



AVICENNA XII. THE IMPACT OF AVICENNA'S PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS ON THE WEST

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xii. The Impact of Avicenna's Philosophical Works in the West

Western European acquaintance with Avicenna began when Latin versions of some of his Arabic works came out in the period between the mid-twelfth and the late thirteenth century. These versions were products of a great translation movement which brought into being a large corpus of philosophical and scientific literature of Greek, Arabic, and Jewish origin and greatly influenced medieval thought in the thirteenth century.

The best known of Avicenna's philosophical works in the Middle Ages was his encyclopedic *Ketāb al-æfā'* (Book of healing). This consists of a biography of Avicenna in a preface by his pupil Jūzjānī and of four *Summae*, i.e., collections (*jomal*, sing. *jomla*), dealing with particular disciplines, namely logic, physics, mathematics, and metaphysics. Each *jomla* is divided into *fonūn* (sing. *fann*), i.e., specialities or sections. Almost all of the Physics (*Ṭabī'iyāt*, i.e., branches of natural science) and the whole of the Metaphysics (*Elāhīyāt*, i.e., branches of



knowledge of God) were translated into Latin. The Mathematics (*Rīāzīyāt*) were not translated. The only parts of the Logic (*Manteq*) which were translated were the introduction (*Madkāl*), a chapter from section 5 on proof (*borhān*, i.e., by syllogism), and two passages from section 8 on rhetoric (*keṭāba*); in all, about one tenth of the Arabic text.

Some of the translations were made during the second half of the twelfth century at Toledo, namely, (1) the introduction (*Madkāl*) to the Logic, preceded by the preface to the *Šefā'* and the chapter from the section on proof; (2) from the Natural Science, three quarters of section I (*al-fannal-awwal*) on physics in the strict sense (*al-Samā' al-ṭabī'i*) and section 6 (*al-fann al-sādes*) which forms the Treatise on the Soul (*Ketāb al-nafs*); (3) the entire Metaphysics, i.e., the whole of the fourth *jomla*.

Section 8 (*al-fann al-tāmen*) of the Natural Science, which forms the Treatise on Animals (*Ḥayawān*) was translated about 1230 for the emperor Frederick II, King of Sicily.

The two passages on rhetoric were translated about 1240 for John, Bishop of Burgos.

Also at Burgos, translation of the Natural Science was resumed under the auspices of Bishop Gonzalvo Garcia de Gudiel, beginning with the part of section I which had been left unfinished at Toledo: Despite the work done at Burgos, the Latin text does not amount to a full translation of the Arabic text. The other translated parts of the Natural Science are sections 2, 3, 4, and 5, on the Heaven and the World (*al-Samā' wa'l-ālam*), Generation and Corruption (*al-Kawn wa'l-fasād*), Actions and Reactions arising from elemental qualities (*al-Afāl wa'l-enfe'ālāt*), and Meteorology, i.e., atmospheric phenomena (*al-Āṭār al-'olwīya*), respectively. Three chapters of the last-mentioned section had been separately translated toward the end of the twelfth century; we thus have a version of this part earlier than the Burgos version.

Section 7 of the Natural Science, which constitutes the short Treatise on Plants (*al-Nabāt*), was translated under the title *Liber de vegetabilibus*; this title is mentioned in the inventory of the great fourteenth-century library of the Sorbonne compiled in 1338, but it has not yet come to light (M. Th. d'Alverny, *Notes*, p. 348).

The names of almost all the chief translators of the *Šefā'* (though not of their



assistants) are definitely known. They were Avendauth, an “Israelita philosophus,” and the archdeacon Dominic Gundisalvi or Gundissalinus, both mentioned in the letter dedicating the Treatise on the Soul to the archbishop John of Toledo; Michael Scotus, who dedicated the Treatise on Animals to Frederick II; Master John Gunsalvi and Salomon, mentioned in the part of the Natural Science translated at Burgos; Herrmann the German, mentioned in the preface to his translation of Aristotle’s Rhetoric into which he inserted passages from Avicenna’s *Šefā’*; and Alfred of Sareshel or Alfred the Englishman, the translator of the three extracts from the Meteorology (section 5 of the Natural Science).

On the other hand, the Latin manuscripts give contradictory indications of the role of Gerard of Cremona, who resided at Toledo contemporaneously with Dominic Gundisalvi and translated Avicenna’s *Canon* on medicine. Some of the Latin terms used in the translation of the Metaphysics suggest that perhaps Gerard had a hand in it, but only one of the twenty-four known manuscripts names him as the translator. In three other manuscripts the translation is attributed to Dominic Gundisalvi, but these are not independent sources (Van Riet, *Liber de philosophia prima* I-IV, p. 123).

In addition to the *Šefā’*, another philosophical work by Avicenna was known to the medieval Europeans, namely *al-Adwīa al-qalbīya* (Medicaments of the Heart), an essay on certain subjects also discussed in the *Ketāb al-nafs*. This short work was translated into Latin early in the fourteenth century by Arnaud de Villeneuve at Barcelona in 1306. Avicenna’s disciple Jūzjānī had inserted a part of the essay into the Arabic text of the *Ketāb al-nafs* in view of the relatedness of the subject matter, and these chapters had already been translated into Latin at the same time as the whole of the *De anima* in the twelfth century (Van Riet, *De medicinis cordialibus fragmentum*, in *De anima* IV-V, pp. 98*-99*, 115*-118*, 187-210).

Finally there are mentions of two more works of Avicenna in the book *Pugio fidei* written by the Dominican friar Raymond Martin in 1278. One is the *Alixarat*, i.e., the *Ketāb al-eċārāt wa’l-tanbīhāt*; the title is interpreted by Raymond Martin as *Liber invitationum vel nutuum* or as *Liber invitationum et exercitationum*, and ten lines in Latin translation are quoted. The other is *Annage*, i.e., *al-Najāt*, one page of which is translated into Latin (Cortabarría, *L’étude des langues*, pp. 233-34).

Avicenna’s philosophical works formed the core of a large body of literature



comprising other translations from Arabic and compilations in which Avicenna's translated writings were lumped together with texts of Christian and Neoplatonist authors. Dominic Gundisalvi himself also translated the *Summa philosophiae* of Algazel (Ġazālī) and the *Fons vitae* of Ebn Gabirol, and reputedly compiled several treatises containing quotations of paraphrases from works by Avicenna such as *De anima* and *De divisione philosophiae*.

There is general agreement that a work falsely attributed to Avicenna, bearing the title *Liber Avicennae in primis et secundis substantiis et de fluxu entis* should be placed in the category of compilations modeled on those of Dominic Gundisalvi. This work is included in the *Opera philosophica* of Avicenna printed at Venice in 1508 (pp. 64v-67v). Other copies with the title *De causa causarum et fluxu earum* were made and are to be found following *De anima* in several manuscripts (d'Alverny, *Les traductions d'Avicenne*, p. 81; cf. *Avicenna latinus*). As Gilson (*Les sources gréco-arabes*, pp. 92-93) observed, "it is almost certainly a Christian work written by an author who borrowed at random from writings of Dionysius, St. Augustine, Erigena, and Avicenna. Such unthinking and unrestrained imitation of Avicenna only appeared in the last two-thirds of the 13th century." The author propounds the concept of the soul's illumination through a separate substance, as taught by Farābī and Avicenna, and attempts to synthesize this with St. Augustine's teaching; Avicenna's active intellect (*dator formarum*) is identified with St. Augustine's illuminator-God, who thus becomes the active intellect of the human species. The complex of ideas prevalent in this historic phase, as attested by the syntheses of Arab and Christian Neoplatonism, is called "Avicennizing Augustinism" by Gilson (op. cit., p. 103) and "Latin Avicennism" by de Vaux (*Notes et Textes*, pp. 63f.). These terms are questioned by certain historians of thirteenth-century philosophy (Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie*, pp. 17-18 and 185-87). In any case the doctrine identifying the active intellect, as a separate substance, with the Father of Light or Word of God continued for decades to be attractive to many minds, e.g., Roger Marston and Marsilio Ficino (Goichon, *La philosophie d'Avicenne*, pp. 113-14).

In the first third of the thirteenth century, Avicenna's works were no longer studied only in connection with writers of Neoplatonic inspiration such as pseudo-Dionysius, St. Augustine, John Duns Scotus, or Erigena; they were also used in the study of Aristotle. Avicenna's own paraphrases of Aristotle "met the needs of the first Aristotle-interpreters until superseded by Averroes's literal commentaries. Before the Western Christians became acquainted with



Averroes, Avicenna's influence on Latin Aristotelianism was very marked" (Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie*, pp. 186-87).

As early as 1210, a synod at Paris banned the reading of Aristotle's "libri de naturali philosophia" and "commenta" thereon. In 1215 the ban was reaffirmed and clarified by Robert de Courcel, the legate of Pope Innocent III, in one of the regulations specifying what might be taught in the faculty of arts: "Non legantur libri Aristotelis de metaphisica et de naturali philosophia nec summae de eisdem" (Aristotle's books on metaphysics and natural philosophy must not be read, nor the "summaries" of same). Historians suggest somewhat divergent explanations of these bans, having regard to the circumstances and to the identities of the suspect teachers (Amaury of Bène, David of Dinant, and others), but all agree that the words "commenta" and "summae" refer definitely, if not exclusively, to the paraphrases of Avicenna. It is noteworthy that the prohibition applied only to the teaching of these texts, not to personal reading and use of them, and that its scope was strictly local. Thus in 1229 the books of Aristotle and commentaries thereon which were under interdict at Paris could be read and taught at the nascent university of Toulouse (Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie*, p. 92).

Several writers active about 1240, such as Guillaume of Auvergne, Alexandre of Hales, Jean of La Rochelle, show in their comments or censures that they had precise knowledge of Avicenna's *De anima*, of his analysis of the faculties of the soul, his theory of abstraction, and his classification of intellects.

Various works of Avicenna enter prominently into the great philosophical-scientific encyclopedia of Albertus Magnus, who started work on it toward the middle of the thirteenth century, just at the time when Aristotelianism was triumphing at Paris. His wish was to "rehash Aristotle for use by the Latins" and to "place within reach of the studiosus all the scientific findings made by the human mind up to his own time" (Mandonnet, *Siger I*, pp. 37-39). Rather than the literal commentaries on Aristotle's works, he cites the paraphrases of Avicenna. He also makes frequent use of Avicenna's own works, most often not explicitly, in quotations which have not yet all been identified (Van Riet, *Liber de philosophia prima I-IV*, pp. 159*-163*). The philosophy of Albertus Magnus, as presented in his encyclopedia, may therefore be described as a Neoplatonized, and above all Avicennized, Aristotelianism (Van Steenberghen, *La philosophie*, p. 303).

Thomas Aquinas's writings contain more than 400 explicit quotations of



Avicenna, drawn mainly from *De anima* (section 6 of *De naturalibus*) and the *Metaphysica* and in some cases from the Physics in the strict sense (*Sufficientia*). On the basis of a solid exegesis of Aristotle made in the light of Averroes' criticisms, Thomas Aquinas endorses or rejects the quoted theses of Avicenna, thereby putting them into sharper perspective. He does this in his discussions of God the Creator, God's providence, the real distinction between essence and existence in finite beings, the analogy of being, and the notion of the necessary (which he drops in his list of the transcendental attributes) (Verbeke, *Le statut*, p. 36).

Following the examples set by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas after him, it became customary to incorporate the gist of the Toledan translations of Avicenna and also materials from the *Liber de animalibus* in large-scale syntheses and thus to engulf them in a mass of texts of other authors such as Aristotle, Boethius, Proclus, and Averroes. This at least facilitated comparisons of different doctrines, with fruitful effects on the works of later writers such as Henry of Ghent, Godefroid of Fontaines, John Duns Scotus, Marsilio Ficino, Caietano, and others. Avicenna's future standing in the West was to be tied to that of the works in which so many ideas taken from him had been integrated (Goichon, *La philosophie*, p. 127).

Less is known about the process of diffusion of the *Libri naturales*, sections 2 to 5, which were translated at Burgos after the death of Thomas Aquinas in 1274 and probably not long before that of Albertus Magnus in 1280. The texts of these books are not included in the *Opera philosophica* of Avicenna printed at Venice in 1508 and have not yet been systematically studied.

In the sixteenth century, several short philosophical works of Avicenna were translated from Arabic into Latin by the physician-philosopher Andrea Alpago of Belluno, but these new translations did not have any leavening effect on contemporary Western thought.

The tally of the work done in the past thirty years gives promise of a revival of Avicennian studies in the West in the coming decades, with particular attention to the *Šefā'*. The new Arabic edition of the *Šefā'*, which the Ebn Sīnā Committee at Cairo began to publish in 1952, was completed with the printing of the *Physics* (*al-fann al-awwal men al-Ṭabī'yāt*) in 1983. This edition provides the essential basis for studies of the Latin versions. The inventory of the Latin manuscripts begun by M. d'Alverny in 1952 has also been completed. The first critical editions of *De anima* and the *Metaphysica*, prepared by S. Van Riet,



came out in 1968-72 and 1977-80-83 respectively. A critical edition of the *Libri naturales* is in progress.

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