

The Influence of Ibn Rushd's on Scholastic Theology: An Analytical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Ibn Rushd is very significant in the Islamic world. Plato and Aristotle influenced the West by the transmission of their ideas as seen through the lens of Islamic Scholasticism of the Nineteenth to twelfth centuries. Latin Scholasticism was built upon Greek philosophy and Christian theology. Scholasticism generally refers to the reception of texts of the philosophers of antiquity (both Greeks and Romans) and their interpretation of faith, theology and understanding of the world. Ibn Rushd's ideas influenced the transformation of thought in medieval Europe. A great Christian thinker like Thomas Aquinas was much influenced by him. Ibn Rushd attained eminence as a physician and astronomer as well. However, his philosophical accomplishments overshadowed his eminence as a man of science. The main philosophical problems taken by Ibn Rushd are: Eternity of the world, the nature of God, Knowledge of God and Immortality of the human soul and its Resurrection.

He sincerely underlined the significance of philosophy in various departments of human endeavours. He tried to restore philosophy and brought out its importance in Islamic theology as well other spheres of life. His contribution to Islamic scholastic philosophy remained superb and appreciative one. The present paper will explore Ibn Rushd's influence on scholastic theology as well as the thought of other subsequent scholars and theologians and its applicability to the domain of metaphysics.

Key Words: Ibn Rushd, Scholasticism, Greek, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Eternity, Islam, Ghazālī.

INTRODUCTION

Ibn Rushd, one of the best known Islamic philosophers, challenged Ptolemy's astronomical system on philosophical grounds and made interesting theoretical contribution to the Andalusian criticism of the Greek astronomer. Along with Ibn Bajja, Ibn Tufayl and Bitruji, he wished to formulate a model for the cosmos according to Aristotelian principle- i.e., uniform and circular motions centered on the Earth in which there was no need for eccentrics and epicycles. He was also an active and a first rate scholar in many other disciplines, including Islamic religion and law, medicine, and the various aspects of Hellenistic philosophy. Ibn Rushd was born in an important family of religious scholars.¹

IBN RUSHD INTO SCHOLASTIC PHILOSOPHY

There are records dating from 1255 that Latin translations of Ibn Rushd's Commentaries were in use in Paris. By the middle of the 13th Century most of this working translation had been finished. Outstanding Latin translators of Ibn Rushd included: the Scottish scholar Michael Scot, born about 1175, who trained in Toledo (Spain) and died in Sicily in approximately 1235; and Hermanus Alemanus from central Europe, who was Bishop of Astorga (near the town of León, Spain) when he died in 1272. Scot translated Ibn Rushd's Long Commentaries on *De Anima*, *Physics* and *De Coelo*, as well as the Middle Commentary on *De Generatione et Corruptione* and the Epitome of *Parva Naturalia*. Hermanus Alemanus, on the other hand, translated the Middle Commentaries on *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* from Arabic into Latin with the help of some Mozarabs.

The Latin translation of the *Kulliyat fil-tibb* first appeared in the middle of the 13th Century under the title *Colliget*, while medieval translations of Ibn Rushd were printed for the first

time during 1472-1475 in an edition by Lorenzo Canozio. Later on the eleven volumes of *Opera Omnia Aristoteli cum Averrois Cordubensis Commentaria*, whose Latin translations were revised by Jacob Mantino, were published by the Juntas of Venice (Italy). This standard edition of Aristotle/Averroes was reprinted many times during the 16th Century, and was the bestseller of its day.

Ibn Rushd and Aristotle: From a doctrinal point of view, Neoplatonism which had prevailed in Western thought since the Christian Fathers and upon which new life had been breathed by Ibn Sina was replaced by Aristotelianism, an interest for which had been renewed in the Middle Ages through Ibn Rushd. Despite its tensions and ecclesiastical damnations, Aristotelian naturalism found its place at universities amongst students' enthusiasm, the intellectual concerns of Masters of Arts struggling for their autonomy, and the distrust of theologians fearful of a (pagan) philosophy that could overshadow their *Weltanschauung*, which until then had been hegemonic.

Until the 13th Century, the Christian world only knew two works of Aristotle, *Categories* and *De Interpretatione*, which belong to the so-called *Organon* or the whole body of his logical writings. This means that the integral Aristotle that has stood throughout with different fluctuations, namely, the author of *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *On the Soul*, *Organon* (made up of six Logical works), *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, *Poetics* and some treatises on Biology was assimilated into the West thanks to the Arabs, and especially by the excellent Commentaries of Ibn Rushd. It is of considerable historical significance that in his interpretation of Aristotelian texts Ibn Rushd neither clouds the issue with dogmatic considerations, nor does he distort his naturalism, rather he purifies it of both the Christian as well as the Islamic ideological additions which had previously been kept by tradition.

The first *receptor* of Ibn Rushd into Scholasticism was the Dominican Albert the Great,

Master in the Theological Faculty of Paris University, who wrote impressive books on theology and philosophy. The Albertian outlook is characteristic of a Christian thinker who has assimilated Aristotelianism. For this reason he continues Ibn Rushd's teachings in many theoretical questions but criticises him when he considers that the Rushdian philosophical position collides with dogma, for example, in the theory of the eternity of the world and in his innovative psychological theses.

At the request of Pope Alexander IV, in about 1256, Albert the Great wrote *De unitate intellectus*. It is not directed specifically against Ibn Rushd but against Monopsychism in general, and for that reason he attacks amongst others al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Gabirol), Ibn Bayya and of course Ibn Rushd, whose *Long Commentary On the Soul* he uses as basic text. The Dominican Master rejected the theory of the unity of material or possible intellect attributed to Ibn Rushd, although surprisingly he admits the possibility of the human soul's union with a separate intellect, an Averroist theory as underlined by the Italian scholar Bruno Nardi.

A clear trace of the Aristotle/Averroes naturalism can be found in Albert's interest in Biology (something which was unusual for a Medieval theologian) and in his consideration of experience as a criterion for truth on contingent objects. Let's recall his comment on the necessary distinction between Philosophy and Theology: "dico quod nihil ad me de Dei miraculis cum ego de naturalibus disseram [When I am discussing questions about nature, God's miracles do not affect me]."²

Ghazali and Abu-l-walid Ibn Rushd: In eleventh century Persia, Abū Hamīd al-Ghazālī, an Islamic jurist and theologian who had at one time professed a deep interest in philosophy, set about attacking the Greek-inspired philosophers, particularly Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī, some of whose tenets he judged to be contrary to the teachings contained in the

Koranic Revelation and thus to have a pernicious influence on Islamic thought and faith. In his book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”), written in 1095, he attempted as the title suggests to refute what he considered to be the errors of these philosophers, using their own demonstrative methods and argumentation. Because of his profound learning and his knowledge of the art of argumentation, his work had such a profound impact on the world of his time that the philosophical tradition of Eastern Islam underwent a severe decline and eventually died.

Philosophy continued in the West, however; and some eighty years later, Abū-l-Walīd Ibn Rushd, a Peripatetic philosopher, who also combined the functions of judge in Cordova and of personal physician to the Almohad sovereigns, responded to Ghazālī’s attacks in a book entitled *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (“The Incoherence of the Incoherence”), where he alternately cited Ghazālī’s views and his own. Ibn Rushd’s reply was the ultimate endeavor of this philosophical system to reassert itself in the midst of growing opposition and to prove its legitimacy within the Islamic religion; for at that time philosophers were under the accusation of heresy, an accusation which threatened them with the penalty of death. Ibn Rushd himself went through a period of disgrace, and many of his original works were publicly burned. With him, the great philosophical tradition which had come to full bloom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries is generally considered to have reached its end. Nonetheless, it left a legacy which was absorbed and molded by the science of *Kalām* the predominant school of thought from then on, and by some of the most eminent Sūfis, such as Ibn ‘Arabī.³

After responding to al-Ghazili’s first objections, Ibn Rushd concludes that al-Ghazili’s account is somewhat laughable: “his putting forth the likes of these sophistical claims is obscene, for one would think that [my objections] would not escape his notice. He intended that only to dupe the people of his time, but it is incompatible with the character of those striving to reveal the truth”. In the rest of his *Incoherence*, Ibn Rushd continues to respond to

al-Ghazili's refutations, clarifying the actual positions of philosophers and admonishing al-Ghazili for ignoring nuance. Ibn Rushd has a firm idea of the "character" of truth-seekers and of how to approach the truth, and these ideas are the topic of his *The Decisive Treatise*.⁴

Ibn Rushd and Plato: Ibn Rushd explains, "Plato and the Ash'arites believed that future celestial rotations could be infinite...Thus whoever supposes that the world has a beginning would have held more firmly to his principle...to suppose that it has an end, as many of the theologians had done". To most readers, the necessary association between eternal endlessness and beginninglessness seems counter-intuitive, because it leads to denying the possibility of a one- directional infinite sequence (one with either a beginning or an end, but not both).⁵

Ibn Rushd and Thomas Aquinas: Even though it is a paradox, the main *receptor* of Ibn Rushd was another Dominican, Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was also a student of Albert, a Master in the Theological Faculty in Paris and without doubt the most outstanding theologian in the Western Medieval Christian World. Despite an apparent hostility between him and Ibn Rushd that can be seen in religious iconography and in the following literature, both thinkers share a common philosophical source, Aristotelianism. As the Spanish Arabist, Miguel Asín pointed out many years ago, they are also close on many theological issues.

A well-known specialist, Salvador Gómez Nogales, summed up the influence of Ibn Rushd on the Italian Dominican with the following points [cfr. "Saint Thomas, Averroès et l'averroïsme", in *Aquinas and problems of his time*, Louvain, 1976]:

In *Logic* and *Theory of Knowledge* Thomas Aquinas has accepted many ideas that Ibn Rushd had expounded in his Commentaries on Aristotelian works.

1. In *Cosmology*, the concept of time and some astronomical theories.

2. In *Metaphysics*, Occasionalism, the knowledge of individuals, providence and some proofs for the existence of God.
3. In *Psychology*, some ideas on the relation between senses and intellect, on the nature of soul and its faculties, in the same way as the theory of the agent intellect internal to man.
4. In *Theology*, the method of exegesis, prophecy, the need of revelation and the conception of the relations between reason and faith.
5. In *Ethics*, the theory of virtues and the concept of practical reason.

An abundant presence by Ibn Rushd in Thomas Aquinas's writings is evident with more than 500 contrasted quotations. This influence turned openly polemic only in his later years, and coincided with attacks from the Catholic hierarchy on Latin Averroism with regard to some of its psychological, cosmological and ethical theses. The crux of this confrontation lies in Ibn Rushd's supposed Monopsychism. Trying to determine the exact doctrinal position of Ibn Rushd on unity of Intellect which he considered was wrongly interpreted in Scholasticism, Gómez Nogales picked up this wise formula proposed previously by H. Kainz: *pluralitas intellectuum, unitas intellectus*.⁶

Ibn Rushd and Hernandez: Cruz Hernández has seen the influence on Defensor Pacis of Ibn Rushd Commentary on Plato's Republic with regard to the immanent condition of human happiness and the concept of social good as the ultimate goal of human action. I think there is also an influence of Ibn Rush's Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, which was in fashion in later medieval schools as shown by the fact that it is the only work quoted in Bishop Tempier's condemnations of 1277. Nevertheless, the most quoted text in the First part of Defensor Pacis which has a greater political, unlike the second part which was of a religious-political nature, or the Third part which is an abstract

of the book is Aristotle's *Politics*, a work that Ibn Rushd unfortunately never knew.⁷

Ibn Rushd and Dante Alighieri: Dante's works, *Convivio*, where there are prevailing philosophical problems, some topics of clearly Averroist origin can be found: for example, when he writes that "knowledge is our last perfection" and that for this reason science can be called "heaven". In my opinion, we must pay special attention to the treaty *Monarchia*, because in it he advances as a political thinker from the Aristotle who more interested in the Renaissance, the Aristotle of *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, in a broad line which can be described as political Averroism, although without the harsh tone of Marsilius. After asking himself what is the end of human society as a whole, he comes to his answer: "It is, so, evident that the last end of the potency of the whole mankind consists of the intellectual potency or faculty". He finishes this reasoning with an appeal to the argument by authority: "And with this sentence agrees Averroes in his Commentary on *De anima*".⁸

CONCLUSION

Ibn Rushd was one of the great philosophers. His philosophy is very significant in the Islamic world. Many philosophers are influenced by his thought and philosophy. And many adopted his ideas. He critically examined the alleged tension between philosophy and religion in the *Decisive Treatise*, and he challenged the anti-philosophical sentiments within the Sunni tradition sparked by al-Ghazzali. This critique ignited a similar re-examination within the Christian tradition, influencing a line of scholars who would come to be identified as the "Averroists." He contended that the claim of many Muslim theologians that philosophers were outside the fold of Islam had no base in scripture. His novel exegesis of seminal Quranic verses made the case for three valid "paths" of arriving at religious truths, and that philosophy was one if not the best of them, therefore its study should not be prohibited. He also challenged Asharite, Mutazilite, Sufi, and "literalist" conceptions of

God's attributes and actions, noting the philosophical issues that arise out of their notions of occasionalism, divine speech, and explanations of the origin of the world. He was one who strived to demonstrate that without engaging religion critically and philosophically, deeper meanings of the tradition can be lost, ultimately leading to deviant and incorrect understandings of the divine.

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