

Interpreting Avicenna : Critical Essays, edited by Peter Adamson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xi + 300 pp., ISBN: 978-0-521-19073-2, €55.00 / \$99.00 (hb)

Peter Adamson's *Interpreting Avicenna* is a collection of twelve essays, written by leading experts on the "Chief Master" of Arabic philosophy – *al-Sheikh al-ra'īs*. Far from being a loose collection of disjointed pieces, this volume stands out as a well-structured and comprehensive handbook on Avicenna. This in itself is a remarkable achievement, which alone would make the volume indispensable. Additionally, each and every essay is an outstanding piece of scholarship, which offers a state-of-the-art presentation of its subject as well as breaks new ground and advances our knowledge of Avicenna's life, thought, and legacy.

The essays fall into three broad divisions: (1) Avicenna's biography, (2) Avicenna's œuvre (with seven articles devoted to philosophy and one to medicine), and (3) Avicenna's reception (Islamic, Jewish, and Latin Christian). The first division is represented by only one contribution: the late David C. Reisman's "The life and times of Avicenna: patronage and learning in medieval Islam" (chapter 1). Reisman offers a panoramic overview of Avicenna's life and works, with emphasis on "how the directions of Avicenna's thought ... are pushed forward by the events and relationships of his private life" (p. 20). Thus, for instance, Avicenna's so-called "Eastern philosophy," developed in his *The Easterners* and *The Fair Judgment* (both only partially extant), is his philosophical riposte to the Baghdād Peripatetic school (such as his arch-rival Abū l-Qāsim al-Kirmānī), involving an independent re-evaluation of the entire Aristotelian tradition from Avicenna's own perspective as an "Eastern" scholar from Khurāsān. Reisman also helpfully surveys the development of Avicenna's philosophical pedagogy and his experimentation with diverse styles of writing – notably his use of "enthymemes" (arguments with deliberately omitted premises, to be recovered by the reader) in the *Pointers and Reminders*.

The second division of the volume opens with Dimitri Gutas' magisterial presentation of "Avicenna's philosophical project" (chapter 2). Gutas stresses that Avicenna was "the first philosopher ever to write

about *all philosophical knowledge* ... within a single composition as a unified whole: he developed the *summa philosophiae*" (p. 32; italics in the original). A key goal of Avicenna's philosophical project was thus to present philosophy "as a whole, to reflect both the interrelatedness and interdependence of all knowledge, and its correspondence with reality" (*ibid.*). Concomitantly, Avicenna insisted on "bring[ing] philosophy up to date" (p. 33) by taking account of scientific developments from Aristotle's time until his own, clearing misconceptions of successive generations of Peripatetic commentators, and resolving difficulties and inconsistencies within the Aristotelian system itself. This updating also involved providing philosophical (i.e., scientific) explanations for religious phenomena, such as prophecy, miracles, or veridical dreams. Avicenna accomplished this as part of his thorough revision of the Aristotelian theory of the soul – a subject dealt with extensively in Gutas' article. As in his previous publications, Gutas stresses the "absence of mysticism in Avicenna," by which he means that, for Avicenna, all knowledge (including prophetic knowledge) is syllogistically structured, and even when intelligibles are acquired "at once or nearly so," the syllogistic middle terms never cease to be present. The article concludes with a valuable survey of Avicenna's diverse styles of writing, complementing Reisman's presentation above.¹

Six extensive contributions on Avicenna's philosophy follow: Tony Street's "Avicenna on the syllogism" (with a valuable "bibliographical guide to Avicenna's logical works," pp. 67-70); Jon McGinnis' "Avicenna's natural philosophy;" Dag Nikolaus Hasse's "Avicenna's epistemological optimism;" Deborah L. Black's "Certitude, justification, and the principles of knowledge in Avicenna's epistemology;" Stephen Menn's "Avicenna's metaphysics;" and Peter Adamson's "From the necessary existent to God" (chapters 3-4 and 6-9; chapter 5 to be discussed below). Taken together, they provide a comprehen-

¹ All these subjects are discussed much more extensively, and with exhaustive references, in the second, completely revised and greatly enhanced edition of Dimitri Gutas' *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*, which has now come out (Leiden: Brill, 2014). This second edition, which is almost twice the size of the first (Leiden: Brill, 1988), also includes a complete inventory of Avicenna's authentic works. A collected volume of Gutas' articles on Avicenna is expected soon from Variorum. Both books will serve as the indispensable foundation for Avicennian studies in the decades to come.

sive introduction to the main themes of Avicenna's philosophy and lead the reader – following the Aristotelian curriculum – from logic as the “tool” of philosophy, through the natural sciences (with emphasis on the soul – and what we call today epistemology), to general and special metaphysics. Collectively, they also illustrate Dimitri Gutas' observation that Avicenna treated philosophy “as a unified whole.”

These studies are packed with valuable insights. Thus, Tony Street pinpoints the key difference between the logical sections of Avicenna's *The Cure* and *Pointers and Reminders*. While *The Cure* is “the culmination of centuries of Peripatetic philosophy” which, by and large, follows the order of Aristotle's presentation, the *Pointers and Reminders* is “a programmatic account ... of how best to present philosophy without reference to Aristotle;” thus while the former “looked back to the tradition from which logic had developed, [the latter] looked forward to how it might be developed” in the future (p. 66).

Jon McGinnis shows how Avicenna developed a novel definition of motion as “never being at the same point for more than an instant” (p. 74). This definition constitutes a radical departure from Aristotle's view of motion in that it postulates motion “at an instant” – an impossibility in traditional Aristotelianism. At the same time, it offers an elegant re-interpretation of Aristotle's definition of motion as entelechy. According to Avicenna, entelechy is to be understood not as the process of actualization of potentiality, but as an already actualized perfection (*kamāl*, “perfection,” being the translation of “entelechy” in the Arabic version of Aristotle's *Physics*); motion's perfection consists precisely in the fact that the moving body is never at the same point for more than an instant. Avicenna was thus able to resolve the paradox of how an *already actualized* perfection (*kamāl*) could signify the *process* of actualization of potentiality.

Dag Nikolaus Hasse's piece offers an insightful solution to the long-standing debate regarding Avicenna's epistemology: namely, whether it is to be understood as primarily Aristotelian / abstractionist (meaning that the human intellect abstracts universal forms from material particulars) or Neoplatonic / emanationist (the human intellect receives universal forms from the Active Intellect). According to Hasse, it is, in fact, both: “Epistemologically, the normal way to acquire universal forms [for the first time] is abstraction from particulars, but ontologically the forms come from the active intellect” (p. 115). Once

the human intellect has gone through the necessary process of abstraction for a particular form, it receives it from the Active Intellect, and henceforth can receive it again at will, without having to go through the process of abstraction again.

Deborah Black's paper offers an intriguing analysis of Avicenna's epistemology, focusing on proposition types to which assent (*taṣdīq*) can be given. Eleven proposition types – such as primaries (*aw-waliyyāt*, i.e., self-evident truths), empiricals (*mujarrabāt*), widely accepted propositions (*mashbūrāt*), and opined/supposed beliefs (*maẓnūnāt*) – are conveniently listed on p. 124, ranked in the order of reliability, and subsequently analyzed. Black argues that for Avicenna, certitude (*yaqīn*), which is “the highest degree of assent,” presupposes “second-order belief,” i.e., “knowing that one knows” (p. 122).

Stephen Menn's contribution is a complex disquisition on the philosophical implications of Avicenna's understanding of quiddity (*mābiyya*) as neutral with regard to existence or non-existence as well as to different types of existence (mental and extra-mental). As Menn shows, in articulating some of these implications, Avicenna polemicizes against the Arab Christian (Jacobite) Aristotelian philosopher Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974). Thus, Avicenna argues that, contrary to Ibn ʿAdī's view, in knowing an immaterial thing the mind does *not* become identical to or united with that thing (thus, for instance, in knowing God the mind does not become united with God). Rather, the mind gets to know the *quiddity* of that thing, which in itself is neutral with regard to mental or extra-mental existence and which comes to exist in the mind (when the mind knows it) or in the extra-mental world (p. 168). Relatedly, knowledge for Avicenna is always an accident (inhering in the mind as its substrate), even if it is knowledge of quiddities which, when they come to exist extra-mentally, are substances rather than accidents (pp. 165-166).

Peter Adamson's article examines how Avicenna argues that the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*), whose existence he has established in the “ontological proof,” has the attributes of, and is thus identical to, the (philosophically construed) God of Islam. The following attributes are considered: uniqueness, simplicity, ineffability, intellection, goodness, and will (the last one only schematically, in the conclusion). Adamson shows that for Avicenna all these attributes can be deduced from the Necessary Existent's two traits: an “intrinsic”

trait, namely its “necessity” (understood as “guarantee of existence,” *ta’akkud al-wujūd*) and an “extrinsic,” relational trait, namely its being the ultimate cause for the rest of existents.

Peter E. Pormann’s contribution, “Avicenna on medical practice, epistemology, and the physiology of the inner senses” (chapter 5), is the only one dealing with medicine. Pormann demonstrates, first, that though Avicenna was clearly more interested in the theoretical aspect of medicine than in clinical practice, he nonetheless had considerable clinical experience, for in his *Canon of Medicine* he indicates repeatedly that he had tested particular drugs or remedies. Second, Pormann focuses on Avicenna’s theory of the internal senses – a significant element of his psychology, discussed both in his philosophical and in his medical works. Here the main conclusion is that “Avicenna’s medical ideas were heavily influenced by his philosophy” (p. 107), with the implication that the *Canon* does not simply rehash previous medical knowledge, but is innovative in a variety of ways. Pormann also highlights the importance of Avicenna’s medical writings for the study of both his medical and his philosophical teachings; he calls attention to the fact that these writings have been unduly neglected and urges historians of philosophy and medicine to pay more attention to them.

The third division of the volume includes three studies, dealing with Avicenna’s reception among Muslims, Jews, and Latin Christians, respectively. Robert Wisnovsky has undertaken the formidable task of charting “Avicenna’s Islamic reception” (chapter 10). His essay explains why Avicenna’s *Pointers and Reminders* – rather than his other books – became the principal object of commentaries. Table 10.1 on p. 194 lists more than thirty such commentaries written from the late 12th century on. As Wisnovsky convincingly argues, it is precisely because of its “compressed and opaque style” that this work allowed for “more interpretative freedom” and was thus more attractive to commentators (p. 199; cf. also Tony Street’s observation discussed above). The significance of this vast commentatorial tradition on the *Pointers and Reminders* – as well as of the reception of Avicenna’s *magnum opus*, *The Cure* – lies in the fact that these commentators developed an “Avicennian” philosophy (distinct from Avicenna’s own) by constantly revisiting Avicenna’s works and working out solutions for problems and inconsistencies inherent in his own system. To put it another way, Avicenna’s works offered a profoundly

influential and successful “scientific paradigm” (in Thomas Kuhn’s sense) for later generations of Muslim philosophers.

One particularly important aspect of Wisnovsky’s essay is his analysis of how such thinkers as al-Ghazālī, al-Suhrawardī, and Ibn ‘Arabī – often viewed as “mystics who departed radically from Avicenna’s philosophy” – fit *within* the Avicennian tradition. Thus, Wisnovsky argues convincingly (p. 206) that far from being merely a critic of Avicenna, al-Ghazālī played a significant role in “integrating core elements of Avicenna’s metaphysics and psychology into Sunnī theology and prophetology as well as into Sufi spirituality, and in appropriating the basic framework of Avicenna’s syllogistic into Sunn[il] jurisprudence.”² Al-Suhrawardī’s criticism of the Avicennian view that existence is “superadded” (*zā’id*) to quiddity is directed not so much against Avicenna himself, but against Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s Avicennianism, while al-Suhrawardī, in a sense, goes back to (a possible interpretation of) Avicenna’s own position. Most intriguingly, while Ibn ‘Arabī’s identification of God with “shared existence”³ collapses Avicenna’s sharp distinction between “existence with the stipulation of negation [of additions]” (God’s own existence) and “existence without the stipulation of affirmation [of additions]” (the shared existence), it is nonetheless grounded in, and only becomes intelligible against the backdrop of, Avicenna’s distinction.⁴

Gad Freudenthal and Mauro Zonta’s “The reception of Avicenna in Jewish cultures, East and West” (chapter 11) is a compressed version of their article “Avicenna among medieval Jews,” published in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* in 2012.⁵ Both versions of their study – the detailed and the compressed – represent the first ever attempt to systematically chart Avicenna’s influence in Jewish circles both in the Middle East and in Europe. In their contribution, they discuss separately Avicenna’s influence “amongst Arabophone Jews” and

² This is amply documented in my own study, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s Theory of Mystical Cognition and Its Avicennian Foundation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012).

³ i.e., existence in which existing beings participate – the *esse commune* of the Latin scholastic theologians.

⁴ On this distinction cf. Stephen Menn’s contribution, p. 167.

⁵ Gad Freudenthal and Mauro Zonta, “Avicenna among Medieval Jews: The Reception of Avicenna’s Philosophical, Scientific and Medical Writings in Jewish Cultures, East and West,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 22 (2012), 217-287.

“amongst Hebrew-writing Jews.” As is to be expected, Avicenna’s influence was also mediated through al-Ghazālī’s *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* and Hebrew translations of the latter. In the conclusion, Freudenthal and Zonta discuss the complex question of why Avicenna was so infrequently translated into Hebrew.

Unlike “Avicenna Judaicus,” “Avicenna Latinus” has, of course, been the subject of considerable research. Amos Bertolacci’s essay, “The reception of Avicenna in Latin medieval culture” (chapter 12), offers an extremely detailed and enlightening overview. Bertolacci shows that our knowledge of Avicenna’s influence upon Latin medieval culture is quite uneven, with some areas investigated much less carefully than others. He shows, for instance, that while the reception of Avicenna’s psychology (through the Latin translation of the psychological part of *The Cure*, the *Liber de Animā*) has been fairly well investigated, this is far from being the case with the reception of Avicenna’s metaphysics and the influence of the Latin translation of the metaphysical part of *The Cure*, the *Liber de Philosophia Prima*, especially in the crucial period before 1250.

It is unfortunate that one important aspect of Avicenna’s reception is completely neglected: the volume has no comparable study of Avicenna’s influence among Christians living *within* the Islamic world.⁶ It is completely silent on the significant Syriac reception of Avicenna – particularly on Bar-Hebraeus (d. 1286), whose major philosophical summa *The Cream of Wisdom* is modeled on Avicenna’s *The Cure* and who translated Avicenna’s *Pointers and Reminders* into Syriac.⁷

⁶ The same omission is noticeable in the otherwise excellent recent volume specifically devoted to Avicenna’s reception: Dag Nikolaus Hasse and Amos Bertolacci (eds.), *The Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin Reception of Avicenna’s Metaphysics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).

⁷ Under the somewhat cryptic alias of “B. al-‘Ibrī,” Bar-Hebraeus is included in the list of commentators on Avicenna (Table 10.1, p. 194). Curiously, however, on p. 193, this is said to be a list of *Muslim* philosophers and theologians; “B. al-‘Ibrī” is thus implicitly misidentified as a Muslim. On Bar-Hebraeus’ reception of Avicenna, see Hidemi Takahashi, “The Reception of Ibn Sīnā in Syriac: The Case of Gregory Barhebraeus,” in David C. Reisman and Ahmed H. Al-Rahim (eds.), *Before and After Avicenna: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Avicenna Study Group* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 249-281; Herman G. B. Teule, “The Transmission of Islamic Culture to the World of Syriac Christianity: Barhebraeus’ Translation of Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-iṣārāt wa l-tanbīhāt*. First Soundings,” in Jan J. van Ginkel, Hendrika L. Murre-van den Berg, and Theo M. van Lint (eds.), *Redefining*

Similarly, it does not explore Avicenna's influence upon such Arabic-writing Christian authors as the Nestorian Īshō'yahb bar Malkōn (d. 1246),⁸ the Copts al-Mu'taman ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. between 1270 and 1286),⁹ al-Ṣafī ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. between 1253 and 1275),¹⁰ and Ibn al-Rāhib (d. ca. 1290),¹¹ the Syrian Catholic patriarch Iṣḥāq ibn Jubayr (d. 1721),¹² and the Maronite scholar Buṭrus al-Tūlāwī (d. 1745)¹³ – to name just the most important figures who cite Avicenna's works. The subject of Avicenna's influence among Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians thus still awaits its researchers.

Another important dimension of Avicenna's thought that the volume, unfortunately, fails to cover – presumably because it is not included in the traditional Aristotelian curriculum – is Avicenna's soteriology and his views on the afterlife (*ma'ād*), which form part of his "metaphysics on the rational soul." Sporadic references to the afterlife are found, e.g., in Dimitri Gutas' contribution (pp. 39 and 42), but for a fuller account the reader has to go elsewhere – Jean (Yahya) Michot's *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne*¹⁴ or the relevant pages in Jon McGinnis' monograph on Avicenna.¹⁵ It is striking that Michot's

Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 167-184. Regrettably, Bar-Hebraeus' Syriac translation of Avicenna's *Pointers and Reminders* is still unedited.

⁸ Herman G. B. Teule, "A Theological Treatise by Īshō'yahb bar Malkon Preserved in the Theological Compendium *Asfār al-asrār*," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58/3-4 (2006), 235-252; cf. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* [=CMR], volume 4 (1200-1350) (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 12 and 332.

⁹ *CMR IV*, 533-534. Al-Mu'taman was possibly also the author of the Copto-Arabic polemical treatise *al-Sayf al-murbaf*, which also makes use of Avicenna – see *CMR IV*, 662-665.

¹⁰ *CMR IV*, 543.

¹¹ *CMR IV*, 478; Adel Y. Sidarus, "Les sources d'une somme philosophico-théologique copte arabe (*Kitāb al-Burbān* d'Abū Šākir ibn al-Rāhib, XIII^e siècle)," *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae* 17 (2010), 127-163, pp. 151-152.

¹² Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* [= *GCAL*], 5 vols., (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-1953), IV, 48-49.

¹³ Graf, *GCAL*, III, 394-400; Maroun Aouad and Hamidé Fadlallah, "Philosophes chrétiens de langue arabe aux XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles en Syrie et au Liban," *Parole de l'Orient* 34 (2009), 443-468, pp. 461-463; cf. the chart on p. 468.

¹⁴ Jean R. Michot, *La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: La retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination* (Leuven: Peeters, 1986).

¹⁵ Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217-221.

book is not even referenced in the bibliography of the present volume.

Minor inaccuracies that need to be pointed out include mistakes in transliteration (e.g., *ḥayāwaniyya* instead of *ḥayawāniyya* on p. 104, *mabdāʾ* instead of *mabdaʾ* on p. 130, al-Isfarāʾīnī instead of al-Isfarāʾīnī on p. 198, and *al-Adwiyya* instead of *al-Adwiya* on p. 219) and in Hebrew vocalization (*hā-bārîm* instead of *be-bārîm* and *derek* instead of *derekb* on p. 241), as well as some typos (Pourjavaday and Schmidke instead of Pourjavady and Schmidtke on pp. 219-220; the latter mistake has even crept into the bibliography at the end of the volume, p. 291). Though al-Ghazālī's *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* is based on Avicenna's Persian work *Dāneshnāme-ye 'Alā'ī*, it is somewhat misleading to describe it simply as an "Arabic translation" of the latter, without explanation or qualification (p. 69).¹⁶

Despite these minor deficiencies, however, the volume is unquestionably a treasure trove of information and a truly indispensable contribution to Avicennian studies. The editor, Peter Adamson, deserves the highest praise for publishing an enlightening and comprehensive handbook on Avicenna that will remain a fundamental point of reference for generations to come.

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¹⁶ For the actual relationship between the two works, see Jules Janssens, "Le *Dānesh-Nāme* d'Ibn Sīnā: Un texte à revoir?" *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 28 (1986), 163-177; reprinted in Jules Janssens, *Ibn Sīnā and His Influence on the Arabic and Latin World* (Ashgate: Variorum, 2006), Essay VII.

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