MEDIEVAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS
OF AVICENNA’S MODAL SYLLOGISTIC

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Over the years there have been many attempts to understand the modal sylogistic of Avicenna (d. 428/1037). Avicenna himself modified the way he set out his sylogistic, and through the course of his career shifted on matters of substance. The early commentators responded to his works in various ways, but broadly speaking Avicennan logic was under attack by the end of the sixth/twelfth century. It only came to be widely accepted in the seventh/thirteenth century after substantial revision. The most important pro-Avicennan intervention in this process was by Naṣīr ad-Dīn ʿAṭ-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) in his Solving the Problems of Pointers and Reminders. ¹

Even though ʿṬūsī needs no introduction to scholars working on Arabic philosophy, it is worth noting that the way he worked in his commentary on Pointers gives it special value as a guide to understanding Avicenna. ʿṬūsī responded to his contemporaries’ attacks on Avicenna by going back over what Avicenna had to say in his other works on logic and bringing the material to bear on disputed issues in Pointers. ʿṬūsī’s distillation is probably the finest medieval interpretation of Avicenna’s logic that we have.

The modern interpretation of Arabic modal syllogistic began about forty years ago, and the best contribution to the specific problem of understanding Avicenna’s position on the subject is Paul Thom’s “Logic and Metaphysics in Avicenna’s Modal Syllogistic.” ² At points, however, his analysis reflects the malign influence of an overview

¹ Naṣīr ad-Dīn ʿAṭ-Ṭūsī, Hall muškilāt al-ʾishārāt wa-t-tanbihāt, at bottom of page of Avicenna’s Kitāb al-ʾIshārāt wa-t-tanbihāt, ed. S. Dunyā (Cairo: Dār al-Māʾārif, 1971). Henceforth I will refer to Ṭūsī’s commentary and Avicenna’s Pointers as such, and by way of the paragraph numbering of the translation in the appendix.
I wrote of Avicenna’s syllogistic. Let me first, therefore, correct a mistake I made in that study.

Throughout my description, I assumed Avicenna was setting out the same syllogistic in Salvation, Syllogism and Pointers. As a result, I filled in gaps and obscurities in the Salvation account by importing material from the other two works. I still think that all three accounts take the same syllogisms to be productive, but I no longer think that Avicenna in Pointers takes the same syllogisms to be perfect that he took to be so in Salvation and Syllogism. This has consequences for the way the syllogistic is developed in Pointers, and the nature of the proofs given. More generally, my approach to the three accounts encouraged an unwarranted mix-and-match interpretation of Avicenna’s syllogistic. In his analysis of Avicenna’s proofs, Thom follows such an approach.

None the less, Thom’s article remains extremely valuable for a number of reasons. It begins by distinguishing carefully a logical theory’s syntax and semantics from the theory’s application. He notes that Avicenna’s modal syllogistic includes an explicit semantics, and he offers a rendition—which he calls the combined \textit{de dicto/de re} analysis—for the semantics of the propositions deployed in the syllogistic (a rendition which makes sense of the syllogisms Avicenna accepts and rejects). Thom concludes his paper by reflecting on the application of the theory’s propositions:

We may conclude that necessity-propositions on the combined \textit{de dicto/de re} analysis...have an application to metaphysical propositions in which the predicate is put forward as being constitutive of the subject.

Similarly, possibility propositions on the combined \textit{de dicto/de re} reading state that it’s necessary that every \(j\) is a possible \(b\); and statements to this effect within an essentialist metaphysics state a natural or essential capacity of the subject-term. So we may also conclude that possibility-propositions on the combined \textit{de dicto/de re} analysis have an application to metaphysical propositions in which the predicate is put forward as expressing a potentiality of the subject.\footnote{Thom (2008), 372.}

As for the absolute proposition, Thom observes that Avicenna gives as an example “all who sleep wake.” This states a truth about essential
