HENRY OF GHENT AND AVERROES

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The thought of Henry of Ghent may be characterised as expressing a kind of “avicennizing Augustinianism”. However, this does not mean that Henry totally ignored the Aristotelian-Averroistic way of thought that was current at his time. Even a superficial reading of his works already reveals a great number of quotations of both Aristotle and the “Commentator”. It also shows that that Henry explicitly approves several of their ideas. This might be somewhat of a surprise insofar as Henry was a member of Tempier’s commission that prepared the condemnations of 1277. But Henry was anything but a lackey of Tempier. Occasionally he expresses his perplexity, not to say his reservation with respect to one or another condemnation. This clearly proves the independence as well as the brilliance of his mind. Hence, one may expect that his attitude towards Averroes was critical, and thus complex, i.e., both accepting and rejecting some of the latter’s major ideas. It is amazing that very little attention has been paid in scholarship to Henry’s attitude towards Averroes. It is at best examined with regard to a specific item, and even this happens only in a very limited number of studies. Therefore, in what follows a basic outline will be presented that hopefully may offer a valuable basis for further research.

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2 As far as I can see, one finds in Henry references to four of the five great commentaries that were available in Latin, i.e., Physics, Heaven, Soul and Metaphysics; to three middle commentaries, i.e., Categories, Generation and Corruption and Nicomachean Ethics; to one epitome, i.e., On Sleep, and to one independent treatise, i.e., De substantia orbis. However, this list results from a rather superficial survey of his writings. A more in-depth analysis is needed in order to fix definitely the list of Averroes’ works quoted by Henry.


4 In the outline I have integrated different elements of a recent paper entitled: “Henri de Gand: lecteur critique d’Averroès”, held at the fourteenth annual symposium of the SIEPM at Geneva (Averroïsme, l’averroïsme, l’anti-averroïsme), October 2006 (forthcoming in the acts of the colloquium).
It has been observed that Henry, when dealing with Avicenna, quotes only one of the latter’s works, i.e., his *Metaphysics* of the *Shifā*. With regard to Averroes, the situation seriously changes. One finds references to a rather wide range of his writings. He refers to the four “Long Commentaries” that had been translated into Latin, i.e., on *Physics*, on *The Heavens*, on *Soul* and on *Metaphysics*. Compared to Avicenna, the presence of quotations from three “natural books” in addition to the *Metaphysics* merits attention. It seems to suggest that for Henry Averroes was more an authority in natural sciences than in metaphysics. This impression is apparently reinforced by the presence of the “Middle Commentary” on *Generation and Corruption* among Henry’s Averroistic sources. Indeed, that commentary was the only available in Latin on this particular text of Aristotle. Also, the use of the *De substantia orbis*, a collection of treatises of which the Arabic original has been lost, as well the presence of at least one quotation from the “Epitome” on *De Somno et vigilia*, which is part of the *Parva Naturalia*, reinforces this impression. Hence, from the formal point of view Averroes clearly receives great attention as an “auctoritas” in the “physical” domain. But Henry did not limit his attention exclusively to Averroes’ physical commentaries (including to the classical scheme the *De Anima*). As already observed, the *Long Commentary on Metaphysics* is used in a fashion similar to the three physical ones. Moreover, Henry refers to the *Middle Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. It has to be observed that it was not Michael Scot (or someone of his circle) who translated this latter work into Latin, as is most probably the case for the other already mentioned works. In fact, Hermanus Allemanus was most probably its translator. Insofar as this translation, unlike the others, seems to have circulated on a very limited scale in the Middle Ages (it was only preserved in four manuscripts), its use by Henry is less evident than one might think. Even more remarkable is a quotation in *Summa*, art. 34, q. 4, taken from the *Middle Commentary on the Categories*, a text that had been translated into Latin by Wilhelm de Luna, most probably during the third quarter of the thirteenth century. Given that Henry’s text dates from approximately 1280, de Luna’s translation was undoubtedly recent, and hence in all likelihood available in only a very limited number of copies. It may be worthwhile to note that Henry from time to time, although not systematically, quotes the Latin translation of Aristotle’s text according to Commentaries of the Averroes Latinus. In view of this fact, it looks probable that he had direct access to Averroes’ works, and hence does not quote them in an indirect manner, i.e., through the mediation of writings of his contemporary scholastics.