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Advisors

Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris
Carmela Baffioni, Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli
Sebastian Brock, Oriental Institute, Oxford
Charles Burnett, The Warburg Institute, London
Hans Daiber, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt a. M.
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Remke Kruk, Universiteit Leiden
Concetta Luna, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa
Alain-Philippe Segonds (†)
Richard C. Taylor, Marquette University, Milwaukee (WI)

Staff

Elisa Coda
Cristina D'Ancona
Cleophea Ferrari
Gloria Giacomelli
Cecilia Martini Bonadeo

studiagraecoarabica@greekintoarabic.eu

Web site: <http://www.greekintoarabic.eu>

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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, grec 1853, f. 186v

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Avicenne (Ibn Sīnā), *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d'Aristote (chapitres 6-10)*, شرح مقالة اللام (فصل ٦-١٠) من كتاب ما بعد الطبيعة لأرسطوطاليس من كتاب الإنصاف, Édition critique, traduction et notes par M. Geoffroy, J. Janssens et M. Sebti, Vrin, Paris 2014 (Études Musulmanes, 43), 119 pp.

This beautiful, indispensable book offers the critical edition, the French translation and a philological and philosophical study of one of the few commentaries on Aristotle written by Avicenna: that on the “theological” chapters, 6-10, of book *Lambda* of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

This work is essential for a proper understanding of Avicenna’s metaphysical doctrine. As is pointed out in the back cover, Avicenna depends on the Greek-Arabic tradition which attributed to Aristotle some works of Neoplatonic origin: the *Theology of Aristotle*, i.e. an adaptation of Plotinus’ *Enneads* IV to VI, and the Book on the Pure Good, an adaptation of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*. For Avicenna, who grew up in this tradition, the God of Aristotle is the first efficient cause of being, and the hierarchical structure of the universe is produced by emanation because of the self-intellection of the First Principle. Within this framework, Avicenna’s commentary on the theological chapters of book *Lambda* counts as the surgical table where the philosopher and physician Avicenna critically analyzes the suture line between Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics.

A rich *Introduction* opens the volume. Avicenna’s commentary on Book *Lambda*, 6-10, probably is part of the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* (*Book of Fair Judgement*),¹ a mature work whose autograph went lost in the looting of Avicenna’s personal belongings during the invasion of Isfahan by the troops of Sultan Maṣ’ūd in 1030. According to the authors, the *Book of Fair Judgement* belongs to what Gutas calls the “Oriental period” of Avicenna, when he conceived the idea of a philosophy alternative to that of the *Šifā’*, a philosophy more concerned with truth in itself than with the history of philosophical ideas (pp. 21-23). On the reasons for composition of the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* we are informed by a well-known letter which Avicenna addressed to his disciple Kiyā’: “In the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* I set forth an exposition (*šarḥ*) of the obscure passages in the texts, up to the end of the *Theology*, even though there is some doubt with regard to the *Theology* (*‘alā mā fī l-uṭūlū ḡiyyā min al-maṭ’an*) and spoke about the negligence of commentators”. The enigmatic clause *‘alā mā fī l-uṭūlū ḡiyyā min al-maṭ’an* has been translated and interpreted in different ways depending on whether one wants to interpret it as an attestation of the fact Avicenna held doubts about the attribution of the *Theology* to Aristotle (Kraus)² or not (Zimmermann, D’Ancona).³ The analysis of Avicenna’s commentary on *Lambda* 6-10 supports this second hypothesis: Avicenna’s reading allows him to confirm that Aristotle’s teaching gave way to the same notion of causality as creation, and of the First Principle as the donor of being, which are present in the *Theology*.

¹ Two other texts seem to belong to the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf*: (1) the Notes on the pseudo-*Theology*, published by ‘A. Badawī, *Aristū ‘inda l-‘Arab*, Maktaba al-Naḥḍa al-miṣriyya, Cairo 1947², Wikālat al-maṭbū‘āt, Kuwait 1978, pp. 35-74, M. Geoffroy, J. Janssens and M. Sebti are now at work on its critical edition with French translation within the context of “Greek into Arabic”; (2) the commentary on the *De Anima*, also published for the first time by Badawī, *Aristū ‘inda l-‘Arab*, pp. 75-116; D. Gutas is working on its critical edition.

² P. Kraus, “Plotin chez les Arabes. Remarques sur un nouveau fragment de la paraphrase arabe des *Ennéades*”, *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte* 23 (1940-41), pp. 263-95, esp. pp. 272-3.

³ F.W. Zimmermann, “The Origins of the So-called *Theology of Aristotle*” in J. Krayer - W.F. Ryan - C.B. Schmitt (Eds.), *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages. The Theology and other texts*, The Warburg Institute, London 1986, pp. 110-240, in particular pp. 183-4 (Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts, 11); C. D’Ancona, *Introduzione*, in C. D’Ancona *et alii* (ed.), *Plotino, La discesa dell’anima nei corpi (Enn. IV 8[6]). Plotiniana Arabica (Pseudo-Teologia di Aristotele, capitoli 1 e 7. “Detti del Sapiente Greco”)*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2003, pp. 102-11 (Subsidia Mediaevalia Patavina, 4).

A paragraph devoted to the tradition of the text follows in the Introduction (pp. 10-14). First, the authors present the two manuscripts that preserve the work: MS al-Qāhira, Dār al-kutub wa-l-waṭā'iq al-qawmiyya, *Muṣṭafā Fādil Hikma* 6 and MS Bursa, Hüseyin Çelebi Kütüphanesi 1194. These manuscripts do not present the same text, except for two fragments. Then the authors list all the witnesses useful to the establishment of the critical text: Uṣṭāṭ's translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*;⁴ the ten passages of the Notes which are present also in Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Mubāḥaṭāt* (*The Discussions*), and which have been recognized for the first time by the late lamented David Reisman;⁵ the quotations of and references to the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* in Tāğ al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Šahrastānī's *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*.⁶ The latter counts as a witness of a text akin to that of MS al-Qāhira, *Hikma* 6 mentioned above: nothing prevents us from thinking that al-Šahrastānī had this manuscript, or another one of the same branch, as his source.

Concerning the genre and style of the work (pp. 14-17), the authors underline that even if Avicenna's commentary probably belonged to the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf*, it has come down to us in the form of *excerpta*. The intervention of another author is evident, for example, in the repeated formulae "he said, he says" where the author referred to is Avicenna, and not Aristotle. This fact opens up the following questions: who was the author of this redaction, and what was the extent of Avicenna's commentary on book *Lambda*? Starting from the study of the manuscript tradition, the authors argue in favour of an authorship of these *excerpta* which antedates the traditional one. The redaction of the commentary is traditionally attributed to 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣignāhī, a third-generation disciple of Avicenna, active in the second half of the 12th century.⁷ On the one hand, the author of the *excerpta* probably did not reproduce all that he found in his model, but, on the other, Avicenna himself could have omitted parts of the Aristotelian text, on doctrinal grounds or for other reasons, and this may explain the lack of doxographical passages and astronomical issues. The text does not appear refined, and some sentences are simply juxtaposed. The editors signal the presence of a plethora of suffix pronouns whose proper antecedents are sometimes difficult to recognize. Therefore, the style seems to fit better with an oral than with a written transmission. This fact can be explained by thinking that the text goes back to the notes of a student who attended Avicenna's lectures, or that the text was written hastily by Avicenna himself, or again dictated to a scribe.

⁴ M. Bouyges, Averroès, *Tafsīr mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a*, Notice, I-III, Dar el-Machreq, Beyrouth 19903 (Bibliotheca Arabica scholasticorum). Now available on line at <http://www.greekintoarabic.eu/> Avicenna does not make use only of Uṣṭāṭ's translation of *Metaph. Lambda*, but also of Iṣḥāq's: cf. A. 'A. 'Afīfī, "Tarğama 'arabiyya qadīma li-maqālat *al-Lām* min *Kitāb Mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a* li-Aristū (An Ancient Arabic Translation of Book *Λ* of the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle)", *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Egypt* 5 (1937), pp. 89-138. 'A. Badawī, *Aristū 'ind al-'arab*, pp. 3-11. Avicenna had at his disposal the Arabic version of Themistius' paraphrase of *Lambda*, which we can read today in Arabic only in part, while the whole text is available only in Hebrew version made by Moïse ibn Tibbon on the basis of the Arabic: cf. *Themistii In Aristotelis Metaphysicorum librum A paraphrasis Hebraice et latine* (CAG V/5), edidit S. Landauer, Reimer, Berlin 1903; Themistius, *Paraphrase de la Métaphysique d'Aristote (livre Lambda)*, French trans., by R. Brague, Vrin, Paris 1999.

⁵ D. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennian Tradition. The Transmission, Contents, and Structure of Ibn Sīnā's al-Mubāḥaṭāt (The Discussions)*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln 2002. Cf. Avicenne (Ibn Sīnā), *Commentaire sur le livre Lambda de la Métaphysique d'Aristote (chapitres 6-10)*, p. 11, n. 5.

⁶ The editors give at p. 12 the list of the correspondences between the two texts. In the same footnote the readers are cautioned about the different editions of the text, no one being a critical edition. They made use of M.F. Muḥammad, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal li-l-Imām Abī l-Faḥ Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Šabrastānī*, Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, Beirut 1990.

⁷ D. Gutas, "Notes and Texts from Cairo Manuscripts, II: Texts from Avicenna's Library in a Copy by 'Abd-ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣignāhī", *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 2 (1987), pp. 8-17, esp. pp. 8-9.

Avicenna as commentator does not hesitate to criticize other commentators. Among them only Abū Bišr Mattā (m. 940) is mentioned by name (pp. 54-55). Sometimes Avicenna criticizes also Aristotle, but his peculiar exegetical attitude is that to distinguish between true philosophy, i.e. genuine Aristotelianism, and the so-called “Western” interpretations, both Greek and Arabic, that have been given of it. Such interpretations fail to explain God as the cause of the being of the universe, because they provide only a “physical” demonstration of His existence, reducing God to an unmoved mover. On the contrary, for Avicenna, to be the cause of movement is only a corollary of being the donor of being; to maintain that the existence of the universe depends only on its eternal movement amounts to deny the true nature of the first cause. Avicenna adds that, at least in part, those commentators have missed the mark because of Aristotle himself, who was sometimes ambiguous. For example, in commenting *Lambda* 9, on the object of God’s thought, Avicenna observes that Aristotle, instead of clearly establishing that God thinks whatever He thinks out of his own essence, says only that God knows himself. A list of ambiguities of this kind is provided in the Introduction (pp. 20-21).

As for the fortune of this commentary, I have already mentioned the *Kitāb al-Mubāḥaṭāt*, a series of *quaestiones* which include also ten passages of it (*al-Mubāḥaṭāt* 6). The questions were raised by a disciple to his still alive teacher Avicenna, and are followed by his answers. According to the authors, the *Kitāb al-Mubāḥaṭāt* could testify to a correspondence between Ibn Zayla⁸ and Avicenna. The former, who arrived in Rayy in 1027 with his teacher, could have remained there when Avicenna came back to Ispahan, before 1030. If this were the case, these *quaestiones* would antedate the autograph of Avicenna’s commentary on *Lambda* 6 to 10. Avicenna would have sent to his student at Rayy a first draft of the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf*, and Ibn Zayla would have placed his comments about the passages that seemed problematic to him: in particular, those in which Avicenna maintains that God is the principle of the being of the world, and not only the principle of its movement (cf. for example pp. 48, 50 of the French translation and pp. 49, 51 of the Arabic text). Also the passages concerning the absolute unity of the divine intellection and the intellection of all the things out of God’s self-intellection (cf. for example pp. 58, 60 of the French translation and pp. 59, 61 of the Arabic text; pp. 66, 68, 70 and pp. 67, 69, 71 of the Arabic text). It is also possible that Ibn Zayla was present when Avicenna was writing the first draft of the book, that he made a copy of a part of it for his own use, or that he took personal notes from the draft while Avicenna was teaching what was destined to become the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf* from a not yet edited text. In the latter case, the *quaestiones* would date rather after 1030. In any case they fall between 1029 and 1034 (or 1036 at the latest), when Avicenna was still alive, because he answered it.

Another text which is taken into account about the fortune of Avicenna’s commentary on *Lambda* 6-10 is al-Šahrastānī’s *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, where the author states, after his exposition of Aristotle’s thought, that his main sources are Themistius’ and Avicenna’s commentaries. What is problematic in al-Šahrastānī’s is that he says that Avicenna unreservedly defends Aristotle’s thought. This seems to imply that, contrary to what we know of Avicenna’s commentary, for al-Šahrastānī the latter did not express any criticism against Aristotle. This may depend on a certain lack of a critical mind on al-Šahrastānī’s part (pp. 28-31). Finally, there is an almost literal reference in Faḥr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *Mabāḥiṭ mašriqiyya* (p. 31).

⁸ D. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennian Tradition*, p. 202. Geoffroy, Sebt and Janssens accept the identification of this disciple with Ibn Zayla, but refute Reisman’s thesis that Avicenna’s commentary to *Lambda* 6-10 in its actual form results from Ibn Zayla’s notes or from his abridgment of the *Kitāb al-Inṣāf*.

Information to the reader, both in French (pp. 33-35) and in Arabic (37-39) follows the Introduction. An explanation of the abbreviations is provided, as well as the criteria for the edition, the critical apparatus and the apparatus of the sources. The authors have chosen to present the apparatus in Arabic for the convenience of the users of linguistic areas other than the Western world, with a special eye to the Iranian readership which has Avicenna as a traditional topic. Once passed the first impact of reading the apparatus in Arabic and not in Latin, the reader appreciates its great accuracy, as well as the richness of the apparatus of the Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin sources.

A final warning (p. 41) is made about the French translation, which is technical because elegance would have betrayed the conceptual work done by Avicenna. Besides, the authors put in evidence the fact that the division into 26 sections corresponds to that present in the MS al-Qāhira, *Hikma* 6, but does not correspond always to a logical sequence of the text. They put in bold all the traces of Arabic translations available to Avicenna that he reproduces literally. Finally, the lines Bekker suprascripted to certain sequences of the text serve to guide the reader, providing indications about the order of Aristotle's text and Avicenna's commentary.

Absolutely worthy of note are the annotations. They are concise, but complete; they favour the comparison with the Aristotelian, Avicennian and other sources, referring refer the reader to lexicographical studies, although the authors make adequate references also to secondary literature of a more general import. A glossary would have been the icing on the cake for someone like myself who has devoured the pages of this magnificent study and remains anxiously awaiting its sequel, namely the edition of Avicenna's commentary to the pseudo-*Theology*. Geoffroy, Janssens and Sebtí's study ends with a comprehensive bibliography and a table of content. In sum, this book is a reference tool that cannot miss in the library of a scholar of medieval philosophy.

Cecilia Martini Bonadeo