INTRODUCTION

IBN RUSHD AS A COMMENTATOR

Most studies of Ibn Rushd have hitherto concentrated on two aspects of his philosophy: his psychology (and in particular that part of it whose importance was paramount in the eyes of mediaeval thinkers — the theory of the intellect or noetics) and his religious philosophy. This second aspect was privileged for various reasons, among which one can mention the availability and readability of his short treatises such as the Faṣl al-Maqāl and the Manāhīj al-Adilla, and the celebrated debate between al-Ghazzālī and Ibn Rushd in the Tahāfut; this debate, in turn, fits into the wider frame of the faith versus reason controversy in Islam and in the Christian West. When students of Ibn Rushd’s thought want to find out rapidly about his position on any philosophical problem, they tend to refer to the Tahāfut which certainly makes better reading than the long-winded and repetitive commentaries, and has the additional (and considerable) advantage of being extant in Arabic, whereas the “great” commentaries, with the notable exception of the Metaphysics and of some fragments, are only available in their Latin and Hebrew versions. Some of the main problems dealt with in the Tahāfut — creation and emanation versus the eternity of the world, the providence of God and so on — have also retained some interest and relevance until today, which is hardly the case for the more abstruse aspects of Aristotelian physics and cosmology.

The main factor in the comparative neglect of the commentaries, however, is precisely the fact that they are commentaries. Besides the unavoidable monotony and repetitiousness of that type of work, it is easily inferred that they are mere developments and explanations of Aristotle’s own treatises, as they purport to be, and as such do not contain what could be regarded as Ibn Rushd’s philosophy as distinct from Aristotle’s. This line of argument calls for some observations.

First of all, since Ibn Rushd’s explicit aim was to follow Aristotle’s philosophy, which to him was unsurpassable, merely explaining its obscurities and removing the accretions of later centuries, particularly of Arab Neoplatonists like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, one could argue that it is precisely insofar as Ibn Rushd followed Aristotle that he expounded his own ideas, and that the apparent independence and originality which he displayed in the Tahāfut and the other short treatises were deviations imposed upon him by the need to answer accusations and objections which were, strictly speaking,
outside the scope of Aristotelianism, and consequently of philosophy. As such, it may be surmised that Ibn Rushd himself would have regarded these works as in no way comparable in importance with his more scholarly commentaries.

Secondly, the long commentaries contain many digressions, some of them fairly extensive, in which Ibn Rushd is no longer content with explaining Aristotle's meaning literally, sentence by sentence, but elaborates on the main argument or mentions various interpretations and objections of other authors and refutes them. On one or two occasions, he even consciously goes beyond Aristotle's words and expounds what he thinks is implicit in his doctrine, or acknowledges that scientific discoveries made in the period of time between the philosopher and himself induce one to modify one's views on certain topics. These digressions have already been exploited, particularly those concerning the theory of the intellect in the third book of the *de Anima*, the theory of matter in the *Physics*, and the greater part of book *Lām* of the *Metaphysics* where they are particularly rich and illuminating. But even when Ibn Rushd merely paraphrases Aristotle in his customary way, introducing his explanations following a short lemma by *yuridu* or *ya'ni*, he often evinces tendencies which are at variance with the fundamental tenets of Aristotelianism. Instances of this are again particularly numerous in the *Metaphysics*, where the poor quality of most translations often compels him to be more imaginative and causes him to wander sometimes very far from the original meaning of the text. In such cases, the subconscious convictions of the author surface again.

The third main objection to be made against a simplistic view of the commentaries' alleged lack of originality is more complex. It rests on the ambiguity of such expressions as "Aristotelianism in its purity" which, it is supposed, it was Ibn Rushd's purpose to restore. In a sense, the modern philologist writing about Aristotle also tries to bring out the ideas of the philosopher as they were conceived by him, so to speak. But the operation does not only require philological skills (primarily a knowledge of Greek and Greek literature) which were well beyond the powers of Ibn Rushd; it also depends on a historicist view of philosophy which was simply inconceivable at that time. The modern student of Aristotle endeavours, as far as possible, to forget his own convictions and knowledge in order not to bring into his subject alien thoughts and interpretations, because he is conscious of the historical gulf separating him from his subject. As a corollary of this awareness, he believes that considerable progress has been made since Aristotle's day in all fields in knowledge. Ibn Rushd, on the other hand, was persuaded that Truth had been almost entirely discovered by Aristotle in the past and that only minor adjustments and improvements could be made. His attitude is quite comparable to that of the Greek Neoplatonists, whose aim
was to unfold the truth contained in the writings of Plato, and to that of Islamic mystics and jurists who were able to find support for all their beliefs and judgements in Quranic verses. If Ibn Rushd wanted to produce a complete interpretation of Aristotle’s treatises, it was not because of any antiquarian interest of his, but because these treatises were assumed to be the receptacle of all truth. His task consisted largely in freeing philosophy, that is to say Aristotelianism, of all the later unjustified accretions, and in explaining it to his compatriots in their language. It is above all this change of language in the Mediterranean world, and the unnecessary and false additions made to Aristotle’s system by the Arab philosophers, which made Ibn Rushd’s work necessary. It is only too understandable, in such circumstances, that he should sometimes have been led unwillingly to read what he regarded as true into the words of his master rather than to infer Aristotle’s meaning from them.

In addition to the difficulties resulting from reading Aristotle in translation, and often translations at two removes, the text of the philosopher contains many puzzles about which scholars and philosophers are still at variance. This is particularly true of the metaphysical and cosmological views of Aristotle. Whereas the modern tendency has been, by and large, to regard the inconsistencies in Aristotle’s text as being due to the evolution of his thought or to the different viewpoints adopted in different treatises, Ibn Rushd, like most ancient commentators, has tried to interpret them away or to reconcile them. The idea that there could have been variations in Aristotle’s thought would have appeared preposterous to Ibn Rushd: there cannot be variations in Truth itself.