AVERROES’ UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHILOSOPHER’S ROLE IN SOCIETY

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One may say of Averroes, as one might of any committed philosopher, that he viewed his responsibilities as a philosopher to be those that brought him to the truth. ‘The truth,’ al-haqq, is also the name—one of the names—of the True One, God, in Arabic, and the connection between these two dimensions of the truth was evident to Muslim philosophers from the ninth-century Ya’qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī, the ‘philosopher of the Arabs,’ on.

The pursuit of the truth along philosophical lines thus had a religious dimension for all Muslim philosophers, however divorced it was from more conventional religious practices, as it was for Averroes. Philosophy had for him the earmarks of a spiritual calling, and he gave himself to it as fully as circumstances permitted. He was, after all, actively engaged and an authority as well in both the judicial and medical professions, disciplines that brought him into contact with other persons and with society at large.

In these capacities, Averroes may be said to have fulfilled his civic obligations. His philosophical activity, on the other hand, was more of a private affair, limited to those relatively few in society who were prepared for it. It is true that Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle’s corpus were commissioned by the Almohad caliph Abū Ya’qūb Yūsuf (reigned 1163–84) in order allegedly to help him understand Aristotle’s work, and in that sense Averroes may be seen as having rendered a public service qua philosopher. Yet the public for which the commentaries were written was a very select one, and one to which Averroes barely

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1 This is a revised version of an article that appeared originally in Arabic, in the proceedings of an international symposium titled ‘Actualité d’Averroes,’ ed. M.A. Mansiyya (Tunis, 1999), i, pp. 319–32.
condescended. Nor would these commentaries, not even the politically oriented commentary on Plato’s Republic, which served in lieu of Aristotle’s Politics, have assisted the caliph discharge his responsibilities towards his subjects.

Each of the three types of commentaries—the Epitome or Short (jawāmī’), Middle (talkhīṣ) and Long (sharḥ)—which Averroes composed (and he wrote thirty eight commentaries in all) assumes some philosophical sophistication in the reader. The five Long Commentaries—to the Posterior Analytics, Physics, De caelo, De anima and Metaphysics,—are very detailed and demanding, while the more numerous Short Commentaries, or Epitomes, often range beyond Aristotle’s text to survey the subject at hand in an abbreviated but eminently non-elementary manner.4

It is only Averroes’ Middle Commentaries that make an attempt to clarify Aristotle’s text for the non-cognoscenti, through paraphrase and relatively brief comment and explanation. The Middle Commentaries also render Aristotle’s text more accessible to the Muslim reader in various subtle ways, as I have attempted to show elsewhere.5 These Middle Commentaries are called talkhīṣ in Arabic, the same term we are told the Almohad caliph had used in requesting Averroes’ assistance. These talkhīṣ may be seen, therefore, as evidence of Averroes’ having fulfilled the responsibilities of a philosopher, as required by his society.

That society, though, was the privileged one of the court and of other philosophers. In his independent works, such as the Taḥāfuṭ al-Taḥāfuṭ (‘The Incoherence of the Incoherence’) and the Fāṣl al-ḥaqdāf (paraphrased as ‘On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy’), Averroes engages al-Ghazālī and the theologians or mutakallimūn of Islam whom al-Ghazālī represents, but only to distinguish himself from them. Among their many errors, they make the mistake, he believes, of reaching out to the masses in order to refine their beliefs, i.e., to disabuse them of

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