AVICENNA THE COMMENTATOR

Allan Bäck

A commentator should provide all the premises that are needed, and omit nothing but the obvious and the superfluous, for the most incompetent commentator is he who uses in his commentary premises more cryptic than, or as cryptic as, the premises of whatever he is commenting upon. These commentaries which [purport to] bring us the truth conceal in fact the theses better than the original texts, while what they conceal most is errors.1

Avicenna has never had high standing as a commentator on Aristotle. In the scholarly world today, he, like any other Islamic medieval philosopher, has the automatic curse of not working from the original Greek in critical editions. He has the additional stigma of having received as Aristotle’s work various spurious works, including Neoplatonist treatises by Proclus and Plotinus like the Liber de causis.2

Even in the medieval Islamic culture, his encyclopedic Aš-Šhīfā (the Healing or Cure), where he did write on many of Aristotle’s works, was not viewed as faithful commentary. Consequently, so the story goes, Averroes was asked by Abū Ya‘qūb to write a set of commentaries more textually based.3

Certainly, this assessment of Avicenna has some merit. He often departs from the text of Aristotle even when commenting upon it. He does so in various ways. (1) He states sometimes that Aristotle is just wrong, for instance, in his doctrine that in thinking the thinker becomes identical to the object thought.4

3 Dominique Urvoy, “Ibn Rushd,” in History of Islamic Philosophy, eds. S. Nasr & O. Leaman (London, 1996), pp. 330–345, p. 332. This story cannot be completely true, as we now know that prior to Avicenna there were many faithful commentaries written in Arabic on Aristotle’s works, especially at the bayt al-hikma. See n. 51.
the ontological square, the fourfold division of beings in *Categories*, Avicenna rejects it and replaces it with a fivefold division. In such cases Avicenna is offering his own views as substitutes. (2) Other times, he omits discussing what Aristotle says. Thus, in his *Al-Ilāhīyyāt* (*Metaphysics*) Avicenna ignores some books of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, like Book IV. Again, Avicenna’s *Physics* hardly has the organization of Aristotle’s. (3) Other times, he adds on a lot of material purportedly consistent with Aristotle’s text, with the aim of defending or elaborating on it. Thus, in *Al-Ilāhīyyāt* Avicenna adds on discussions about the necessary being and prophecy. Likewise the organization of the *Qiyās* hardly follows that of the *Prior Analytics*, although Avicenna does end up covering most of the material there, while adding much more. (4) In some cases his attempts at a literal commentary fail ludicrously, as in his discussion of the *Poetics* where he attempts to describe Greek tragedies without having ever read or seen one. (I shall not be discussing this last type as it hardly gives Avicenna a claim for being a pre-eminent commentator. For it consists of standard, literal commentary, just done badly.)

The first three types of cases differ significantly. In the first type Avicenna goes where, he believes, the truth leads him at the expense of what Aristotle has said. As a result, we have an explanation inconsistent with Aristotle’s doctrines. In the second and third types, we have material being introduced or omitted so as presumably to increase our understanding of the material being discussed by extending its doctrines. Such additions and omissions can remain consistent with Aristotle’s doctrines. As for the omissions, Avicenna generally does discuss that material somewhere: he has just reorganized their presentation. Thus he does discuss the material of *Metaphysics* IV in various places: e.g., what is meant by genus, species, difference, etc. appears in his commentary on Porphyry (*the Logica of the Avicenna Latinus*); in his summaries as well he explains the meaning of many terms and reorganizes Aristotle’s doctrines quite a lot. We can then find some justification for a commentary deviating from the text in the second or

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7 I am thinking of *Ar-Najāt* (Salvation), *Al-Ishārāt* (Pointers), and the Persian Dānešnāme (trans. Morewedge as *The Metaphysica of Avicenna*).