AVICENNA
(Great Medieval Thinkers Series)

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This book, written by Jon McGinnis, one of the eminent Avicenna scholars working in the field today, aims to give an introductory account of Avicenna's intellectual output. As part of the Great Thinkers Series, it is not intended to be a critical introduction, but rather a survey of Avicenna's work with a view to engage and entertain the reader. The book consists of ten chapters. The first chapter offers an historical account of Avicenna's life and intellectual milieu, which allows the reader to gain an understanding about the man himself, his main philosophical concerns, and the sources of influence that impacted upon him. In the rest of the book, McGinnis does not limit himself to the latter's strictly philosophical works, but also gives full treatment to his work in logic, natural science, psychology, value theory, medicine and the life sciences. A short, final chapter then provides an understanding of the key influences Avicenna had on later thinkers. Each area is studied and analyzed with great erudition and clarity by the author, noting especially Avicenna's groundbreaking departures from previous Greek and Arab thinkers. In all, such a book is rather rare andfills a gap in the English literate currently available on this key philosophical thinker.

McGinnis begins the first chapter by noting that the Greek scientific and philosophical curriculum taught at the academies in Athens and Alexandria were adopted and made the standard regimen of study for the Arab inheritors of philosophy. The curriculum is briefly outlined and explained, describing the reasons for its structure whilst also making note of some subtle interpretative changes that occurred through the Platonic and Neoplatonic phases of thought. For example, metaphysics, third in the curriculum and first envisioned by Aristotle as a science of being qua being, was shifted towards theology as the study of immaterial beings, and only access to Aristotle's original works would later make the initial intentions behind metaphysics clear to Avicenna. Next, McGinnis considers the

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reception and appropriation of this Greek scientific and philosophical tradition into Arabic, whilst considering the impact of the political situation within which this process was carried out. Alongside Greek, there were Persian and Indian sciences, backed with Arabic grammar and literature, Islamic law and speculative thought, which together combined to create the Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition within which Avicenna grew. The last section of the first chapter gives an interesting account of Avicenna's life, bearing testament to the intellectual brilliance and personal charisma that would be cause for an eventful life story.

The second chapter introduces Avicenna's work on logic, where McGinnis considers how Avicenna supports his scientific realism and theoretical foundation for the relation between logic and scientific enquiry. Here McGinnis details Avicenna's understanding of conceptualization, verification and his novel concept of essences, to help explain the how he believes logic plays a role in the acquisition of knowledge about the world. This chapter also sketches Avicenna's division of the natural sciences before then providing a rather detailed analysis of two key logical tools – namely, definitions and demonstrations – which Avicenna employed in the study of causes. For example, McGinnis provides a neat explanation of the role of definitions in Avicenna's physics, which are logical statements composed of a genus (*jins*) and strict difference (*fasl*), which together designate a thing's essence (*mahiyat*). For Avicenna, it is by ensuring that the logical order is accurately corresponded with the causal order that definitions correctly describe the true natures of things and can reliably serve in logical inferences. Then, in the last section of this chapter, McGinnis offers an informative examination of Avicenna's thoughts on the empirical methods used for gaining knowledge of definitions and the first principles of demonstrations.

Before going on to examine various matters proper to some of the physical sciences demarcated in chapter two, the next chapter focuses on Avicenna's consideration of the most general principles of things which are assumed by all the special physical sciences. McGinnis begins by examining Avicenna's presentation of the principles of nature, which are understood as the causes necessary for the existence of motion. This is then followed by a look at Avicenna's analysis of motion and the certain necessary conditions which the latter believed were essential to motion. These include place, void, time, and the continuum. A fine exposition of Avicenna's arguments against atomism follows, which was popular among the Islamic theologians of the time. The chapter then presents a brief yet illuminating analysis of Avicenna's theory of inclination (*mayl*) and the role it plays in his dynamics.

McGinnis then ends with an account of substantial change, the elements, and the point at which Avicenna's first introduces his 'Giver of Forms'.

The fourth chapter is the first of a two chapter presentation of Avicenna's psychology, which begins with a look at his consideration of the cause of the activities associated with living bodies. Due to the way Avicenna understands these actions, this initial study includes a discussion of the soul in addition to the life activities under consideration. Consequently, the next two sections present treatments of the vegetative soul and the animal soul respectively. The first is rather short owing to the fact that Avicenna's own account in this area is short, but the next section, which begins with a discussion of perception via the external senses – that is, hearing, sight, smell, touch, and taste – includes a particularly impressive treatment of Avicenna's theory of vision, and the role he assigned to light. McGinnis' examination then turns to the so-called internal senses identified by Avicenna, which include, for example, the acts of sensory perception that can take place without a corresponding externally sensible object. Such acts include remembering a past event, or imagining a future one, as well as dreaming of so far unperceived objects. The internal senses also include sensory acts of awareness regarding something that is not immediately perceived by the external senses, like, for example, awareness of the passage of time – for times' passing is neither directly seen, heard, or sensed in any other apparently direct fashion. In this section, McGinnis looks at the criteria that Avicenna uses to deduce his list of the various kinds of internal senses with especial focus upon the compositive imagination and cogitative faculty. By providing an understanding of Avicenna's conception of vision and light as well as the functions of the internal senses, McGinnis provides a good foundation for a look at Avicenna's account of the human intellect, its proper act of cognition, and his account of self-awareness, which are all the principle concerns of the next chapter in his book.

Though Avicenna divides the human intellect into a practical (*'aql 'amil*) and theoretical part (*'aql nazari*), due to the formers concern with bodily welfare and morality, McGinnis avoids a full treatment of the practical intellect until chapter eight (where he undertakes an examination of Avicenna's view on moral temperaments). Here, in the fifth chapter, McGinnis focuses on Avicenna's account of the theoretical intellect, which corresponds to the philosopher's own main concern in the final book of his psychology. This examination starts by presenting Avicenna's stages of intellectual development and continues by looking at the nature of the human theoretical intellect. McGinnis concentrates on Avicenna's arguments for the human intellects immateriality, temporal origination and its

immortality. This is followed by a discussion of the human intellect's relation to the Active Intellect and intellectual memory. The chapters on psychology then conclude with a discussion of self-awareness (*shu'ur bi-dh-dhat*) and Avicenna's naturalist account of prophecy.

McGinnis notes that with the introduction of the material intellect Avicenna moves beyond the science of physics (defined as the science of material bodies insofar as they are subject to motion) and into what he understands to be the science of Metaphysics, whose proper subject is 'existence qua existence'. After a helpful exposition of how Avicenna defines metaphysics against the definitions drawn by thinkers following Aristotle, McGinnis then goes on to explain how God's relation to the cosmos was generally understood by philosophers of the time. Here McGinnis concentrates on a number of central philosophical issues raised by Avicenna's predecessors, which he specifically attempted to address. These include the problem of how God could be both the final and efficient cause of the world and still be a simple entity. This section is then followed by a detailed analysis of Avicenna's theology, especially key areas such as his modal ontology, his proof for the Necessary Existent, and the divine attributes.

The next chapter, then, concentrates on Avicenna's cosmology, i.e. possible existents and the created order. Giving yet another account of the contemporary situation prior to Avicenna's arrival, McGinnis notes the difficulties that existed in attempting to make sense of Aristotle's arguments for the eternity of the world. Despite the damaging polemics laid against Aristotle's views by such commentators as the Christian Neoplatonist Philoponus, many of the philosophers writing in Arabic, including Avicenna, still maintained that the cosmos was eternal. Objections made against the arguments for eternity were acknowledged by many of the philosophers of the time, both those who regarded the cosmos as eternal and those that did not. Some of these objections identified a lack of demonstration in the arguments while others remarked that the claim for the eternity of the world contradicted long-held beliefs about infinity.

McGinnis examines how, both in his physics and metaphysics, Avicenna's attempts to counter this double pronged attack, by presenting an in-depth reading of Avicenna's conception of possibility and of what exists in itself with his most basic modes of possible existence (substances and accidents). A discussion of the formal and material causes is then followed by a look at Avicenna's notion of causality generally, which together provide an understanding of the nature of the realm of possible existents.

This chapter then finally concludes with a section on the Necessary Existent's relation to possible existenceas illustrated in Avicenna's novel Neoplatonic theory of emanation. In all, McGinnis explains how Avicenna's ontology is able to provide effective responses to the objections against eternity by offering variants of the classical proofs with new modal premises.

Chapter eight analyzes Avicenna's ethical and political theory, which concerns our ultimate destiny and the role of philosophy in achieving that end. To do this McGinnis reintroduces Avicenna's division of the intellect between practical and theoretical parts, looking at the formation of our moral temperaments and how they help us achieve our proper perfection. The formation of these temperaments, Avicenna holds, depends upon communal association which in turn is dependent upon the political organization of a society. It is here, in Avicenna's political theory, that we encounter the 'Prophet-Lawgiver' who McGinnis also examines. This is followed by a look at Avicenna's thoughts on the afterlife (*ma'ad*) and the likely fate of the individual according to how they lived in this world. Finally, McGinnis provides an account of Avicenna's understanding of providence and his treatment of the existence of evil in the world created by a wholly good God.

The final chapter concerns Avicenna's work in medicine and the life sciences. In this, the ninth chapter of the book, McGinnis explains the place Avicenna held medicine to have amongst the rest of the sciences. This is then followed by a presentation of the general principles of the humeral medicine Avicenna adopted with a discussion of his views about health and the causes of disease. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of Avicenna's views on embryonic development, and the debate as to whether this development occurs gradually or in stages. McGinnis relates this debate to the question of female contribution to the physical makeup of offspring that was being asked at the time.

The book then finally concludes with a discussion of Avicenna's legacy, which aims to give some idea of how wide and great an influence Avicenna had on the philosophical tradition after him. This is the shortest chapter of the book. It divides into two sections, one that concentrates on Avicenna's heritage in the world of Judeo-Islamic philosophical theology and the other in the Christian world of scholasticism.

Four appendices to the book each present a separate diagram that sketches the theoretical structure of one of four of Avicenna's key philosophical proofs, namely, the immateriality of the intellect, the incorruptibility of the intellect, proof for a necessary existent, and proof of a

material subject of philosophy. These act as good reference points to the reader which can help in understanding these areas of Avicenna's philosophy.

In sum, this book represents a significant contribution to the literature on Avicenna in the English language, each of the areas treated is carefully analyzed to explain in a concise fashion the background, theoretical underpinnings, and common structure behind much of Avicenna's philosophical and scientific output. It thus introduces the reader to the wide array of his work, and, by marking out especially those philosophical advances Avicenna made from Aristotle and other predecessors, brings into light his original and ingenious contributions to the school of philosophy and science that would impact so greatly both within and without the Islamic domains.