of medieval Averroism: rather than look for an Averroist current neatly put together in a couple of Italian universities in the Renaissance (Padua and Bologna, essentially), one should, more modestly, recognize the diversity and the extent of his influence in what appear to be highly individual thinkers. Paul Oskar Kristeller sought to identify this current by labeling it “secular Aristotelianism”, which seems to me more fitting.

The essays in this book do a good job in shedding light on the individuality and originality of the figures they discuss. The volume starts with a chapter that gives us a glimpse into the biggest influence on Averroes besides Aristotle, Avicenna (Amos Bertolacci). Averroes’s big project was to provide a systematic refutation of his Persian predecessor, and anybody who has read a page of Averroes knows the extent to which all his ideas, wherever possible, are confronted with those of Avicenna and forged against him. In my opinion, Averroism, in the sense of Averroes’s doctrine, should always be taken as a product of his confrontation with Avicenna and Aristotle, rather than as a personal system, and in this sense, it is regrettable that Avicenna’s views do not play a role in the rest of the volume. Bertolacci retraces the divergent opinions of Averroes and Avicenna on the natural-philosophical issue of the possibility of the spontaneous generation of humans back to the two philosophers’ different attitudes towards the relationship between philosophy and religion. The essay argues that, on the question of human spontaneous generation, there were three opinions available in the Renaissance: that of Avicenna, which defended human spontaneous generation; that of Duns Scotus, which reworked Averroes, and argued against the possibility of spontaneous generation; and that of Thomas Aquinas, which provided a middle term. This tripartite view is highly characteristic of the Renaissance discussion of natural-philosophical issues: these are the usual authorities one can expect. The conclusion of Bertolacci’s investigation is also predictable, that is, characteristic of Averroes’s attitude towards Avicenna: we learn that Averroes twisted Avicenna’s position, that the latter never upheld the precise doctrine he is ascribed (spontaneous human generation directly from earth), and that Averroes falsely explained Avicenna’s view as a consequence of his theological positions, assimilating him to that other tireless fundamentalist, Al-Ghazali. Since this essay was written, an ample study of the theory of generation in Averroes has appeared that should please the author: C. Cerami, *Génération et Substance, Aristote et Averroès entre physique et métaphysique*, (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2015).

Charles Burnett’s chapter revisits the great Giunta edition of Aristotle-Averroes, which we still use today, and provides a fascinating story of the

editorial process, completing an older study by Charles B. Schmitt on the same topic. His engaging detective work shows the extent to which philosophical principles of exegesis can bear on an editorial enterprise. Craig Martin, whose recent book on Renaissance Aristotelianism devotes a large part to Averroes,⁴ describes the unlikely appeal that the Commentator had for part of the humanist current. Since the disdain of the humanists for Arabic scholasticism is obvious, Mr. Martin chose to focus on the rather scarce evidence of favorable views on Averroes, suggesting, rightfully, “that there were multiple Averroisms just as there were multiple Aristotelianisms.” Those that viewed some of Averroes’s opinions favorably linked them to ancient sources. Thus the article provides an interesting insight into Averroes’s own use of the antiquity, especially into his reliance on the Ancient Greek commentators (Themistius, Olympiodorus, and Alexander), whose works were more available in Arabic than they were in Latin. The growing interest of the Renaissance for these ancient authors caused, according to Martin, a more favorable view of Averroes himself, who was seen as closer to the antiquity. Martin then offers a short presentation of the few commentaries available on some of Averroes’s works, especially *De substantia orbis*. Commentators of this work—essentially Jandun and Nifo—sought to integrate it into the Aristotelian corpus of natural philosophy.

Agostino Nifo, a somewhat understudied epitome of the Renaissance polymath, makes the subject of two essays. Nicholas Holland presents an early work, Nifo’s commentary on the *Destructio destructionum*. The *Destructio* is part of one of Averroes’s core projects that was little known to the Latins (except through some excerpts from Maimonides’s *Guide*): his refutation of the refutation of Al-Ghazali, whose *Incoherence of the Philosophers* was itself not known. Nifo is doing pioneering work: he edited for the first time an older and partial translation of the *Destructio* in his edition of Aristotle-Averroes from 1495-1496. His commentary appears to be unique, although complete editions of the *Destructio* did appear in the sixteenth century. Mr. Holland’s article provides a discussion of Nifo’s account of celestial influences and intentions: Nifo understood God as acting like a formal cause, following an older idea of Albertus Magnus; he also retained an influence of the heavens on the sublunary world under the guise of a “secondary intention.” Mr. Holland’s discussion thus interestingly connects Averroes’s noetics with his doctrine of celestial influence, the reception of which, in Nifo’s case, was mediated by Albert. Owing to this mediation, Mr. Holland shows that Nifo managed to bring together Averroes’s Aristotelianism and some Neoplatonic and Hermetic understandings of the influence of the heavens, in a sort of unlikely syncretism characteristic of the period.

⁴ Craig Martin, *Subverting Aristotle. Religion, History, and Philosophy in Early Modern Science*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

Leen Spruit further investigates Nifo's noetics and looks at it from the perspective of its end: intellectual beatitude. The Latin West was very interested in intellectual beatitude, but drew its sources from Augustine and the Church Fathers rather than from Averroes. As Mr. Spruit shows, Nifo appears to be the first author to take Averroes's doctrine of beatitude as a result of the *copulatio* of the soul with the agent intellect seriously. His article goes through Averroes's exegesis of Aristotle's "text 36" from Book III of *De Anima* and its reading in the Latin West, before analyzing Nifo's own doctrine from Book VI of his *De Intellectu* (1503), of which Mr. Spruit gave us an edition (Leiden: Brill, 2011). According to Averroes, the soul could, even *pro statu isto*, when bound to the flesh, attain a perfect knowledge of incorporeal substances. We learned from Mr. Spruit that for some authors, such as Thomas Aquinas, the Averroist doctrine of knowing the separate substances provided a model for rationalizing divine contemplation, but the idea that we could attain a union with intellectual substances in this life was unanimously refuted. It is no surprise that this opinion vexed the Christians and figured as a prime target in Bishop Tempier's great condemnation of 1277. It went contrary not only to the medieval *dictum* that all knowledge in this life is bound by the senses, but to the entire Augustinian tradition of sharply separating the intellectual capacities of man before and after the fall, as a viator and after death. John of Jandun and Agostino Nifo figure as exceptions: they both developed an Averroistic account of human beatitude and of the possibility of attaining a pure intellectual knowledge of God in this life, as a wholly natural capacity, a position so radical in the West that one can only find it again in Spinoza (the third kind of knowledge).⁵

Carlos Fraenkel writes the most provoking and original chapter of the collection. The author has championed the thesis of Spinoza's Averroism in several other pieces. In this one, he studies Elijah Delmedigo (Helias Hebreus/Cretensis), a Jewish author rediscovered by Leon Roth about a century ago and nowadays seen as an enigmatic hero of Renaissance rationalism. Mr. Fraenkel revisits the relationship between philosophy and religion in Al-Farabi, Averroes, and Maimonides, in order to place Delmedigo's own view, which turns out to be very close to that of Averroes (*veritas veritati non repugnat*). Mr. Fraenkel shows with great detail that Delmedigo did not hold a theory of the double truth, as several other scholars have thought. However that may be, we can retain this valuable information: that Delmedigo was the one of the scarce sources through which Averroes's *Decisive Treatise* was present in the West. The second part of the paper puts the analysis of Delmedigo to further use, to show his probable influence on the early Spinoza, and, implicitly, Spinoza's debt to Averroism. The thesis is seductive, well argued and warrants further

⁵ Regarding Jandun, there is a more complete study: J.-B. Brenet, *La noétique d'Averroès selon Jean de Jandun*, Paris: Vrin, 2003.

consideration; it is certainly a contribution to our understanding of Spinoza's sources. One should note an Italian book on the topic that came out recently and that contains a precious edition of Delmedigo's treatise that Spinoza is likely to have read, "The Examination of Religion": Licata Giovanni, *La via della ragione. Elia del Medigo e l'averroismo di Spinoza* (Macerata: EUM, 2013).

The high quality of all these essays is evident and the book will be of profit to many scholars with different interests. José Manuel García Valverde writes a new chapter in the history of the debate on immortality following the Pomponazzi scandal by looking at Cardano's reply and interprets the latter's extravagant doctrine of the transmigration of the soul as springing from an Averroist source. Guido Giglioni, besides his sizeable introduction to the book, offers a detailed and philosophically challenging analysis of the notion of imagination. Michael J.B. Allen brings a literary touch to the volume with his essay on the Saturnianism of Ficino. Sarah Hutton looks at the notion of the agent intellect in the Cambridge Platonists and analyses at length More's views. Marco Sgarbi draws the picture of Averroism in German Enlightenment, before and after Kant, and looks at the interpretation of Kant as an Averroist. The three historiographical articles, by John Marenborn, James Montgomery, and Anna Akasoy, to which we can add Gregorie Piaia's essay on the presence of Averroes in early modern histories of philosophy, nicely complete this rich picture (although the insistence on "Straussianism" may seem a little Anglo-centric and overdone). We will retain John Marenbon's learned and captivating piece on Renan, a divisive figure himself. As Jean Jolivet used to say, one can only feel sorry for Renan that he spent the better part of his youth researching a topic that he loathed.

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The Correspondence of John Wallis, ed. by Philip Beeley and Christoph J. Scriba, vol. III, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, xxxiii + 630 pp., and vol. IV, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, lv + 595 pp.

A first-time student of early modern English science may not be immediately introduced to John Wallis (1616-1703). There is a strong line-up of towering figures—from William Harvey to Robert Boyle to Robert Hooke to Isaac Newton—who need to come up first in textbooks for beginners and often occupy them at the expense of everybody else. On the other hand, a seasoned scholar of the subject could hardly avoid meeting him at almost every turn of his/her work. Apart from anything else, this situation stems