

TWO KNIGHTS OF ARABIAN THOUGHT

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(CONCLUSION)



THOUGH NOT A NATIVE ARABIAN, Ibn Roschd, better known among Christian philosophers as Averrhoes, was nevertheless an outstanding Arabian philosopher. Born of Andalusian parentage in 1126 A.D. at Cordova near Seville in southwestern Spain and naturally gifted with many intellectual talents, Averrhoes gave early indications that he would be the most gallant knight of Arabism in the west. He was a youth profound in thought and well-versed in the liberal arts. Having studied theology and jurisprudence, this Arab, who was eager for intellectual acumen, set out with all the confidence possible in the quest of knowledge in the sciences of medicine, mathematics, and philosophy. His success was greatest in philosophical endeavors. By performing the functions of judge and magistrate in his own locality for some time, Averrhoes became very adept at the art of pulling strings in the political game. Usually very diplomatic in his relations with the ruling class he soon found favor with the newly crowned calif, Abu Jacob Jusuf.

Abu, who was not unfamiliar with the philosophical problems of his time, appointed Averrhoes in 1163 to the gargantuan task of preparing an analysis of Aristotle's works. In truth this was a favor for Averrhoes whose veneration of Aristotle was unique. To this erudite Arabian the Stagirite was as an idol that merited supreme reverence and honor. He came close to deifying the Peripatetic, for he considered Aristotle the only one of the entire human race upon whom was divinely bestowed the sublime privilege of attaining to the zenith of perfection. The Stagirite, in the capacity of founder and perfecter of scientific knowledge, was worshipped by Averrhoes, as a renowned professional athlete would be hailed as a hero and model by young enthusiasts. His industry in this analytic project earned for him the title of Commentator par excellence. His literary works are as good in style as they are in quantity. Though Averrhoes perverted the Peripatetic tradition, the Angelic Doctor not infrequently throughout his works maintained that the words of the Commentator ought to be treated with utmost respect. For over thirty years Averrhoes very adroitly remained in favor. Suddenly his situa-

tion in politics became ominous. The tide of political favor soon overwhelmed him. Favor changed places with disfavor, praise with blame, honor with opprobrium. Somehow he had made an expensive and irrevocable mistake and as a result lost his influence. Charged with the crime of excessively cultivating ancient philosophy and science to the exclusion of Islam, and therefore guilty of bucking against the regal goad, our Arabian knight of philosophic thought was banished to Morocco by a special edict. Added to the disgrace of banishment was the public burning of his logical and metaphysical works. Weakened by years and disheartened by this exile, as opprobrious as that of treason, Averrhoes died in 1198 at the age of seventy-three. With his demise Arabian thought lost its driving power and began to decline. Arabism had lost its two great protagonists; but their influence was to live on for centuries.

Averrhoes' renown as a writer and philosopher originated not so much from his being so prolific and profound, as from his commentaries on the Stagirite which garnered for him the name, Grand Commentator. This reputation was recognized by all scholars. His commentaries were of three kinds: Minor or short analysis of the work itself, Middle or brief exposition of the text, and Major or a more extended explanation of the doctrine. This method of commentating was the model later utilized by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The great medieval work on therapeutics, *Culliyyat* or *Colliget* earned for him greater scientific fame. His original philosophical productions were not few in number. Among the more important of these productions is his refutation of Algazel's scepticism in the *Destructio Destructiois*. Besides this work, his tract on the Physics, two treatises on the union of the Active and Passive Intellects, a logical treatise on the Organon, as well as an opus on the harmonious agreement which ought to exist between theology and philosophy, manifest his assiduity in philosophical writing. Averrhoes also edited many works on medicine, and his astronomical dissertations on the Ptolemaic system are still extant in manuscript form and in a Hebraic translation at the Imperial Library of Paris. His candid criticism of the Ptolemaic system was that the actual state of reality and the system did not jibe perfectly. In the senile period of his life with the spirit of fun of a youthful prankster he held that the theory of epicycles and eccentricities was improbable; Averrhoes did this with the sole purpose of exciting young students to further investigation. His prestige in philosophy may be better grasped by a cursory examination of his own doctrines.

Though not at all opposed to religion or religious worship, and as

a matter of fact demanding that a philosopher should gratefully and tenaciously cling to the belief in which he had been reared, Averrhoes declared, nevertheless, that a philosopher's religion should be accommodated to his philosophy. According to him, philosophers ought to know God through his works, and this could be accomplished most effectively and efficiently by penetrating the depths of philosophical knowledge. In this accommodation theory of philosophy with religion is virtually contained the germ of the principle this Arabian knight so bravely propounded and defended. This is the principle of a two-fold truth, i.e. that a thing may be true in theology but untrue in philosophy, and vice versa. It is a perversion of the very nature of truth and a denial of first principles. His argument would be presented in this fashion. Religion has its special sphere in which the unschooled and unlettered masses are given or subjected to a symbolical knowledge of truth, but philosophy has its own sphere in which a chosen few intellectually grasp truth itself. And so his conclusion was that philosophy in the minds of the enlightened superseded religion. Yet he maintained firmly that religion ought not to be disdained nor worship be disparaged, for such were the only means by which the common people could attain truth. Such a rationalistic teaching lessens the dignity of a supernatural science which should transcend all the natural sciences. True religion is a real supernatural science and is the most direct path to Truth Itself.

Before we consider his major psychological doctrine, it seems feasible to mention a few of his other fundamental theses. He taught that between essence and existence in things created there is only a conceptual distinction, of which doctrine, Siger de Brabant, a well-known professor at the University of Paris in the time of the Angelic Doctor, was the most prominent medieval protagonist. According to Averrhoes, the principle of individuation was not matter signed by quantity, but rather the substantial form itself.

His major doctrine was monopsychism. This term is derived from two Greek words meaning "one soul"; monos—one, psuche—soul. The doctrine is better known as the unicity of the Intellect. This teaching of Averrhoes, so vigorously opposed by Thomas Aquinas and his Master, Albert the Great, in lectures and opuscula, held that there existed only one Intellect, which, common to all men, was temporarily particularized in each individual human being—and that each of its emanations is ultimately reabsorbed in the One Intellect which alone possesses immortality. Let us look at some of the devastating effects such a teaching would have on society. Personal immortality is denied absolutely to the individual; control over our in-

tellectual and corporeal actions is done away with; the vices of the wicked are excused (for they have no control) and the virtues of the saints are scoffed at; a Personal God is either a mental figment or a non-entity; free-will and liberty are just high-sounding phrases. Such a teaching is not consonant with, nor conformable to, the general tone of Aristotelianism. It is peculiarly Averrhoean and was taught in the schools for many centuries by Christian philosophers. So far from being rationally acceptable, this doctrine was also opposed to Faith and declared heretical. In 1256 Pope Alexander IV by a formal decree ordered Albert the Great to formulate a special treatise in opposition to this fallacious Arabian doctrine. This opusculum was entitled *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averrhoes*. Averrhoes maintained in support of his doctrine that the same substance was the Active Intellect (nous poietikos) insofar as it constructed forms and the Passive Intellect (nous pathetikos) insofar as it received forms. For the Averrhoean teaching on the nature of the Passive (Possible) Intellect we can do no better than go to the Angelic Doctor who was co conversant with Arabian doctrines. In Book the second, Chapter fifty-ninth of the *Summa Contra Gentes*,¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas states that Averrhoes held, "that the possible intellect, by which the soul understands, has a separate being from the body, and is not the form of the body." Since however such an intellect would nowise belong to us, nor should we understand thereby, unless it were in some way united to us, he defines the way in which it comes into touch with us (Comment. on 3 De Anima i., text 5.), saying that the species actually understood is the form of the possible intellect, just as the actually visible is the form of the visual power. Hence there results one thing from the possible intellect and the actually understood form.

Despite his philosophical tenets on the nature of the Intellect, in the religious belief of Averrhoes the individual human soul was possessed of and endowed with immortality. It is the same old story of the two-faced truth, for in his philosophical teaching the only conclusion was that the individual soul in itself was mortal and perishable. Like Avicenna this philosopher is guilty of leaving too many gaps and ruts on the road to wisdom; but we must remember that both of these Arabs did a praiseworthy job despite their many imperfections. Indeed the lacunae, which we have pointed out in their doctrines, do injure the whole system of Arabism, but they had no little influence on subsequent masters of thought and systems of philosophy.

For those who maintain that the influence of these Arabian phi-

¹ Translation of the Dominican Fathers of the English Province. Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London—1923.

losophers is of little or no import, how can such great effects, as we shall enumerate, be adequately to such insufficient causes? To lessen the influence of the Arabian knights of philosophy is to make the equation of cause and effect disproportionate. To put our case more clearly and more concretely, were not the Arabians a great driving power in causing many Neo-Platonic ideas and theories to seep into medieval philosophy; was not Arabism a potent factor in philosophy being revealed to western civilization? Again, if Arabism had very little effect on medieval thought, why was it condemned formally by dignitaries of the Church, save that Christians were tending toward those doctrines? Why was Arabian philosophy banned by special decrees from great universities of Christian Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? Would the great Angelic Doctor take these Arabian philosophers and their doctrines into consideration as frequently as he did, if they were as unimportant as some historians of philosophy would maintain? The true answers to these queries demand an adequate cause. Certainly such real effects were of grave importance to Christian philosophy and the Church itself. Besides these effects in those early centuries, Averrhoism flourished among Italian philosophers even to the close of the sixteenth century. Some say that Averrhoes was the original source of many doctrines of Duns Scotus and that Averrhoism has influenced in no small way the thought of Christian Europe down to the inception of the modern era.

Having explained and also refuted many Arabic doctrines in this paper, and having perused many of their own texts, we are convinced that they had an indirect positive and a direct negative influence on Christian philosophy. By direct negative influence we mean that their doctrines and theories were so opposed to Faith and irreconcilable with reality, that philosophers of all ages were shown the pitfalls to be avoided in any true Christian philosophy. Their indirect positive influence was that their tenets provoked speculative arguments and occasioned philosophical controversies. And thereby these knights of Arabism enabled other great thinkers, such as Albert the Great and Thomas of Aquino, with minds keener by nature and souls blessed by grace, to melt the dross of erroneous and distorted interpretation from this medieval Arabism, and simultaneously produce a richer and more correct system of thought based on a purer version of Aristotle. In this Golden Age of erudition, which witnessed the birth of Thomism, Aristotelianism was purged of its impurities by Christian thinkers with the cleansing waters of Christian thought.

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