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Averroes
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Averroes
(Ibn Rushd)
His Life, Works and Influence

MAJID FAKHRY
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Abū'l-Walīd Ibn Rushd, better known as Averroes (1126–1198), stands out as a towering figure in the history of Arab–Islamic thought, as well as that of West-European philosophy and theology. In the Arab–Islamic world, he played a decisive role in the defense of Greek philosophy against the onslaughts of the Ashʿarite theologians (Mutakallimun), led by al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), and the rehabilitation of Aristotle. In the Western world, he was recognized, as early as the thirteenth century, as the Commentator of Aristotle, contributing thereby to the rediscovery of the Master, after centuries of near-total oblivion in Western Europe. That discovery was instrumental in launching Latin Scholasticism and, in due course, the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century. Notwithstanding, there has been very little attention to Averroes’ work in English, although greater interest has been shown in French, since the publication of Ernest Rénan’s outstanding *Averroès et l’averroïsme* in 1852, and since that time in Spanish.

I have tried in this volume to give a comprehensive account of Averroes’ contribution to the fields of Aristotelian exegesis, Islamic theology, jurisprudence and medicine. In addition, I have tried to highlight his impact on European thought, both Jewish and Christian, and the reception of his philosophy in the Islamic world. In the final chapter, I have dealt with the encounter of Averroes and Aquinas, the two greatest Aristotelians in the thirteenth century.
Unless otherwise indicated, translations in the text are mine.

In closing, I wish to express my appreciation to Oneworld and its Director, Novin Doostar, for including this volume in their new series, Great Islamic Thinkers, and to the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University for permission to reproduce parts of my paper, “Averroes, Aquinas and the Rediscovery of Aristotle in Western Europe”, published by that Center in 1997.

Majid Fakhry
September 2000
Introduction

The Hellenistic phase in the history of Greek philosophy coincided with the founding of Alexandria in Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.E. From that time on, Alexandria became the heiress of Athens as the cultural center of the ancient world, especially in the fields of the positive sciences and medicine. In philosophy, that phase was marked by its syncretism and its tendency to bring together Greek, Chaldean, Egyptian, Phoenician, Jewish and Christian elements, culminating, in the second and third centuries of the Christian era, in Neoplatonism, the last great monument of Greek philosophy.

The accredited founder of this philosophy was Plotinus, who was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, in 205, and died in Rome in 270. His teaching was continued in the Near East and beyond by his disciple and editor, Porphyry of Tyre (d. 303), Jamblichus (d. 385), Syrian disciple of Porphyry, and in turn by Jamblichus' disciple, Proclus of Athens (d. 485), the last great proponent of Greek paganism. Shortly after, the eclipse of Greek philosophy in its homeland and the rest of Europe began, when the Byzantine emperor, Justinian, ordered the School of Athens, which was the last bastion of Greek paganism, to be closed. Seven of its teachers, led by Simplicius (fl. 533), crossed into Persia, lured by reports of the philhellenic sympathies of the Persian emperor, Chosroes I, known in Arabic sources as Anûšhirwan or the Just. This episode heralded the
eastward migration of Greek philosophy, which the afore-mentioned Hellenistic or Alexandrian phase had inaugurated.

The next historic phase in the history of Greek philosophy was the Arab-Islamic, which began during the Abbasid period (750–1258), when Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, inherited from Alexandria and Athens the title of cultural center of the world. Philosophers, scientists and theologians converged on it from all the corners of the Islamic world.

The first of those philosophers-scientists was al-Kindī (d. c. 866), who wrote on the whole range of ancient learning from logic, to arithmetic, psychology, meteorology, astrology and metaphysics. Al-Kindī lived during a period of profound soul-searching, during which the theological rationalists, known as Mu'tazilites, were pitted against their arch-rivals, the Ḥanbalites, the Malikites and other traditionalists, who rejected the application of rational methods of discourse, borrowed from the Greeks, as tantamount to heresy (bid'ah) or irreligion (kufr).

Al-Kindī, who sympathized with the Mu'tazilite desire to rationalize Islamic dogma, faced the traditionalists with singular determination and ensured thereby a secure, if short-lived, foothold for philosophy in Muslim lands. His successors, including al-Fārābī (d. 950) and Ibn Sīnā, also known as Avicenna (d. 1037), faced the same challenges in the next two centuries and developed in the process a metaphysical world-view, grounded in Neoplatonism, which they believed to be compatible with the Islamic system of beliefs. Their position was soon challenged by the new school of theology (kalām), which stemmed originally from Mu'tazilism itself. Its founder, Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935), an ex-Mu'tazilite, favored the application of theological methods of proof to Islamic dogmas, but was inclined to agree with the traditionalists, including Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), on the substance of their dogmatic teaching. His followers, who constitute a galaxy of outstanding theologians, or Mutakallimun, included al-Bāqillānī (d. 1012), al-Baghdādī (d. 1037), al-Juwayni (d. 1086) and his disciple al-Ghazālī, generally regarded as the greatest theologian or Proof of Islam (Hujjat al-Islām).

Al-Ghazālī was thoroughly schooled in the ways of the philosophers, as his Intentions of the Philosophers, his Criterion of Knowledge (or logic) and his
Balance of Action (or ethics) clearly show. His sympathies, however, were thoroughly religious and mystical, and thus he bent all his energies to the rebuttal of those parts of Greek philosophy, which “were in conflict with the fundamentals of religion,” according to him. These consisted of the bulk of physical and metaphysical propositions, that the Muslim Neoplatonists, led by al-Farābī and Avicenna, had popularized. Significantly enough, unlike the majority of other theologians, he regarded the other branches of philosophy, such as logic, ethics and mathematics, as entirely innocuous from a religious point of view.

Be this as it may, al-Ghazālī’s onslaught on Greek–Arabic philosophy, embodied chiefly in his Ṭabaṣṣūt al-Falāṣifah (Incoherence of the Philosophers), is a landmark in the history of the confrontation of the theologians and the philosophers of Islam. At a time when the Muslim world was racked with strife between the Shi‘ite Fātimids of Egypt and the Sunnite Abbasids of Baghdad, the theological battle was deemed as crucial as the political and military battle. Al-Ghazālī was the standard-bearer of the struggle against the philosophical and Shi‘ite party, who had been from the start strange bedfellows. In fact, the Shi‘ite or Ismā‘īli pro-philosophical sympathies dated back to the tenth century, which witnessed the rise of a popular philosophical fraternity at Basrah, known as the Brethren of Purity.

Al-Ghazālī’s onslaught in the eleventh century may be said to have signaled the death of philosophy in the East, but it soon gained a new lease of life in the West. Starting in the ninth century during the reign of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (852–886), the study of mathematical and juridical subjects appears to have prepared the ground for the study of the so-called ‘ancient sciences,’ during the reign of al-Ḥakam II, known as al-Mustansir Billāh (961–976). This enlightened prince ordered the importation of books from the East, to such a point that Cordova, the capital of Muslim Spain (al-Andalus), soon began to rival Baghdad as the center of learning, with its famous library which housed some 400,000 books. However, the picture changed with the accession of al-Ḥakam’s son, Hishām (976–1009), who reversed the cultural policies of his father and ordered the books of ‘ancient learning’ to be burned, with the exception of astronomy, logic and arithmetic, in an attempt to appease the
jurists and the masses at large, generally inclined to accuse the adepts of such subjects as downright heretics or infidels.

During the reign of the successor Berber dynasties, the fate of these sciences, including philosophy and theology, or *kalām*, did not change perceptibly. The first of these dynasties, al-Murābītūn (Almoravids), who ruled Spain and North Africa from 1090 to 1147, adhered to a rigid form of the Maliki legal creed (*madhhah*), and encouraged the study of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), but prohibited the study of theology (*kalām*) and the 'ancient sciences,' including philosophy. In that respect, they were following in the footsteps of the founder of the Maliki school, Mālik Ibn Anas (d. 795), who had no use for rational discourse of any kind. Asked once about the Qur'ānic verses which speak of God's sitting on the throne (*istiwā*), he is reported to have replied: "The sitting is well-known, its modality is unknown; belief in it is obligatory and questioning it is a heresy (*bid'ah*)."

With the advent of the Muwāhidūn (Almohades) in 1146, the intellectual climate in al-Andalus and North Africa changed somewhat. The founder of the Almohades dynasty, Āḥmad Ibn Tumart (d. 1128), introduced the study of theology (*kalām*), and this opened the way for the study of philosophy and the 'ancient sciences,' which had been neglected in the West, as we have seen. It is to be noted that Ibn Tumart was somewhat eclectical in his approach to *kalām*, since he favored the Mu'tazilite method on some questions and the Ash'arite method on other questions. In law, he remained a Zahirite, following in the footsteps of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1068), and thus regarded Scripture (*ṣīrāt*) as the final authority in matters of religious law (*ṣīrātah*) and ritual observances (*ibādah*), as well.

However, despite his profession of the Maliki creed, Ibn Tumart believed that the apparent conflict between *kalām* and philosophy can be resolved by recourse to the intuitive principles of reason, which stipulate that every action or occurrence should be referred to an Agent, as the principle of causality and the Qur'ān itself stipulate, in such verses as 11: 14 and 11: 17, which refer to the Qur'ān as a revelation from God and "a clear proof from their Lord." It follows that upon this as a premise, Ibn Tumart held, we can prove the existence of God, and thus "it is certain that God Almighty can be known through the necessity of reason," as he has put it in
his best known work, the *Dearest Quest (A'azz mā Yuṭlab).* He then inveighs against those who claim that the religious law (*sharīʿah*) is incompatible with wisdom or philosophy (*ḥikmah*), "demeaning thereby religion itself and ignoring God's wisdom." He was also convinced, like Averroes, who is known to have written a *Commentary on Ibn Tumart's Creed,* that deduction (*qiṣās*), whether religious (*sharīʿ* or rational (*'aqīq*), is the pathway to certainty, contrary to 'conjectural' deductions which have led many sectarians, such as the Non-attributionists (Muʿāṭtilah) and the Corporealists (Mujassimah), astray. He was also convinced that rational and legal deductions are equivalent; for in the case of the former, we distinguish between the necessary, the possible and the impossible; whereas in the case of the latter, we distinguish between the obligatory, the lawful and the unlawful – the two sets of categories being analogous, according to him.

In further defending this view, Ibn Tumart goes on to argue that legal deduction, which has five varieties, was actually used by the different sects, including the already-mentioned Non-attributionists, the Corporealists and others, in support of their specious propositions. The five varieties are then given by him as follows:

1. The existential deduction, which has led the Corporealists to infer from what is an object of empirical observation that the Creator Himself must be corporeal.
2. The habitual deduction, which led some to hold that all existing entities are generated by other existing entities, so that a being who does not generate other existing entities, similar to him, does not exist – from which they inferred that God does not exist.
3. The observational deduction, according to which everything we observe must exist in a given locus. It follows, then, that God Himself must exist in a locus.
4. The active deduction, from which some have inferred that whoever is responsible for a certain action, such as injustice or aggression, must be described as an unjust aggressor. From this premise they inferred that God must be so described.

5. The causal deduction, which stipulates, on the basis of observation, that the knowledge subsisting in the knower is the cause of his being a knower. Ibn Tumart objects to this type of deduction on the ground that, if this were the case, God's knowledge would be contingent, rather than necessary, and thus knowledge could be denied of Him.3

This interest in defining rational deduction, as distinct from legal deduction, and its many varieties, will play a decisive role in Averroes' attempt to demonstrate the harmony of religion (Sharī'ah) and philosophy (hikmah) in his Decisive Treatise, as will appear in due course, by highlighting the analogy between the two varieties of deduction, the religious, used by the jurists and the theologians and the rational, used by the philosophers.

Although the Almoravids, as we have mentioned, were averse to the study of philosophy, theology and the ‘ancient sciences,’ it is noteworthy that they do not appear to have actively combated this study. This is illustrated by the fact that the beginnings of philosophical speculation in al-Andalus coincide with the latter part of their rule. Thus, of the earliest scholars, the Andalusian historian, Ṣa'īd (d. 1070) mentions Maslamah Ibn Ahmad al-Majriti (d. 1008), who distinguished himself in astronomy and the occult sciences, and is said to have traveled in the East and brought back with him to Spain the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity. According to other reports, these were brought to Spain by his disciple, al-Kirmānī.4

Other scholars who cultivated interest in philosophy and the ‘ancient sciences’ are mentioned by Ṣa'īd. They included Ibn al-Nabbāsh al-Bajjā'i, Abūl-Fadl Ibn Hasdai, Ahmad Ibn Hafsūn, nicknamed the philosopher, and others. An earlier Andalusian scholar, Muḥammad Ibn 'Abdullah Ibn Masarraḥ (d. 931), is said to have inclined to Mu'tazilite theology and mysticism, and if we are to believe the Spanish Orientalist, Asín Palacios, a form of apocryphal Empedoclean doctrine.5

However, the first genuine philosopher of al-Andalus was Abū Bakr Ibn al-Ṣayigh, better known as Ibn Bājjah or Avempace (d. 1138). Unlike

3. Ibid., pp. 158 f.
4. Ṣa'īd al-Andalusi, Tabaqāt al-Uman, pp. 80 f.
his Andalusian predecessors mentioned above, Avempace was thoroughly versed in philosophy, logic and medicine. He wrote paraphrases of Aristotle's *Physics*, *Meteorology*, *Generation and Corruption*, the *Book of Animals*, as Aristotle's zoological corpus was called in Arabic, and the spurious *De Plantis*. In addition, he wrote extensive glosses (*ta'åliq*) on the logical works of al-Farâbi, for whom he had the highest regard, in addition to an original political treatise, modeled on al-Farâbi's *Virtuous City* and entitled the *Conduct of the Solitary* (*Tadbîr al-Mutawahhîd*).

The second major figure in the history of Andalusian philosophy was Abû Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), a close friend and associate of Averroes. His only extant work, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzân*, is a philosophical novel which embodies the substance of Islamic Neoplatonism, tempered by certain Sufi tendencies, which al-Ghazâlî had popularized in the East.

The pivotal figure in the history of Andalusian philosophy, however, was Abû'l-Walîd Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rushd, better known in European sources as Averroes, on whom the present study centers. Averroes' philosophy marks the climactic point in the development of Arab-Islamic philosophy and the conclusion of four centuries of philosophical-theological warfare in Islam. In global cultural terms, his contribution to Aristotelian scholarship marks a critical point in the history of the transmission of Greek-Arabic philosophy to Western Europe, at a time when Greek philosophy in general and Aristotelianism in particular had been almost completely forgotten in the West. For, with the exception of the translation of Aristotle's logical works by Boethius (d. 525) and parts of Plato's *Timaeus* by Chalcidus (fourth century), very little of Greek philosophy had survived in the West. Thus, when Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Latin early in the thirteenth century, they caused a profound intellectual stir in philosophical and theological circles in Western Europe, and laid the groundwork for the rise of Latin Scholasticism, which prior to the rediscovery of Aristotle, thanks chiefly to Averroes' commentaries, would have been inconceivable. Even the rise of Renaissance rationalism and humanism is closely linked to Averroes' commitment to the primacy of reason in philosophical and theological discourse. Thus, as Etienne Gilson has written in his *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*, "Rationalism was
born in Spain in the mind of an Arabian philosopher, as a conscious reaction against the theologism of the Arabian divines," by whom he means the Ash'arite Mutakallimun. He then adds that when Averroes died in 1198, "he bequeathed to his successors the ideal of a purely rational philosophy, an ideal whose influence was to be such that, by it even the evolution of Christian philosophy was to be deeply modified." In this respect, it can be argued that Averroes' 'philosophical rationalism' is not only five centuries earlier, but even more comprehensive than the 'mathematical rationalism' of René Descartes (d. 1650), generally regarded as the father of modern philosophy.

Apart from his contribution to the philosophical and theological debate which ripped the intellectual world of Islam apart, Averroes is the only Muslim philosopher to have taken an active interest in the juridical debate of the time in al-Andalus. He served as the religious judge (qāḍī) of Seville (1169–1172), chief judge of Cordova (1172–1182), and in 1182 was appointed physician royal at the court of Marrakesh. He also wrote a number of juridical treatises of which only the Primer of the Discretionary Scholar (Bidāyat al-Mujtahid) has survived. In this treatise, Averroes explains that his aim is to discuss those juridical decisions which are the subject of consensus or dissension among scholars and to determine their bases in the explicit statement of Scripture (sharī'a). Here his vast erudition in the field of jurisprudence is revealed, since he mentions, then discusses, every juridical opinion, liberal or conservative, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Mālikī or Ḥanbali, and does not always stick to the Mālikī opinion, despite his official status as a Mālikī judge.

In addition to jurisprudence, philosophy and theology, Averroes contributed extensively to medicine, to which he devoted a large number of treatises, the most famous of which is al-Kulliyat, translated into Latin as Colliget, together with a number of medical tracts, many of which have survived. They consist mostly of epitomes or summaries (talākkēs) of some of Galen’s medical works. To these tracts should be added a commentary on Avicenna’s famous medical poem, al-Urjūzah fi‘l-Ṭibb, which has also survived in Arabic and Latin.

Life and Works

According to his leading biographers, including al-Marākushi (d. 1224), Ibn al-Abbār (d. 1260), Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah (d. 1270) and al-Anṣāri (d. 1288), Averroes was born in Cordova, Spain, in 1126, into a prominent family of religious (Mālikī) judges and statesmen, and in the manner of his father and grandfather, who served as Mālikī judges of Cordova, the young Averroes studied jurisprudence, Arabic, letters (adab), theology (kalām), philosophy and medicine at the hands of a number of teachers whose names are sometimes mentioned by his biographers. Thus, of his medical teachers, Abū Ja'far Hārūn and Abū Marwān Ibn Jurbul of Valencia are mentioned by name, but his closest medical associate was the famous Abū Bakr Ibn Zuhr, who died in 1162. None of Averroes' philosophy teachers are mentioned by name, but he appears to have been influenced by Avempace, who was responsible for introducing the study of Aristotle into al-Andalus, as we have seen, and for whom Averroes had the highest regard. He was, in addition, a close friend of Ibn Ṭufayl, who served as physician royal of the caliph, Abū Ya'qūb Yusūf, who appears to have been genuinely interested in philosophy. Ibn Ṭufayl's 'illuminationist' (Ishrāqi) or mystical sympathies cannot have appealed much to Averroes, who was highly critical of the Ishrāqi tendencies of Avicenna and the Sufi tendencies of al-Ghazālī, whose thought was at the heart of Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical outlook. However, Averroes' association with Ibn Ṭufayl
proved very fruitful in determining the direction of his philosophical output; since it was Ibn Tufayl who introduced him to the caliph in 1169, commending him "for his acumen, his sound instinct and his attachment to the art (of philosophy)." Whereupon, we are told by the historian al-Marākushi, the caliph addressed to him the question: "What do the philosophers believe regarding heaven? Is it eternal or created in time (ḥādīth)?" In response, Averroes, thoroughly taken aback, denied that he was "engaged in the study of philosophy." To allay his fears, the caliph then proceeded to expound the views of Plato, Aristotle and the other philosophers on this question, as well as the objections of Muslim scholars to these views. "I found in him [i.e. the caliph] a profuseness of learning I did not suspect in specialists in that field," Averroes later told one of his disciples.1

It was chiefly as a result of this encounter of the philosopher and the prince that Averroes' philosophical career was launched. For that prince, an avid reader of Aristotle, had complained to Ibn Tufayl about "the obscurity of Aristotle's idiom or that of his translators" and expressed the wish that he might attempt an interpretation of the philosopher's works for his use. Already advanced in years, Ibn Tufayl excused himself and recommended Averroes, whose talents he greatly admired, as we have seen. From that time on, Averroes' career as the Commentator began, since his earliest Aristotelian works, the paraphrases of the Parts of Animals, the Generation of Animals and the Parva Naturalia (al-Hisr wa'l Mahṣūs) were written in the same year, 1169.

When Abū Yusuf Ya'qūb, nicknamed al-Manṣūr, succeeded his father in 1184, Averroes continued to enjoy the same royal patronage; but in 1195, probably in response to public pressure instigated by the Mālikī jurists, who were averse to the study of philosophy and the 'ancient sciences,' the fortunes of Averroes took an adverse turn. According to other accounts given by Averroes' biographers, a variety of charges appear to have been leveled at the philosopher. Thus, Ibn Abī Usaybi'ah attributed his disgrace to his reference to al-Manṣūr, in the Book of Animals, as the 'king of the Berbers' (al-barbar), which could also be construed in

Arabic as the Barbarians. Al-Ansārī attributes it to his statement elsewhere, in connection with the People of ‘Ād and the wind which destroyed them, as mentioned in Qu’ran 54:19: “Indeed, the existence of the People of ‘Ād is uncertain; what then of the news of their destruction” by that wind?2 Finally, al-Marākushi attributes Averroes’ disgrace to his reference to Venus as one of the Gods.3

The writings of Averroes covered a greater variety of subjects, philosophical, medical, juridical and linguistic than those of any of his predecessors in the East. However, by far the largest part of his output consisted of commentaries or paraphrases of all the works of Aristotle, with the exception of the Politics, for which he substituted the Republic of Plato. The commentaries are usually divided into large (tafsīr), intermediate (sharḥ) and short, i.e. paraphrase or epitomes (jawāmi’). It is noteworthy that the only works of Aristotle on which Averroes wrote all three types of commentaries or paraphrases are the Physics, the Metaphysics, De Anima, De Coelo and Analytica Posteriora. In addition, he wrote commentaries on De Intellectu of Alexander of Aphrodisias, the Metaphysics of Nicolaus of Damascus, the Isagoge of Porphyry and the Almajest of Ptolemy.

To these commentaries or paraphrases should be added a series of original philosophical writings, some of which have survived in Arabic, Hebrew or Latin. They include treatises On the Intellect, On the Syllogism, On Conjunction with the Active Intellect, On Time, On the Heavenly Sphere and On the Motion of the Sphere. A number of polemical treatises, some of which have also survived, include an Essay on al-Fārābī’s Approach to Logic, as Compared to that of Aristotle, Metaphysical Questions Dealt with in the Book of Healing (al-Shīfā’) by Ibn Sinā and a Rebuttal of Ibn Sinā’s Classification of Existing Entities into Possible Absolutely, Possible in Themselves but Necessary by Another and Necessary in Themselves.4

Averroes’ theological works consist of a trilogy, which begins with the Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tabāfut al-Tabāfut) (1180), a rebuttal of

2. Rénan, Averroës, Appendix, pp. 444, 452.