

PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENTARIES AND POPULAR CULTURE IN ISLAM

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Philosophy was introduced into the Islamic world in the third century A.H. (the ninth century A.D.), an expression in part of the cultural efflorescence of the period, tolerated and even encouraged by the ruling 'Abbāsid circles in Baghdad. It is worth recalling that al-Kindī (d. 870), the first philosopher in Islam, was patronized by the caliphs al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'taṣim, and that he was the tutor of the latter's son. A number of al-Kindī's treatises are dedicated to the nobility of his day, and they are written as responses to queries put to him on scientific and philosophical matters.

Though his patrons and auditors may have been genuinely interested in such issues, they were not for the most part equipped to follow elaborate or sophisticated explanations, and al-Kindī wisely refrained from boring them overly with such. He often wrote essays of relatively short length, some just a few pages long, geared to the limited education and understanding of the addressee, whose limitations al-Kindī unhesitatingly proclaimed. *Fa-hādā fīmā sa'alta kāfin bi-ḥasb ma'wḍi'ika min an-nazr* ("Of what you inquired about, this, then is sufficient, corresponding to your attainment [literally, "place"] in speculation")¹, is a not uncharacteristic closing remark of his. al-Kindī's successors thought scarcely more of him than he thought of his contemporaries, viewing his oeuvre as extensive but limited in depth and philosophical acumen. Once the Aristotelian corpus in translation had been assimilated, al-Kindī's initial response to it seemed inadequate, to later generations.

¹ Cf. M. Abū Rīda, ed., *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafīyya* (Cairo, vol. I, 1950; vol. II, 1953), I, 311. Cf. further, R. Walzer, "New Studies On Al-Kindī", *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford, 1962), 179.

Overlooked, perhaps, was his real achievement, that of introducing philosophy into a culture that had not known it previously, and which was of divided minds as to its suitability. Overlooked, too, it seems, was the distinction to be found in al-Kindī's writings between essays written to order, and longer, more thorough works on the same theme. It is in the latter kind of treatise that we find the arguments which are often treated more dogmatically and more superficially in the shorter works. al-Kindī's success in introducing philosophy into Islamic culture may well be due in part to this distinction which he drew between philosophy in a somewhat lighter and more popular mode, though still *falsafa*; and philosophy proper, or at least as proper as he could make it.

Whatever one may think of al-Kindī's philosophical abilities, his longer treatises do have the merit of arguing *in extenso* for a given position, using arguments which are mostly philosophical in character. In his book *On First Philosophy (Fī l-falsafa l-ūlā)*² and in other longish treatises, he works out the logical entailments of concepts which derive directly from a philosophical lexicon formed by Aristotelian and Neoplatonic texts. Though his definitions of terms may be presented as so many grand pronouncements, and his premises appear to be dictated by a philosophical tradition accepted almost *en bloc*³, he is not prepared, in the longer works, to dictate the conclusions which follow from these premises, preferring to reason them out syllogistically, as best he could.

al-Kindī's shorter treatises, in comparison, and particularly those which are but a few pages in length, tend to state their claims in summary and mostly dogmatic terms, presenting philosophy as another genre of teachings to be accepted on authority. The auditor or reader of

² Ed. Abū Rīda (*op. cit.*, I, 81-162; trans. A. Ivry, *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics* (Albany 1974), 55-114; analysis of the argument, pp. 11-21 and *passim*).

³ Cf. al-Kindī's *Treatise on Definitions*, ed. Abū Rīda, I, 163-179; S. M. Stern, "Notes on Al-Kindī's Treatise on Definitions". *JRAS* (1959), 32-43.

a short composition⁴ is being told what to believe in science or philosophy, not why it is necessary to so believe. At best, al-Kindī favours his audience with some slight argument, offering a partial account of his reasons for holding a given view. Accordingly, these essays serve essentially as brief digests of the longer works on the same theme, and may be seen as a popular gloss or commentary to them. As such they complement the more serious work, and extend its teachings to wider circles. If the shorter treatises succeeded to stimulate people to inquire further, so much the better; if not, they caused no harm, from al-Kindī's viewpoint. They did not teach false doctrines, or misrepresent the author's real position.

Of course, one may well question the wisdom of teaching philosophy in the manner of the short treatise, essentially as a series of truths to be learned, without fully demonstrating the *technē* which renders these truths true; and al-Kindī's recourse to this didactic approach reflects his social position more than his status as a philosopher. However, the *falāsifa* in Islam from al-Kindī's time on occupied a social position of some significance, and the shorter type of treatise assured their acceptance in the broader circles on which their livelihood – and very life – usually depended.

An example of this kind of short treatise may be had in al-Kindī's "Treatise on the True Agent, the First and Perfect, and On the Agent Which is Deficient and Metaphorically (Predicated)". *Risālat al-Kindī fī l-fā'il al-ḥaqq al-awwal at-tāmm wa-l-fā'il an-nāqiṣ alladī huwa bi-l-mağāz*⁵. The "true, first and perfect" agent is of course God, "the Creator, Agent of all that is" (or "the universe"), *al-bārī, fā'il al-kull*. God is

⁴ No one term necessarily serves al-Kindī for this genre of writing, though *kitāb* by itself is reserved for the longer works. *Kalām*, a term which is used sparingly for this purpose, does seem to denote a brief "word" on a given subject. but *risāla* may stand for a long or short treatise. Cf. the titles listed in the Table of Contents of Abū Rīdā's edition, *op. cit.*, I, v, vi; II, 153. See too the comprehensive list of titles prepared by G. Flügel, *Al-Kindī: genannt "der Philosoph der Araber"*, (Leipzig 1857; reprint Liechtenstein: Nendeln, 1966), 36-52.

⁵ Ed. Abū Rīdā, I, 182-184.

designated as "agent", *fā'il*, in that He alone is capable of performing that kind of action which truly merits being called an action, or agency, *al-fīl*, viz., creation from nothing, *ta'yīs al-aysāt 'an laysa*.

This unique action, however, is called *ibdā'* rather than *fīl*, since the latter term is used, if metaphorically, for other forms of activity as well, al-Kindī knows. These other actions involve the agent in the effect of its action, whereas God's actions do not affect Him in any way whatsoever, presumably. In the causal chain of events which al-Kindī then outlines, God alone is "the agent which is never a recipient of action", *fā'ilun lā munfā'ilun battatan*.

A causal chain of events does exist, however, for al-Kindī, so that God's agency over the world is shared, to a degree, with other agents. Thus, the creation of the world from nothing is an action unique to God, but the world He has created possesses, *pace* al-Kindī, many real, and not metaphorical agents. God may be *fā'il al-kull*, the agent or cause of all that is in the universe, but He is, as al-Kindī acknowledges, a remote or mediated cause for all but the first effect of His action.

While the treatise goes on for a short while to make further distinctions in the concept of agency, we may pause here and ask what al-Kindī has sought to do in this brief *risāla*, and what he has not done. It seems clear that he wishes to extol God's uniqueness as Creator of the world, where creation is *ex nihilo*, *'an laysa*. This action is of such unique greatness that it alone qualifies to be called an "action" truly, even as its "agent" is the only one fully deserving of the name.

In making these assertions, al-Kindī distinguishes radically between God and the world, and between His actions and all other causes. Purportedly, God is not affected by, i.e., He is not involved in a causal relation with the effects of his actions, though He clearly is the cause of these effects, directly or remotely. al-Kindī does not explain here how God can be both involved and totally unaffected, any more than he explains how creation from nothing is possible, logically. After all, defining *ibdā'* does not render it real. God's status as a unique agent is proclaimed arbitrarily, and the term *fīl* is both rejected and rescued for further philosophical use. The very meaning of metaphorical discourse,

of equivocal language, is taken for granted, though an understanding of his intention in using the term is critical for judging whether al-Kindī is to be taken seriously as a philosopher.

al-Kindī attempts to address all these issues in his treatise "On first Philosophy" and in other works, but in this short essay he has simply stated the conclusions he has reached elsewhere. As found here, his remarks also have the effect of affirming traditional views of God's unique nature, of his creation of the world, and of His governance of it; while at the same time, he explicitly indicates to his audience that he believes in a world which, once created, functions along physical. i.e., natural principles of cause and effect. al-Kindī's world is thus more akin to that of the philosophers than to that of the *mutakallimūn*, his main adversaries, though his differences with them are somewhat muted in this presentation. Here as elsewhere in his shorter pieces, al-Kindī is not interested in drawing attention to the challenges or problems which philosophy can present to traditional beliefs, or to theology; but in highlighting the areas of agreement and sympathy with tradition which philosophy offers.

al-Kindī is able to do this because he was himself persuaded of the harmony of philosophy and religion, where religious belief determines philosophical tenets. His successors were similarly convinced of the agreement of philosophy and religion, but with philosophical premisses often determining the interpretation of religious beliefs. Thus *ibdā'*, for example, is still employed by later philosophers to describe the act of creation, but it is not a creation from nothing, as al-Kindī understood it⁶. The "created" world is ever more self-explicable and self-reliant. God's uniqueness notwithstanding. Philosophy had come of age, and in its maturity was prepared to exhibit its strength to all interested parties.

Not all interested parties were disinterested future philosophers, however, and the philosophers had to temper their enthusiasm for their profession with professions of conformity to religious ideals, or at least to avoid statements antagonistic to such beliefs. A good example of this

⁶ Cf. Walzer, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

may be found in the writing of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (257-339/870-950), *al-mu'allim at-tānī*, the "second teacher" (after Aristotle) of philosophy for the Muslims. Not all of the compositions of al-Fārābī are equally discrete, and some, such as his *Kitāb al-milla*⁷ are shockingly daring in their depiction of religion in sociological terms. In general, al-Fārābī's objectivity in discussing religious phenomena is striking, though that does not necessarily imply disbelief in the tenets of Islam. With him, however, philosophy has gone well beyond theological concerns, though when the two intersect, he is usually careful to avoid giving offense to traditional beliefs.

A good example of this may be seen in what may be regarded as al-Fārābī's Long and Short commentaries on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, *Kitāb al-'ibāra*⁸. These compositions are part of al-Fārābī's careful elucidation of Aristotle's *Organon*, which, as found in his Hellenistic predecessors, includes Porphyry's *Eisagoge*. In relation to that latter work, al-Fārābī wrote what amounts to an introduction to an introduction to logic, which itself is regarded as the propaedeutic or preliminary training required for one to do philosophy responsibly.

al-Fārābī thus takes his reader by the hand and leads him from the initial stages of the philosophical pursuit to its final pronouncements, in logic and beyond. The stages and areas of philosophy in which al-Fārābī writes are usually treated a number of times, in essays and books of varying length and difficulty. It has been a challenge to scholars to sort out the differences found in parallel works, and to evaluate the various emphases, omissions and additions with which al-Fārābī confronts the reader. Whatever the moral al-Fārābī wished his

⁷ Ed. M. Maḥdī, Beirut 1968.

⁸ The short commentary has been edited by M. Küyel, *Kitāb bārī armīn iyās ayy al-'ibāra*, and published in the Turkish journal *Araştırma* (Ankara 1966), IV, 35-85. The long commentary has been edited by W. Kutsch and S. Marrow, *Šarḥ al-Fārābī li-kitāb Aristūṭālīs fī l-'ibāra*, Beirut 1960. Both commentaries have been translated by F. W. Zimmermann, *Al-Farabi's Commentary and Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione*, London 1981.

sophisticated reader to receive from his frequently mixed messages, it would appear that in his shorter treatises and commentaries he sought common ground with the layman who was educated but not expert in philosophy. In his surveys and shorter works, al-Fārābī could convey a greater sense of agreement between competing ideas, be they religious or philosophical, than he could in his more comprehensive compositions. If he did not sacrifice his principles in these shorter works, neither did he fully acquaint the uninitiated reader with the complexities of the issues being discussed.

Thus, his Short Treatise on the *De Interpretatione* covers much the same ground as his much longer *Šarḥ* on the subject. It is mostly a technical manual, and avoids asserting the larger philosophical justification of logic which its English translator has so well described⁹. al-Fārābī prefers here to offer definitions and clear-cut, brief explanations of the terms and concepts which Aristotle and his Hellenistic commentators treated under this rubric. Thus we learn what constitutes significant expressions, both simple and compound; what the structure of language is in itself and in relation to time and circumstances; what the distinction is between univocal and non-univocal meanings of terms, and that for al-Fārābī metaphors are to be excluded from scientific discourse¹⁰. Propositions are discussed in terms of their internal structures and in terms of the type of predication they exhibit, with the relationships of the various forms of affirmative and negative predication fully outlined.

This technical disquisition changes its tone only when al-Fārābī discusses modal propositions and the truth status of "future matters of possibility", *al-umūr al-mumkina al-mustaqbala*¹¹. Here the relevance to issues which the community of believers felt strongly about has probably led al-Fārābī to expand a bit upon his theme. Unlike events in the past or present which, in his words, "distribute truth and falsity

⁹ Cf. Zimmermann's introduction, pp. xxiv-xlvi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹¹ Cf. Zimmermann, p. 244, Küyel, p. 79.

intrinsically definitely" (*alā t-tahṣīl*), future possible events, "though they do distribute truth and falsity between themselves, do so intrinsically indefinitely". That is, we do not know whether a possible event will or will not transpire, and whether our claim about it is true or false, because neither condition attaches to it definitely. It is the nature of possible events that they are not necessary, and therefore no definite claim about them can be certain, as long as they are future events.

The passage from future possibility to present reality is described as a change from "nonexistence to existence", *min al-ʿadam ilā l-wuḡūd*¹², a radical change which deprives future existence of any substantive existential status. The future is not known with certainty because it does not exist yet.

Though this is al-Fārābī's conclusion here he does not belabour it, preferring to dwell on the unwelcome consequences of assuming definite knowledge of future events, which is tantamount to asserting their necessary nature. In a world in which nothing is intrinsically possible, he insists, there would be no significance to will or choice, or to deliberate actions, in terms of changing the future. God Himself is seen as constrained by the necessity of such a universe, unable to change anything in it.

The limitations on God's omnipotence which this last assertion entails is brought by al-Fārābī as the final argument for a position which he describes as "self-contradictory, impossible and absurd", *muḥāla ḡayr mumkina wa-ṣunʿa*¹³. The paradoxical truth which he wishes to leave with the reader of this Short Treatise is that possibilities are real, just because they do not exist (except as such). There are events which are contingent, as long as they have not occurred, and it is this element of contingency which is a condition of civilization in general, and of ethical behaviour in particular.

¹² Zimmermann, p. 246, Küyel, p. 81.

¹³ Zimmermann, p. 247, Küyel, p. 84.

In the *Šarḥ* to this Aristotelian text, al-Fārābī also expresses his awareness of the ethical and theological challenge which a strict determinism holds, but he acknowledges there as well the popular belief, asserted also by most *mutakallimūn*, in God's foreknowledge. Thus, the dilemma which faces God's omnipotence in a necessary world is countered by the problem which is posed to His omniscience in a possible world. To believe that God does not know things before they come to be is, in al-Fārābī's words, "absurd and unacceptable. All religions have it differently, and it would seem a very detrimental belief for people to hold"¹⁴. al-Fārābī therefore seeks for "a solution to these dilemmas which does not entail anything objectionable in relation to what exists or is commonly accepted or (what is believed by) religions", *lā bi-ḥasb al-amr al-mawǧūd wa-lā bi-ḥasb al-mašhūr wa-lā bi-ḥasb al-milal*¹⁵.

al-Fārābī's solution is rather problematic, for in it he attempts to distinguish between events which are possible in themselves, and statements about these events which are necessary propositions. The necessity in the one is not seen as obliging a change in the character of the other. Thus, for God to know (and in that sense say) what e.g. Zayd will do on the morrow does not, supposedly, deprive Zayd of having the theoretical possibility, seen as a real possibility, of doing otherwise; though of course Zayd will not do other than as God knows.

This solution is, as I have said, problematic, though it is also traditional. Whether al-Fārābī himself was convinced of its plausibility is an open question, particularly since his reasons for offering it are partially logical and partially utilitarian, or political. In a related problem, that of the status of possible events which God knows will never exist, belief in the possibility of their existence is said to be "more helpful", *anfāʿ*, from a religious point of view than otherwise¹⁶.

¹⁴ Zimmermann, p. 92 f., Kutsch & Marrow, p. 98.

¹⁵ Kutsch & Marrow, *ibid.*, and cf. Zimmermann's translation, p. 93 and note 1.

¹⁶ Zimmermann, p. 96; Kutsch & Marrow, p. 100.

One may question the sincerity of al-Fārābī's position further, in view of the fact that he avoids raising the whole issue of Divine omniscience in his Short Commentary. Though the position taken there is less complete than a traditional Muslim would like, it upholds certain traditional beliefs, while maintaining a discrete silence about others. Note also that while God's omnipotence is supposedly defended, it is also limited, as it were, to what exists, though that includes potential as well as actual existents.

This particular short treatise thus alerts us to the fact that longer is not necessarily better. Still, it does seem true that the shorter treatise and commentary, by its very nature, treats the issues more simply and superficially, offering in that sense a more popular version of that which is being communicated.

There is none to compare with Averroes when it comes to philosophical commentaries and to commentaries of diverse length, though hitherto there has been very little comparative study of them, that is, of Short, Middle and Long commentaries to the same work, the various *ḡumūʿ*, *talāḥīṣ* and *ṣurūḥ* which in all comprise some thirty-eight commentaries¹⁷. The assumption has been that Averroes' teachings on a given work are uniform, an assumption that has yet to be tested. It is known that Averroes changed his mind on the nature of the material or hylic intellect, *al-ʿaql al-ḥayūlānī*, after completing his Short Treatise, or Epitome, on the *De Anima*¹⁸, but little else in it has been compared to his remarks in the celebrated Long Commentary of that work¹⁹. I have now had occasion to compare the latter work with Averroes' Middle

¹⁷ Cf. H. Wolfson, "Plan for the Publication of a *Corpus Commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem*", *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ed. I. Twersky, G. H. Williams (Cambridge, Ma. 1973), I, 433 f.

¹⁸ Ed. A. al-Ahwānī, *Talḥīṣ* (!) *Kitāb an-Nafs*, Cairo 1950.

¹⁹ Ed. F. S. Crawford, *Averrois Cordubensis: Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis de Anima libros*, Cambridge, Ma. 1953.

Commentary, or *Talḥīs*, in preparing the *Talḥīs* for publication²⁰. I have discussed this hitherto unedited work elsewhere²¹, and can here only outline those characteristics it possesses which qualify it as a "popular" work.

It should be evident by now that "popular" for the philosophers is not tantamount to "vulgar", in the classical or common usage of that term. The audience even for "popular" philosophical treatises was limited, and highly selective. Though not philosophically adept, the auditor or reader of these treatises was an educated and literate person. The author, correspondingly, did not need to condescend to his public or overly simplify his material. At the same time, there was little to be gained in a rigorous and overly demanding presentation, or one which assumed too great a familiarity with the philosophical tradition and its representatives.

Averroes' Middle Commentary on the *De Anima* seems geared to such an audience. It is an extensive work, some 155 pages in folio²², yet small in comparison to the Long Commentary. Unlike that longer work, the Middle Commentary does not bring every word of Aristotle's text, and its comments are more selective and more brief. It is apparent that Averroes has consulted the Long Commentary in writing the Middle, for many of his remarks in the latter are excised *verbatim* from the former. Themistius' commentary on the *De Anima* in its Arabic

²⁰ The Arabic edition has been published by the Egyptian Academy of Letters and Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo. A partial edition and German translation, comprising Averroes' commentary on *De An.* III 9-11, has been published by H. Gätje, "Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus: Das Kapitel über das Begehren aus dem Mittleren Kommentar des Averroes zur Schrift über die Seele", *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, AFD. Letterkunde Nieuwe Reeks* 129 (Amsterdam, Oxford & New York 1985), pp. 60-79. Cf. too Gätje's general comments on this text, and on Averroes as commentator, pp. 1-58.

²¹ Cf. "Averroes' Middle Commentary on the *De Anima*", in the *Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy: Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. R. Tyorinoja, Helsinki, 1990, III. 79-86.

²² In the Paris ms. hébreu. 1009, one of the two Judaeo-Arabic mss. extant.

translation by Ishāq b. Ḥunayn is another source for Averroes in the Middle Commentary, and it is consulted both in itself and as it had already been used by him in the Long Commentary. Ishāq's translation of the *De Anima* itself is quoted also, both as it appears in Themistius and by itself, presumably (the original being lost, but now largely retrievable, through Themistius' and Averroes' use of it).

Averroes borrows freely from these sources and rearranges them to a degree, occasionally adding new thoughts, besides omitting old ones. The entire *mélange* is presented, however, with less than scrupulous care for acknowledging its sources. Aristotle is explicitly quoted often enough, but not always, and some *qālas* are not his, though they claim to be. It is clear that the issue of attribution is secondary to the subject matter under discussion, in Averroes' eyes, and that past sources all blend into a present unified reality. This is well suited for the presumed audience of this work, which would not have cared particularly for a detailed acknowledgement of each source, but was interested in having Averroes' explanation of the issues presented in as self-contained a manner as was possible. Admittedly, this approach fits a general indifference to acknowledging one's sources that is not uncommon in medieval philosophy, where the universality of the truth made it seem unnecessary to recognize publicly one's predecessors. However, the Middle, and certainly the Short Commentary, go further in this direction than the Long Commentary, so that this attitude may also be taken to be a function of the genre of composition under discussion. Averroes even goes so far in the Middle Commentary as to refer often in general terms only to Aristotle's other works, reserving specific mention of them for the Long Commentary.

It is probably Averroes' awareness of this same audience which leads him to minimize mention of the Presocratics with whom Aristotle takes issue in the *De Anima*, for Averroes knew full well that such names meant little to the readers of the Middle Commentary. The Greek world of personal names and (occasional) places thus figures less prominently in the Middle Commentary, and in a variety of ways a more neutral ambience is suggested.

The most striking difference between the Middle and Long Commentaries is the absence in the Middle of the two extended discussions which Averroes has in the Long Commentary on the nature of the intellect, both in its active and passive states²³. This is the doctrine of monopsychism for which Averroes was celebrated, and denounced, in the Latin West, and which probably contributed to the demise of Aristotelian philosophy in the Muslim world. Averroes explores this issue in the Long Commentary at length, evaluating the positions of his predecessors, particularly Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, in detail, and offers his own view of the relation of the Agent Intellect to the individual material intellect, having first defined the latter intellect in relation to the faculty of imagination. Averroes is much more reticent in these matters in the Middle Commentary, leaving his audience less agitated, perhaps, and more free to construe his meaning as it wished. He does speak his mind, but less loudly. Again, the genre of the commentary and the expectations of the public for which it was written allowed Averroes to take the steps he did, hoping probably to avoid controversy without sacrificing his integrity.

The appearance of phenomena such as these in Averroes' writings indicate that his Middle and Short treatises, as the shorter compositions of his predecessors, well deserve comparative study with the longer treatment he gave a given Aristotelian work. Within the Long Commentaries too, shorter treatments of the material may be found in the introductions and in the prefaces Averroes wrote to individual chapters, and this introductory material is not without political as well as philosophical significance²⁴. Such comparative studies will tell us a good deal about their authors and about the society in which they lived and which they served.

²³ Cf. Crawford. *op. cit.*, Commentary 5, pp. 387-413; Commentary 14, pp. 430-434.

²⁴ Cf., for example, Averroes' "prooemium" to *Metaphysics Lambda*, ed. M. Bouyges, *Averroes Tafsīr Mā ba'd at-ṭabī'a* (Beirut 1938-48), 3:1393-1405, and see Ivry, "Averroes and the West: The First Encounter/Nonencounter". *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture*, ed. R. Link-Salinger *et al.* (Washington, D.C. 1988), pp. 153-158.