Introduction

Avicenna had few reservations about expressing his thoughts on the nature and practice of philosophy, both in history and in his immediate environment. Acutely aware of the historical progression of the acquisition of knowledge through philosophy, he was never content to follow tacitly or leave unchallenged the presuppositions that governed the philosophical praxis. In numerous introductions, epilogues, and private letters, texts that can be described as personal and some as private, he raised these very issues and stated his position on them. His views were also reflected in the writings of his disciples, who responded to the earnestness and intensity with which he approached the work of philosophy. The fourteen texts translated in this chapter present a selection of these texts. The selection contains, I believe, the most relevant and the most significant pronouncements by Avicenna on these issues, but it does not aim to be comprehensive. Many were excluded for considerations of space, and others doubtless escaped my attention for lack of ready availability. The task of collecting all these texts, and especially Avicenna’s considerable correspondence with his disciples, is a major desideratum for the future.¹

The first three texts provide the setting, or the normative background, for the rest. They inform about what, in Avicenna’s view, is to be learned

¹ Recent publications are well on their way to remedying this deficiency. In particular the writings of Avicenna referring to his controversies with Abū-l-Qāsim al-Kirmānī have been used to good effect by Reisman Avicennan Tradition 166–185 to map the stages of composition of Avicenna’s Discussions, and some of these texts themselves were soundly edited, translated, and studied by Michot Abû Sa‘d and “Riz”. The review of the former of Michot’s publications by Reisman “New Standard” is by itself a major contribution to this subject, and cf. also my review in JIS 14 (2003) 379–381. The contribution of such documentation to a profounder understanding of Avicenna’s social and intellectual context can be seen in Reisman “Patronage.”
in philosophy (T1) and _how_ it is to be learned (T2), and give an example of a person _who_ learned it (T3). The remaining texts, except for the last, follow in chronological order the evolution of Avicenna's thoughts about Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition, about the historical progression of philosophy, and about the place of his own work in this continuum. The last section (T14), finally, also Avicenna's very last work, presents his own summary of his philosophical system. These texts are intended to be read in the order presented. Since they constitute the focus and provide the documentation for much of the discussion in this book, a serial reading will bring out the major themes and points which, to borrow Avicenna's phrase, “had they been perceived, there would have been no need” for the rest of the book (T9, § 4).

Some of these texts are available in translations of varying accuracy; very few are available in editions even marginally critical. It was therefore necessary to provide relatively full, and separate, textual annotation, indicated by superscript letters. As these notes show, critical editions of all of Avicenna's works still remain to be done. My notes, which are based on a necessarily narrow base of printed and manuscript evidence, merely aim to contribute toward an eventual critical edition of these texts; they are not intended to substitute for a critical apparatus. Their main purpose is to enable the Arabist to read my versions while comparing them with the available Arabic texts in the cited publications.

My translations aim to render Avicenna's meaning as precisely as possible and are based for the most part on the detailed analyses of the texts in the body of the book. For this reason recurring technical terms which have a special significance in Avicenna's thought are always written with a capital letter; the reader's attention is directed to the Index of Technical Terms. References to earlier translations have accordingly been kept to a minimum and have been made primarily when their renditions of key passages, representing accepted wisdom, differ substantially from my own. References to editions and manuscripts, and other bibliographical information, are given at the beginning of each selection.

Text 1. _From Compendium on the Soul_ (GP 10)

The eighth chapter of Avicenna's first philosophical treatise lists the intelligible forms, i.e., theoretical knowledge, to be acquired by the rational soul. It is extraordinary because it presents these forms in the order and in terms of the philosophical sciences as classified in the Aristotelian tradition. (See the discussion below, Chapter 2, W1, and Chapter 3.1.)