

## Avicenna's Critical View of Aristotelian Metaphysics

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### Abstract:

Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) (d.428/1037) great enterprise of reconstructing the Aristotelian philosophical tradition in a way that agrees with his own understanding of truth, explaining and determining the true nature, scope and aim of metaphysics occupies a place of special importance. In the *Ilahiyat* (Metaphysics) of *Kitab al-Shifa*, his most important philosophical *summa*, Avicenna not only expounds his own view about the metaphysical problems, but also discusses and explains the subject matter, content and purpose of metaphysics in a comprehensive way. As the studies of Avicenna in recent years have clearly shown that during the course of his elaboration of the he adds new aspects and dimensions to the previous Aristotelian understanding and follows an independent line. In this way, his approach to the question of determining subject matter of metaphysics led to certain methodological discussions and raised an objection by Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (d.595/1198), who took different position on the topic. Averroes criticizes Avicenna's conception of the scope of metaphysics and in particular his view of the relation between physics and metaphysics. Moreover, he blames Avicenna's position on the matter to find out whether Averroes claim that Avicenna did not follow Aristotle's opinion about the subject matter of metaphysics is really right, and if so, exactly to what extent. I will do this within the framework of Averroes argument, analyzing the basic points of his argument. In the first section, I will deal with the claims of Averroes, and in the second section with Avicenna's view of the contents of metaphysics in the light of the main points of criticism by Averroes. In addition, in the final section, I will compare Avicenna's conception with that of Aristotle's and present the reason for the position taken by Avicenna.

**Keywords:** Metaphysics, Physics, First Principle, God, Soul.

Averroes asserts that metaphysics makes use of certain principles demonstrated in physics. Moreover, most of the things that are sought after in metaphysics are explained by the things that are explained in physics and postulated then in metaphysics. The metaphysician accepts, for example, the existence of the First Principle from physical science and explains the manner in which it is a mover, just as it is from mathematical astronomy that he accepts the number of principles which exist as movers of the spheres. According to him, the metaphysician who accepts the first moving principles for the physicist has no way to demonstrate the existence of a first mover unless he accepts it as something well-known from

the physicist. In this perspective, the investigation into the existence of separate principles belongs to physical science, and not to the first philosophy, as is said by Avicenna. Thus, the explanations which Avicenna makes use of in his metaphysics to establish the existence of the First Principle are all dialectical assertions, not altogether true, nor do they prove anything in an appropriate manner.

Averroes, who repeatedly maintains that metaphysics recalls and postulates what has been explained in physics, states that since Avicenna believes that no science can prove its own principles and takes that absolutely, he mistakenly thinks that it is for the first philosopher to explain the existence of the principles of the sensible substance, whether eternal or not. Thus, Avicenna incorrectly says that, Averroes continues, the natural philosopher postulates the existence of nature, and that the metaphysician proves its existence (Genequand, 1986, p.74). Averroes mentions that according to Aristotle the existence of nature is obvious in itself and Avicenna is wrong when he says that the existence of nature is not known in natural science and that it is metaphysics which proves its existence. For a proof of the existence starts at what is more known to us, the natural phenomena, and from these the existence of nature is obvious. The cause of its existence may be given by metaphysics (Averroes, 1983, pp.21-22).

Averroes who believes that this mistaken conception was directly borrowed from Alexander of Aphrodisias by Avicenna replies to this argument as follows:

It is true that the metaphysician is he who seeks what the principles of substance *qua* substance are and shows that the separate substance is the principle of the natural substance, but in explaining this problem, he takes over what has been explained in natural philosophy; as for the substance subject to generation and corruption, he takes over what has been explained in the first book of the *Physics*, namely that it is composed of form and matter; as for the eternal substance, he takes over what has been explained at the end of the eighth book, namely that the mover of the eternal substance is something free from matter. Moreover, the existence of the eternal substance, the prime mover, has been established in the last book of the *Physics*, where it is not postulated, nor taken over from first philosophy. Therefore, the thesis that the investigation of the First Principle as the prime mover of the universe lies outside the scope of physics is in direct opposition to Aristotle (Genequand, 1986, pp.74-75).

In his refutation of the thesis offered by Avicenna and the others before him, Averroes explains: Since by definition the First Principles themselves have no principles, they cannot be demonstrated apodictically, that is, they cannot be the objects of an apodictical demonstration which must start from principles more universal than that which it wants to demonstrate; they can be arrived at by induction, which elaborates general principles on the basis of a multiplicity of particular applications, from a science lower in rank. Thus, it is incorrect to allege the doctrine that no science can demonstrate its own principles. So one must understand what these two sciences, physics and metaphysics, have in common in the inquiry into the principles of substance. Physics explains their existence as principles of the movable

substance, whereas metaphysics inquiries into them as principles of substance *qua* substance, not of the movable substance. According to Averroes, the principles of the two sciences are different in the manner one envisages them only, not in their being. Thus, the natural philosopher explains the material and efficient causes of the movable substance; the formal and final causes are beyond his power. But the metaphysician explains the cause of the movable substance which is described as formal and final, for he knows that the moving principle the existence of which has been demonstrated in natural philosophy is the principle of the sensible substance as form and end. It is forming that point of view that the metaphysician seeks the elements of the sensible substance, which are the elements of being *qua* being. In other words, the principles are the same for the sensible substance and being *qua* being, but envisaged from different viewpoints. Metaphysics covers both sensible and eternal substance; however, if the object of metaphysics and physics is the same, the mode of inquiry and the point of view from which this object is envisaged are different (Genequand, 1986, pp.79-80).

Thus, according to Averroes, Avicenna also erred completely in his claiming that the natural philosopher cannot explain the fact that the body is composed of matter and form and in his thinking that only the metaphysician can undertake its explanation. According to those who devote themselves to the two sciences, i.e. the physics and metaphysics, Averroes continues, it is obvious in itself that all these claims are incorrect. According to Averroes, Avicenna does not think it possible for a science to prove the principles of its subject, because such a proof would have to use premises which are more primary than these principles and consequently belong to higher disciplines. This is not true, because a proof of the fact of a principle – not an absolute proof or a proof of the cause – is possible within the science which has a subject the subject whose principle this is: in natural science one may prove that primary matter and the First Mover exist, for such a proof starts at the natural phenomenon and derives from them an explaining principle; giving an absolute proof belongs to metaphysics.

Consequently, the main points of Averroes criticism of Avicenna can be summarized as follows:

(a). The investigation into the existence of certain principles as principles of the movable and sensible substance, not of principles of substance *qua* substance, belongs to physical science, and not to the first philosophy, as is said by Avicenna. Thus Avicenna's thesis that that the investigation of the existence of the First principle as the prime mover of the universe lies outside the scope of physics is incorrect as well as in direct opposition to Aristotle.

(b). The master of particular science can demonstrate the causes of his own subject, just as Aristotle did in the *Physics*, where he demonstrated the existence of prime mover. But the only way by which he can demonstrate the existence of the prime mover is through indications in physical science. Thus, Avicenna is not right in saying that the metaphysician can demonstrate the existence of prime matter and First principle as prime mover by universal way, and natural philosopher accepts them from the metaphysician.

(c). According to Aristotle, the existence of nature is obvious in itself. Thus, Avicenna is not right in claiming that the metaphysician proves its existence and the natural philosopher postulates it, thinking that no science can prove its own principles.

(d). The natural philosopher can prove the fact that the body is composed of matter and form. Thus, Avicenna's idea that only the metaphysician can prove it is incorrect.

Next we will examine Avicenna's conception of the scope of metaphysics to see whether Averroes claim is really right in light of these four points. In other words, we will see to what extent Averroes got Avicenna right regarding this issue.

In the *Ilahiyat* of his *Kitab al-Shifa'* (Bertolucci, 2002) Avicenna draws a distinction between the subject matter of metaphysics and objects of inquiry of metaphysics. *Ilahiyat* are mainly devoted to the question of what the subject matter of metaphysics is. Avicenna negatively proves that neither God nor the four causes are the subject matter of metaphysics. The main reason is that their existence is proved, not assumed, by metaphysics. His principal thesis here is that the subject matter of natural science must be already given as a postulate, prior to the investigation of its nature and attributes. In this context, Avicenna states:

The inquiry concerning [God] would, then, have two aspects—one [being] an inquiry concerning Him with respect to His existence and the other [an inquiry] with respect to His attributes. If, then, the inquiry concerning His existence is in this science, it cannot be the subject matter of this science. For it is not for any science to establish its own subject matter... Since it has become clear to you from the state of this science that it investigates [the things] that are basically separable from matter. You have glimpsed in the natural sciences that God is neither a body nor the power of a body, but that He is one-free in every respect from matter and from admixture with motion. Hence, the inquiry concerning Him must belong to this science (Avicenna, 2005, p.4).

Then, Avicenna positively argues that the primary subject matter of metaphysics is existent *qua* existent; and the objects of inquiry of metaphysics are those that accompany the existent inasmuch as it is an existent, unconditionally. Thus, he divides 'this science' into parts:

Some of these will investigate the ultimate causes, for these are the causes existent with respect to its existence. [This science] will [also] investigate the First Cause, from which emanates every caused existent, not only inasmuch as it is an existent motion or [only inasmuch as it is] quantified. Some [of the parts of this science] will investigate the accidental occurrences to the existent, and some [will investigate] the principles of the particular sciences. And because the principles of each science that is more particular are things searched after in the higher science—as, for example, the principles of medicine [found] in natural [science] and surveying [found] in geometry – it will so occur in this science that the principles of the particular sciences that investigate the states of the particular existents are clarified therein (Avicenna, 2005, p.10).

Thus, according to Avicenna, metaphysics investigates the states of the existent and the things that are akin to being divisions and species until it arrives at a specialization with which the subject matters of particular sciences, such as natural philosophy and mathematics, begin, relinquishing to them this specialty. And this science investigates and determines the state of that which, prior to such specialization, is akin to principle. Thus, some of the things sought after in this science are the causes of the existent inasmuch as it is a caused existent; some of the things sought after pertain to the accidental occurrences to the existent; and some pertain to the principles of the particular sciences. For Avicenna who claims that what is investigated in metaphysics is something which no exponent of a particular science discusses, the benefit of this science is to bestow certainly on the principles of the particular sciences and to validate the quiddity of the things they share in common, even when the latter are not principles.

Hence, Avicenna points out that metaphysics can prove the existence of the First principle without using particular sensible data, and relying rather on universal intellectual premises. In this respect, he says:

You ought to know that, within [this subject] itself, there is a way to show that the purpose in this science is to attain a principle without [requiring first] another science. For it will become clear to you anon, through an intimation, that we have a way for proving the First Principle, not through inference from sensible things, but through universal rational premises that necessitate [the conclusion] that there must be for existence a principle that is necessary in its existence...and that necessitates [the conclusion] that [this principle] of the whole [of the other existents] (Avicenna, 2005, p.16).

It seems that one of the Avicenna's main aims in his handling of metaphysics is to cleanse it of non-metaphysical elements. He especially wishes to remove premises drawn from physics in arguments with metaphysical conclusions related to issues like God's existence, unity and transcendence of attributes. He certainly admits that created phenomena can be cited as grounds for reaching these conclusions about God. Nevertheless, it is an inferior basis to being *qua* being. Wherever possible, metaphysical conclusions deserve commensurably metaphysical premises. Furthermore, Avicenna attacks the other ways of reaching such conclusions and finds fault with Aristotle and the commentators. In commenting on Book *Lambda* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, he even says:

It is nonsensical to arrive at the First Truth by way of motion and by way of the fact that it is a principle of motion, and [then] to undertake from this [position] to make it into a principle for the essences, because these people offered nothing more than establishing it as a mover, nor that it is a principle for what exists. How utterly incompetent that motion should be the means of establishing the One, the Truth, which itself is the principle into a principle of the motion of the celestial sphere does not necessarily entail that they should [also] make it into a principle of the substance of the sphere (Avicenna, 1947, pp.23-24).

Avicenna maintains that certain topics and principles, such as God and the four causes, albeit dealt with in natural philosophy, are extraneous to this discipline and rather belong to metaphysics. In the *Ilahiyat*, after explaining the reason why the inquiry concerning God must belong to metaphysics, he states:

Hence, the inquiry concerning Him must belong to this science. What you have glimpsed regarding this in the natural sciences was foreign to the natural sciences [something] used in them that does not belong to them. By this, however, it was intended to hasten for man the knowledge of the existence of the First Principle, so that the desire to acquire the other sciences would take hold of him, and [to hasten] his being drawn to the level [of mastering these sciences] so as to reach true knowledge of Him (Avicenna, 2005, p.4).

Here Avicenna makes two points: first, the investigation of God pertains properly only to metaphysics; second, the account of God provided by natural philosophy was alien to this discipline and motivated only by didactical purposes. In this regard, Avicenna provides a long and detailed proof of the eternity of the heavenly motion, meant to supersede the one provided in natural philosophy. Now, the eternity of heavenly motion is just the basis of proof's God's existence given by natural philosophy. It appears that Avicenna's aim is to transfer from natural philosophy to metaphysics the account of the heavenly motion, thus depriving natural philosophy of the possibility of proving God's existence and, consequently, to deal with God's nature and related issues on that account. In the *Ilahiyat*, natural philosophy and metaphysics do not result to have distinct and independent ways of proving God's existence; only metaphysics appears to be the discipline deputed with proving God's existence and dealing with divine matters.

Consequently, it seems that the four points of Averroes' criticism of Avicenna which were mentioned above can be found in Avicenna's own philosophy. In other words, concerning the issue, Averroes got Avicenna right. One can still ask, though, whether Avicenna really differed from Aristotle in those points, as Averroes claimed. Did Avicenna really misunderstood Aristotle's statements on the issue or were these points the result of Avicenna's attempt to reconstruct the Aristotelian philosophical tradition in a way that agrees with his own understanding of truth? Here we will examine these in light of the above mentioned four points.

Aristotle divides *Metaphysics* mainly into three parts: (1) the science of first principles, (2) the study of being *qua* being, and (3) theology. Avicenna was aware of the above classification of the contents of metaphysics. The understanding of the scope of metaphysics is evident in his several works. Al-Farabi's essay on the purposes of the *Metaphysics* gave Avicenna information about the matter. In particular, it alerted him to the fact that Theology is only a part of metaphysics, not the entire subject. In this light Avicenna could identify what he had earlier thought to be the Theological one. Thus, Avicenna discarded outward adherence to the transmitted forms of Aristotelianism, he broke with tradition which identifies Aristotelian metaphysics with ideology. As Dimitri Gutas has pointed out that

Avicenna added a fourth dimension to this understanding of the contents of Metaphysics, which dealt with the subject of the survival of the rational soul. Gutas calls the final category of Metaphysics of the Rational Soul which includes revelation and prophecy, destination and afterlife (Gutas, 1988).

As mentioned before, it appears that Avicenna's aim is to transfer from natural philosophy to metaphysics the problem of demonstrating the existence of the Prime Mover. Accordingly, natural philosophy could not deal with the possibility of proving God's existence. Consequently, it neither could also nor deal with God's nature and related issues. Thus, only metaphysics appears to be the discipline deputed with proving God's existence and dealing with divine matters. Since

the subject matter of natural is bodies, with respect to their being in motion and at rest, and [that] its investigation pertains to the occurrences that happen to them essentially in this respect...[And] the divine science investigates the things that are separable from matter in subsistence and definition...the divine science is the one in which the first causes of natural and mathematical existence and what relates to them are investigated; and [so also is] the Cause of Causes and Principle of Principles – namely God (Avicenna, 2005, p.2).

Although Aristotle's *Physics* shows that a particular science can demonstrate its own principles through induction or *a posteriori* I have not found the statement that a particular science cannot demonstrate its own principle in the works of Aristotle. However, Aristotle's commentators such as Alexander of Aphrodisias and Simplicius (d.533) claimed the idea. According to Aristotle, physical substance can demonstrate its own principles. Thus the principles of physics, which are at the same time the general principles of being, are demonstrated by the metaphysician and then taken over by the natural philosopher. Furthermore, the principle of physical things is not itself a physical thing: it is the immovable substance. According to him, the metaphysician demonstrates the principles of being whatever they are, and the immovable substance, as principle and cause of the physical world, is the primary object of metaphysics.<sup>30</sup> In fact, what Aristotle says is merely that there is no demonstration of the first principle of a demonstration. From this, the commentators drew the conclusion that first principle of the particular sciences had to be demonstrated by a superior science that is metaphysics.

As to which science demonstrates the existence of nature as principle of the natural things, Aristotle's statement also is uncertain. In *Physics*, Aristotle says,

Nature exists, it would be absurd to try proving; for it is obvious that there are many things of this kind, and to prove what is not is the mark of a man who is unable to distinguish what is self-evident from what is not (Aristotle, 1995).

According to the quotation, it seems that natural philosopher can apprehend the existence of nature as well as show it; since the existence of nature which is 'innate impulse to movement'

is obvious from experiences and needs no proof. To argue for its existence would be to put oneself in the position of a blind man who has to argue about colour because he cannot apprehend directly.

### **Conclusion:**

It can be understood that one hand Avicenna follows Aristotle and Aristotelian tradition, but on the other hand he adds new aspects and dimensions to the previous Aristotelian understanding regarding the issue and follows an independent line. It seems that he tries to reconcile the divergent tendencies of philosophical history in the context of the Aristotelian system as homogenized and reflected in his own understanding of absolute truth as well as he aims primarily at providing the discipline expounded in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* with a new form, that is a proper scientific status, as Amos Bertolacci has showed in his "The reception of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in Avicenna's *Kitab al-Sifa*." Since the epistemological profile of metaphysics that emerges from the *Metaphysics* is regarded as imperfect by Avicenna, it means that contrary to Averroes' claim, Avicenna did not misunderstand Aristotle, but attempted to reconstruct his metaphysics in a way that agrees with scientific understanding.

Consequently, it could be said that Avicenna's scientific reshaping of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has been worked out in four main areas. First, Avicenna clarifies what metaphysics is about, namely whether it deals primarily with God, or rather with existent being as such and its various features. Avicenna's solution is a synthesis between these two perspectives: metaphysics is both ontology, in so far as existent qua existent is its subject matter, and a theology, since its goal is the knowledge of God. Second, Avicenna recasts the structure of metaphysics in a systematic way, by dismissing the rather unimportant order of books of the *Metaphysics*, and arranging this discipline according to a precise epistemological pattern, only adumbrated in Aristotle. Third, he refines the method of metaphysics, by enhancing its use of demonstrations and terminological distinctions, introducing new methods of argumentation like proofs by division and classification, and reducing the role of procedures like the criticism of previous philosophers' opinions, and the discussion of aporias cognate with dialectic. Finally, he elucidates the relationship of metaphysics emerges to be a science higher than all these disciplines and encharged with providing their epistemological foundation. In the historical route leading from Aristotle to Avicenna a significant role is played by Alexander of Aphrodisias, who picks up Aristotle's unaccomplished plan of a scientific metaphysics and substantiates it in his commentary on the metaphysics. Al-Farabi, commentators on the *Metaphysics*, and outlines scientific configuration of metaphysics which Avicenna receives and, with significant modifications and refinements, applies in the *Ilahiyat*.

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