

# 14 Averroes' *Decisive Treatise* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*) and *Exposition (Kashf)* as Dialectical Works

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A prominent feature of Averroes' most widely read work, the *Decisive Treatise* (*Faṣl al-maqāl*, hereafter simply *Treatise*),<sup>1</sup> is its distinction between three types of discourse: demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical.<sup>2</sup> This classification is, of course, based on Aristotle's logical works and corresponds to the sorts of argument discussed in the *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Rhetoric*, respectively. Averroes introduces it in order to show the harmony between religious revelation and philosophy. Both present their audience with truth, but philosophy does so by giving demonstrations that can be appreciated only by experts, whereas religion does so with dialectical and rhetorical proofs (see, e.g., *Treatise* 109). The fact that we can choose between these methods is a manifestation of divine providence. People are divided into three classes corresponding to the three kinds of discourse, and God has ensured that all three classes have access to the truths that everyone needs to accept.

It seems natural to ask which sort of discourse is being employed in the *Treatise* itself. Averroes gives no explicit indication toward an answer, but it would be rather disappointing if a work that is so conscious about registers of argument entirely lacked self-consciousness about its own argument. We can immediately exclude the possibility that the *Treatise* is demonstrative in character. Nowhere in its pages does Averroes offer a syllogism that would come close to satisfying the stringent requirements laid out in the *Posterior Analytics*. That leaves us with two options: the *Treatise* may be dialectical or rhetorical. In what follows, I am going to argue that it is a dialectical work, and quite deliberately so. Dialectic is the appropriate style of discourse for the occasion, namely the settling of a "problem" in the sense recognized in Aristotle's *Topics*. A "problem" (Gk.: *problema*, Ar.: *maṭlūb*) is a question to be answered by appealing to premises acceptable to the other side of a debate. Of course, the "problem" here is whether or not Islam requires the practice of philosophy, and, of course, Averroes answers this question in the affirmative.

This interpretation may seem unappealing, because in the *Decisive Treatise* itself, Averroes seems to have a rather negative attitude toward dialectic (*jadāl*). He associates it with the rationalist theologians of Islam, the *mutakallimūn*, and takes pride in distinguishing philosophy as a

demonstrative and not dialectical enterprise. But, as will emerge from an examination of the *Decisive Treatise* and a closely related work, the *Exposition of the Methods Used in Arguments Concerning Religious Doctrines* (hereafter simply *Exposition*), Averroes' critique of *kalām* is not simply that it is dialectical. Rather, he complains that the theologians make two mistakes: first, they offer dialectical arguments in the false belief that these arguments are demonstrative; second, and less obviously, they offer arguments that do not even rise to the level of successful dialectic. The theologians are "dialecticians" only in the sense that dialectic is the best we can hope from them, not in the sense that they are genuinely effective practitioners of the dialectical art. By contrast Averroes is, in his own estimation, an accomplished user of the tools described in Aristotle's theory of dialectical discourse.

### The Usefulness of Dialectic

Readers of the Arabic Aristotelian tradition could be forgiven for supposing that "dialectic" is a term of abuse. In the works of figures like al-Fārābī and Avicenna, "dialectical" tends to mean "merely dialectical." It refers to arguments that are suspect because they fall short of demonstration. But we should remember that Aristotle himself recognizes dialectic as an important and useful discipline. It is a familiar observation that Aristotle's own works look more like examples of dialectic than demonstrative science.<sup>3</sup> Later, Aristotelians also wrote self-consciously dialectical works on philosophical topics.<sup>4</sup> What then did Averroes think about dialectic? Fortunately, we are in a good position to know, because we have the two exegetical works that he devoted to Aristotle's *Topics*, the treatise of the Aristotelian organon dedicated to this art. These are a so-called "short commentary," or better "epitome," and a so-called "middle commentary," or better "paraphrase" (hereafter *Ep. Top.* and *Paraph. Top.*).<sup>5</sup> It emerges from these two works that Averroes has a good understanding of Aristotelian dialectic and an appreciation of its usefulness, including its usefulness for doing philosophy.

Fundamentally, dialectic is about debate. It presupposes a context in which a questioner is trying to refute an opponent. Dialectic is the "aptitude" (*malaka*) to produce such refutations (or, for the answerer, avoiding refutation), but without engaging in sophistry.<sup>6</sup> Dialectical arguments are not invalid, but they may be unsound. Dialectical arguments are sometimes made from false premises, and, even when they are true, this is merely accidental to their applicability in dialectic (*Ep. Top.* §4). Rather than truth, the characteristic of the dialectical premise is that it is "accepted" (*mashhūr*, cf. Gk.: *endoxon*) (see, e.g., *Paraph. Top.* §1.3). This does not, at least in the first instance, mean that it is broadly accepted by people in general, but that the opponent in the debate is bound to accept it. He may indeed do so because the premise is widely acknowledged. As

Averroes says, such a premise is “evident to all people or most of them, for there is no doubt [*shakk*] concerning it.”

But there are other kinds of dialectical premises:

*Paraph. Top.* §1.9 (cf. *Ep. Top.* §13): The dialectical premise is an accepted statement [*qawl mashhūr*] to which the questioner solicits agreement, in order to set up part of a syllogism. It has various types: first, those that are accepted by all, for instance that God exists, or accepted by most people without being rejected by the rest, or accepted by the scholars [*‘ulamā’*] and the philosophers [*falāsifa*] without being rejected by the masses, for instance what the sages think about the immortality of the soul, or accepted by most of the scholars without being rejected by the rest [of the scholars], or accepted by those possessed of insight and renown among experts [*ahl al-‘ilm*], without being an implausible opinion, that is, rejected by opinion of the masses.

The concept of doubt (*shakk*) is very important here. As the dialectical premise is distinguished by the opponent’s tendency not to doubt it, so the dialectical problem is one that *is* subject to doubt: “It is that whose truth is not known by itself in accordance with what is accepted [*mā lam yakun ma’lūman šidquhu bi-nafsihi bi-ḥasab al-mashhūr*]; instead, some doubt attaches to it as concerns what is accepted” (*Paraph. Top.* §1.10). If one tries to solve a dialectical problem by appealing to doubtful premises instead of acceptable ones, one has thus tried to solve a doubt by appealing to something doubtful. This is worse than pointless; it is sophistical, at least if one does so under the guise of presenting a proper dialectical argument: “Demonstrative syllogisms are from true premises, dialectical ones from accepted premises, and sophistical ones from premises which seem to be accepted but are not, or seem to be true but are not” (*Paraph. Top.* §1.11). A sophist may get away with this if his audience is not paying attention. But the skilled dialectician knows it is better not even to try. Doubtful premises tend to provoke “opposition” (*‘inād*), a problem that also befalls attempts to persuade through poetical and rhetorical devices (*Paraph. Top.* §1.2). And as soon as opposition is raised against a premise, it ceases to be dialectically useful (*Ep. Top.* §2).

Following the lead of Aristotle at *Topics* §1.2 (101a), Averroes identifies three contexts in which dialectic may be of use: “as practice [*riyāda*], in disputation with the many [*munāẓara al-jumhūr*], and for the theoretical sciences” (*Paraph. Top.* §1.2). Of particular importance to us is the second sort of application. It is obvious why dialectical arguments are useful for dealing with “the many” (I translate *al-jumhūr* this way because the underlying Greek in Aristotle is *hoi polloi*). A whole class of dialectical premises becomes “acceptable” because they are believed by all or most people. Lack of opposition, though not endorsement, from the masses is also used by Averroes to justify the inclusion of expert opinions among acceptable

premises (see the end of the longer quote just given above). You may wonder why a philosopher, at least one with the profoundly elitist attitudes expressed in Averroes' *Treatise*, would bother to dispute with the many. The answer is that there are some things that the many need to accept, including beliefs conducive to virtue and theoretical beliefs that have social or political importance (*Paraph. Top.* §1.2). Since the premises on which the dialectician draws may not even be true, the resulting cognitive state is mere "conviction" (*ẓann*), in contrast to the "certainty" (*yaqīn*) that is the hallmark of demonstrative arguments. But, for many purposes, this may be enough. In any case, it is often the best one can hope for, since, as we know from the *Treatise*, "the many" are not capable of appreciating demonstrative proofs.

### Dialectical Argumentation in the Decisive Treatise

But the audience of the *Treatise* is not "the many." Indeed, one might wonder whether any written text from this period could have had the *jumhūr* as its intended audience, literacy rates being what they were.<sup>7</sup> Rather, this is a juridical text, written "from the standpoint of the study of the religious law" (*alā jihat al-naẓar al-sharī*) (85). Averroes is writing for other jurists. This means that, if it is right to suppose that the *Treatise* operates at a dialectical level, we should expect it to argue from premises that would be "acceptable" to jurists, in the sense that they are bound to be endorsed by such readers. And this is exactly what we find. Take, for instance, Averroes' contention that philosophy has at least as good a claim to legitimacy as the study of the law:

*Treatise* 89: For, just as the jurist [*faqīh*] deduces, from [God's] command to engage in legal reasoning about judgments, the obligation to know the various sorts of juridical arguments, which of them constitute a [valid] argument [*qiyās*] and which do not, so in the same way the person of understanding [*al-ʿarīf*] must deduce, from the command to engage in reflection [*naẓar*] about existing things, the obligation to know the various sorts of intellectual argument. Or rather, this applies to him even more [*bal huwa aḥrā bi-dhālik*]. For, when the jurist deduces from His statement, may He be exalted, "reflect, you who have vision" (Q. 59:2), the obligation to know juridical argument, how much more worthy and appropriate is it for someone who understands God to deduce from this [verse] the obligation to know intellectual argument!

This kind of *a fortiori* argument appears repeatedly in the *Treatise*: whatever a jurist may say in his own defense will be at least as good a defense of philosophy. The judge who gets things wrong is still rewarded, and "which judge [*ḥākim*] is greater than the one who makes a judgment that being

[*wujūd*] is a certain way, or not? These judges are the scholars [*‘ulamā’*] God has entrusted with [allegorical] interpretation” (107). Or, closely thereafter (108), if the jurist needs to be qualified in order to exercise discretionary judgment (*ijtihād*), how much more would the “person who makes judgments about existing things” (*al-ḥākim ‘alā l-mawjūdāt*) need to be qualified by understanding intellectual principles?

Similarly, aspersions cast on the legitimacy of philosophy are not so much refuted as shown to apply equally to jurisprudence. For instance, philosophy is accused of being an “innovation” (*bid‘a*), on the basis that it was not practiced by the earliest Muslims. Instead of arguing that the accusation is misleading or irrelevant, Averroes counters with the observation that the early Muslims did not engage in jurisprudence either, yet we do not admit that it is an innovation (89). Likewise, while it is potentially true that the study of philosophy could corrupt some people, many jurists have also been corrupted by the study of the law (95). And again, one cannot complain of the philosophers’ resorting to allegorical interpretation, since the jurists do so as well (98). Loosely, one might describe all these arguments as *ad hominem*: Averroes is talking to fellow jurists and showing that Islamic law has no better claim to legitimacy than philosophy, or perhaps it has an even worse claim in light of the *a fortiori* arguments just considered.

More strictly, though, the arguments apply techniques described in Aristotle’s treatment of dialectic. Averroes is arguing “from the similar” (*min al-shabīḥ*), a strategy discussed in Aristotle’s *Topics* (*Paraph. Top.* §2.10). This means appealing to a similarity between two subjects to justify the transfer of a predicate from one of the two subjects to the other. An example given by Averroes in his *Paraphrase* is that since the king relates to the city as the navigator does to the ship, the king should not get drunk, since neither should the navigator. This is, of course, the pattern used in the arguments just mentioned from the *Treatise*. For instance, if the study of jurisprudence is licit despite sometimes corrupting the would-be jurist, then the same goes for the study of philosophy. Meanwhile, the *a fortiori* arguments about jurists and philosophers exemplify the next argumentative pattern or *topos* mentioned by Aristotle, the so-called “argument from more and less” (*min al-aqall wa-l-akthar*). Averroes says in his explanation of this *topos*:

If we find that a predicate applies to a subject, we may determine that what is all the more that subject has the predicate all the more, for instance, if pleasure is good, then what is more pleasant is more good.  
(*Paraph. Top.* §2.10; Aristotle gives the same example)

Compare the argument given in the *Treatise*: if jurisprudence is legitimate because it fulfills the Qur’ānic command to engage in reflection (a premise

any jurist is bound to grant), then philosophy, which is an even deeper sort of reflection, is even more legitimate.

Though these examples show Averroes appealing to assumptions that are acceptable to jurists, in particular, he does also make use of premises that are liable to be granted by everyone. When defending allegorical interpretation of the Qurʾān, he mentions a general agreement that allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) can be applied to the apparent meaning (*al-ẓāhir*) of Scripture. His phrasing here is significant: he says that “this is a determination that no Muslim doubts, and no believer questions” (98). The exclusion of doubt (*shakk*) is, as we saw, what makes such a premise dialectically acceptable. Here and in what follows, Averroes refers repeatedly to the idea of a consensus (*ijmāʿ*) concerning the use of allegory and to other matters of religion. Thus, he says that consensus is not certainly established with regard to theoretical questions, as it has been for some practical matters (99).

This may give rise to an objection to my reading of the *Treatise*, namely that I am confusing characteristically *legal* concepts and strategies with concepts and strategies that are at home in Aristotelian dialectic. It is quite clear in the passage just mentioned that Averroes is thinking of *ijmāʿ* as it was applied in Islamic law, since he discusses the problem of verifying the views of the *ʿulamāʿ* and even alludes to the possibility that their teachings may have been passed down by authoritative transmission (*tawātur*). Likewise, the strategy I described above as “argument from the similar” is highly reminiscent of the legal argument from analogy (*qiyās*), the classic example being that if a certain kind of wine (*khamr*) is forbidden because it intoxicates, then so too are other alcoholic beverages.<sup>8</sup> And there are other arguments in the *Treatise* that look straightforwardly jurisprudential. The best example is perhaps Averroes' argument that it is acceptable to make use of the teachings of non-Muslims (like Aristotle) on analogy to the use of an instrument owned by a non-Muslim in a sacrifice (91).

To this, I would reply that we cannot draw a strict contrast between dialectical and legal argumentation. The question of how jurisprudential reasoning fits into the framework of the Aristotelian organon is a complex one. On the face of it, it seems plausible to say that juridical arguments are typically rhetorical. Aristotle after all considers courtroom argument to be a kind of rhetoric, and Averroes follows him in this and has a good deal to say about law in his *Paraphrase of the Rhetoric*.<sup>9</sup> However, this has to do, in the first instance, with arguments given before a *qāḍī* or judge, with the aim to convince that judge (*Paraph. Rhet.* §1.3.1). In the *Treatise*, by contrast, Averroes *is* the judge who is passing down his decision on the status of philosophy. His role is not that of a legal advocate, but that of an interpreter of the religious law—hence the aforementioned remark at the start of the *Treatise* that it is written *ʿalā jihat al-naẓar al-sharʿī* (85). Later in the *Treatise*, we learn that for Averroes this sort of interpretation may be dialectical:

*Treatise* 117: In general, everything that is conveyed by these [Scriptural statements] is an interpretation that is grasped only through demonstration. So this interpretation is the duty of the experts [*al-khawāṣṣ*] in [demonstration]. The duty of the many is to take them in their apparent sense, and in two respects, namely in conception and in assent. For it is not in their nature to go further. Those who reflect on the Scripture [*al-sharīʿa*] may come upon interpretations because one of the common methods that yield assent predominates over the others. That is, if the indication [*dalīl*] offered by the interpretation is more fully convincing than the indication offered by the apparent meaning. These sorts of interpretation are appropriate to the many [*jumhūrī*], and it may be that they are a duty for those whose powers of reflection extend only to a capacity for dialectic [*al-quwwa al-jadaliyya*].

In what immediately follows, Averroes associates this kind of interpretation with the Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites, so one may suppose that his condescending final remark applies only to *kalām*. But he has already said numerous times that Islamic jurisprudence involves offering allegorical interpretation of the Scripture. This would explain why the *Treatise* adopts a dialectical, and not rhetorical, method.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Kalām* as Failed Dialectic**

Averroes' allusion to the *kalām* schools in this passage does, however, return us to a worry mentioned at the outset of this chapter. How can we believe that Averroes would deliberately choose to write dialectically, when he excoriates the theologians for doing precisely this? Part of the answer is that Averroes is willing to meet the theologians on their own ground: they argue from merely dialectical premises, and he responds in kind. This is how we may take the famous passage in which Averroes complains about al-Ghazālī's unwise decision to air matters appropriate for scholars in front of a wider audience. It was the resulting "notoriety" (*shuhra*: from the same root as *mashhūr*) that prompted Averroes' composition of the *Treatise*, which seeks to undo the damage done by al-Ghazālī's dialectic (114). But this already points us toward another and more interesting reason why Averroes would choose to write dialectically. He does so because *kalām* is not merely dialectical, but often engages in unsuccessful or incompetent dialectic. Averroes, by contrast, plays by the rules.

To understand this, we need to turn to the *Exposition*, which explicitly describes itself as a kind of sequel to the *Treatise*, and also describes itself as being motivated by the need to respond to al-Ghazālī (*Exposition* 185–86).<sup>11</sup> The *Exposition* confirms that *kalām* is an example of dialectic. At one point, Averroes seems to treat the two as near synonyms, saying that in between the many and the true scholars are people who are in a defective



state, namely “the adherents of dialectic and *kalām*” (*ahl al-jadal wa-l-kalām*) (181; cf. 159, which just calls the *mutakallimūn* the “dialecticians”). Earlier, he has gone so far as to lump the theologians in with the many, because they do not deal in demonstrative proofs. Yet, even here, they are singled out as dialecticians:

*Exposition 168:* By “the many” [*al-jumhūr*], I mean all those who do not devote themselves to the demonstrative arts, whether or not they have achieved the art of *kalām*. For it is not within the power of the art of *kalām* to arrive at this degree of knowledge, since the most adequate rank of the art of *kalām* is dialectical, not demonstrative, wisdom [*ḥikma*].

He also mentions that, in what the Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites say, “there is a true part and a false part” (165). We can take this as a reminiscence of an observation, made in his epitome of Aristotle’s *Topics*, that dialectical premises are a mix of the false and the true (*Ep. Top.* §4, cited above).

But, as this reminds us, a dialectician may quite legitimately make use of false premises, so long as the premises are “accepted.” It is really on the latter point that *kalām* fails. It seems that the Ash‘arites may have *tried* to use commonly acceptable premises, given that they “take their start from prima facie opinion [*min bādi’ al-ra’y*], namely beliefs that people have when they first start to consider something” (204). But all too often, the premises used in the Ash‘arites’ standard arguments are subject to “doubt” (*shakk*), which as we saw is exactly the criterion that disqualifies a premise from being suitable for a dialectical syllogism. This criticism of being “doubtful” is applied, for instance, to the claim that there are atoms (139), and to al-Juwaynī’s assumption that the features of the world could be different and thus must be contingent (145). Another locution used to make the same point is that a premise is “not evident” (*ghayr bayyan*), as for instance the Ash‘arite claim that anything willed must be temporally originated (148).

The result of this is not merely that a skilled philosopher like Averroes can see through the theologians’ arguments, diagnosing them as non-demonstrative. It is also that the arguments are ineffective for convincing normal people:

*Exposition 138:* The methods that these people use in [proving] the createdness of the world combine two features: namely that the many are incapable of receiving [*qubūl*] them, and at the same time, that they are not demonstrative. So they are befitting neither for the scholars nor for the many.

Again, regarding the Ash‘arite assumption that an infinite series of events is impossible:



*Exposition* 144–45: The things certain people have supposed to be demonstrations about these topics are not in fact demonstrations, nor are they statements appropriate for the many.

And again, regarding an Ash‘arite argument for the uniqueness of God:

*Exposition* 158: Its not working in accordance with nature is because what they say about this is not a demonstration, and its not working in accordance with religion is because the many cannot understand what they are saying, never mind their being convinced by it!

In technical terms, he means that the *kalām* arguments are not apt to elicit “assent” (*taṣdīq*). In this respect, the theologians’ claims are less effective than the surface meaning of religious texts (*al-ẓawāhir al-shar‘iyya*) which do produce assent (174). This may be why Averroes hints, at one point, that the theologians would have done better to stick with merely *rhetorical* arguments. At least these would be persuasive! This suggestion comes in his discussion of al-Juwaynī’s aforementioned claim that God could have made the world differently. Averroes allows that this might qualify as a good rhetorical premise, since it would convince the many. Even this grudging concession is revoked immediately, though. Averroes adds that the premise undermines God’s perfection as designer of the universe, for which reason it shouldn’t be put before the many (146).

As with the comments about *kalām* in the *Treatise*, this hardly looks like an advertisement for dialectic. One might suppose, especially given Averroes’ harsh words about al-Ghazālī, that he would disapprove of any use of dialectical argumentation concerning religious beliefs, whether or not the dialectic is carried out competently. In fact, though, a closer look at the *Exposition* shows that Averroes himself makes use of self-consciously dialectical argumentation. In a sign that the intended audience of the *Exposition* may be wider than that of the audience envisioned for the *Treatise*, he sometimes says that his own premises are bound to be accepted by all people, and not just one group (like the jurists addressed in the *Treatise*). There is a particularly striking example early in the *Exposition*, which mentions that “all Arabs acknowledge the existence of the Creator” (136), striking because it is an accepted belief we also saw being cited in Averroes’ paraphrase of the *Topics* (§1.9). On the other hand, the remark comes within a summary of the views of the *hashwiyya* rather than of Averroes’ own position, so it doesn’t really prove that Averroes wants to base himself on accepted beliefs.

There is, however, ample evidence of this in other passages, where Averroes is indeed presenting his own views. In the midst of his treatment of the question whether God can be said to have a “spatial direction” (*jīha*), he says, “all the philosophers [*ḥukamā*] agree that God and the angels are in heaven, just as all religions agree to this” (177). In the terms

of his paraphrase of the *Topics*, this would be a thesis accepted both by “the scholars” and by “the many.” Though it may raise an eyebrow to see Averroes ascribing this particular notion to the philosophers, he actually has good grounds for doing so. In a rather puzzling passage at the end of *Physics* book 8 (267b), Aristotle says that the Prime Mover is “in the circle” (*en kuklōi*), usually taken to mean “at the circumference of the celestial sphere.”<sup>12</sup>

One of Averroes' favorite ways of describing such accepted premises in the *Exposition* is to say that they are rooted in human “instinct” or “in-born disposition,” in Arabic *fiṭra*. This is an idea familiar from the Islamic tradition, most famously in the *ḥadīth* that states, “every newborn is born according to *fiṭra*, but his parents turn him into a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian.”<sup>13</sup> Averroes applies this to the premises invoked by his own favored proofs for God's existence, namely that the universe is designed with the welfare of humans in mind, and shows other signs of providence, as for instance the cunningly designed organs of animals. Unlike the *kalām* arguments for the same conclusion, these arguments can be generated from premises accepted by all. Thus, the second argument is built on “two principles that are potentially available [*mawjūd*] in all human instincts [*fiṭar*]” (152). That Averroes understands this in terms of the dialectical theory from the *Topics* is proven by a passage at *Exposition* 155, which again mentions *fiṭar al-nās* and then explains that his methods of proof are appropriate to both the “elite” (*khawāṣṣ*) and “the many” (*jumhūr*), with the elite simply understanding them in fuller detail (*tafṣīl*).<sup>14</sup>

Another locution favored by Averroes when emphasizing the “acceptability” of his premises, so sorely lacking in the assumptions made by the theologians, is “known in itself” (*ma'rūf bi-naṣīhi*). Truths said to be “known in themselves” include the impossibility of a single city being ruled harmoniously by two rulers (156), that the earth was made to give humans a place to live (197), that justice is good and injustice bad (235), and that it is better to have a greater good and less evil than no good at all (238). At first glance, it might seem that Averroes wants more than dialectical acceptability in such passages. Isn't a premise that is “known in itself” suitable for use even in proper demonstrations?

Not necessarily. We have already seen him use the phrase “known by itself in accordance with what is accepted” (*mā ma'lūm [ . . . ] bi-naṣīhi bi-ḥasab al-mashhūr*) in his paraphrase of the *Topics* (*Paraph. Top.* §1.10, cited above). Here in the *Exposition*, too, something that is “known by itself” is apparently the same as that which is “accepted.”<sup>15</sup> Consider the following passage, which concerns the existence of prophets:

*Exposition* 216: The existence of those who are called messengers and prophets is known by itself [*ma'rūf bi-naṣīhi*] [ . . . ]. For their existence is denied only by those who deny the existence of things depending on testimony, for instance the existence of other kinds of things we

have not witnessed, or people famous for their wisdom, etc. For the philosophers and all people [*al-falāsifa wa-jamī‘ al-nās*], except for those whose claims are insignificant, namely the *dahriyya*, agree that there are individuals who have been given revelation.

Here again, we have the appeal to both scholarly and popular opinion, and even the exclusion of skeptics about testimony and materialists or eternalists (*dahriyya*), groups that fall outside the pale because of their paradoxical teachings. I use “paradoxical” in the sense used in the *Topics*: these groups explicitly reject what is *endoxon*, that is, generally acceptable. The premise Averroes is asserting here—that there do exist people who have received a revelation—is then joined to another premise, namely that whoever brings a religious law is such a prophet. This second premise is something “about which there is no doubt in human instinct” (*ghayr mashkūk fī l-fiṭar al-in-sāniyya*). On this one page of the *Exposition*, Averroes uses nearly all the terminology that flags dialectically acceptable premises.

Let us now repeat a remark made by Averroes when paraphrasing the *Topics*: “dialectical arguments are from accepted premises, and sophistical ones from premises which seem to be accepted but are not, or seem to be true but are not” (*Paraph. Top.* §1.11). Applying this to what we have seen in the *Exposition*, we can say that, strictly speaking, it is Averroes who argues as a dialectician. The theologians are really arguing like sophists, because they fail to base themselves on premises that are accepted. Why then does Averroes label the theologians as dialecticians? The answer may lie in another remark we have already quoted above: “the most adequate rank [*aḡhnā l-marātib*] of the art of *kalām* is dialectical, not demonstrative, wisdom” (*Exposition* 168). I take this to suggest that the theologians may in principle aspire to do dialectic according to the rules, and may manage to do this much of the time despite the criticisms made in the *Treatise* and *Exposition*. When, for example, Averroes lambastes al-Ghazālī for arguing “dialectically” in the *Incoherence*, he may well mean that his arguments really are dialectically sound—that is, based on premises that are accepted, if not necessarily true. Whether a given *kalām* argument meets this standard, or instead falls into sophistry, will have to be decided on a case-by-case basis.

### Averroes the Dialectician and Philosopher

The general point in any case is that dialectic is the best we can hope for from the *mutakallimūn*, and it is in light of this highest attainment that they are labeled as dialecticians. The same reasoning can of course be used to explain why Averroes is not eager to style himself as a dialectician, even if he is well aware that the arguments he offers in the *Treatise* and *Exposition*

are dialectical in character. Averroes can do dialectic and do it right, but he can do better still if the context is appropriate. He is a philosopher and would be able to offer demonstrative arguments for the things he here establishes non-demonstratively. This is what lies behind the somewhat enigmatic remark in the *Exposition* that “the elite” understand providential design in greater depth than “the many,” even though both can use these proofs to show the existence of God (155). The philosophers are able to produce versions of these same proofs that go back to genuinely apodeictic premises, rather than premises that are merely accepted, on the basis of their detailed understanding of nature. For instance, the philosopher could explain exactly how a certain organ is well-designed to promote well-being in a given animal species, on the basis of the species' essential features. Here, of course, Averroes will be thinking of Aristotle's *Parts of Animals*, but also Galen's *On the Usefulness of the Parts* and its lengthy paean to the providence of nature.

If this is right, then the arguments found in these two works may be dialectical, but they need not be “merely” dialectical. Much as the philosopher is in a position to separate true interpretations of Scripture from false ones, he would be able to choose dialectically effective arguments that have true premises and conclusions. As Averroes says in the epitome of the *Topics*, truth is “accidental” to premises insofar as they are dialectical (§4). But then it is also accidental to a syllogism, insofar as it is dialectical, that it is being given by a philosopher. Whether Averroes has always been careful to select true premises in the *Treatise* and *Exposition* is something we could decide only through a close comparison of these premises to the views set forth in the properly scientific works, that is, the commentaries on Aristotle. But we should be careful not to leap to the assumption that Averroes is hiding his true convictions, simply because he is arguing dialectically.<sup>16</sup> To the contrary, he is presumably doing what he describes when summarizing the *Topics*: using dialectic to refute opponents who teach falsehoods and to argue for true beliefs that are useful for everyone to accept, such as the existence of God and the compatibility of philosophy with Islam, all in a way appropriate for a broad, non-philosophical audience. Insofar as the conclusions and perhaps even the premises of his arguments are true, there will be no clash between the teachings of these dialectical works and the deliverances of Aristotelian science. After all, truth does not contradict truth.

### Acknowledgments

My thanks to audiences at the University of Erlangen and LMU Munich for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

## Notes

- 1 I cite by page number from the following Arabic edition: Averroes, *Faṣl al-maqāl*, ed. Jābirī. There are numerous English translations: e.g., Averroes, *On the Harmony*, ed. Hourani; Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, trans. Butterworth. All translations from the *Treatise* and other texts are my own.
- 2 One could hardly choose a more appropriate topic for this tribute to Richard C. Taylor, since he has contributed some of the most insightful studies of the *Decisive Treatise* and the issues it raises for his philosophical stance as a whole. See, for instance, Taylor, “Truth Does Not Contradict Truth”; Taylor, “Ibn Rushd/Averroes”; Taylor, “Averroes on the *Sharī‘ah*.”
- 3 On this question see, e.g., Barnes, “Aristotle and the Methods of Ethics”; Irwin, *Aristotle’s First Principles*; Smith, “Aristotle on the Uses of Dialectic.”
- 4 See Adamson, “Dialectical Method.”
- 5 For the terminology concerning these types of exegetical work, see Gutas, “Aspects of Literary Form.” For an Arabic edition and English translation of *Ep. Top.*, see Averroes, *Averroes’ Three Short Commentaries*, ed. Butterworth; for the Arabic of *Paraph. Top.* I have used Averroes, *Talkhīṣ mantiq Aristū*, ed. Jihāmī, both cited by section number.
- 6 The term *malaka* is used at both *Ep. Top.* §21 and *Paraph. Top.* §1.1.
- 7 Having said this, Averroes seems to worry that literary productions can reach the many, given his criticism of al-Ghazālī for airing controversial questions and corrupting his readers in a misguided attempt to make them “knowledgeable people” (*ahl al-‘ilm*) (113). See further below on the *Treatise* as a response to al-Ghazālī.
- 8 On the question of how the legal sense of *qiyās* (“analogy”) relates to the logical sense of *qiyās* (“syllogism”), see Bou Akl, “Averroes on Juridical Reasoning.”
- 9 See Averroes, *Averroès (Ibn Rushd): Commentaire moyen*, ed. Aouad. My thanks to Rotraud Hansberger for discussion of the following point.
- 10 At one point, Averroes explicitly reflects on the sort of discourse he himself is using in the *Treatise*. Having given a comparison between the legislator and a doctor, Averroes comments that the analogy (*tamthīl*) might seem to be “poetic” but is in fact “certain” (*yaqīn*), because it accurately portrays two kinds of relation: that of the doctor to the body and that of the legislator to the soul (*Treatise*, 121).
- 11 References are to Averroes, *al-Kashf*, ed. Qāsim. English version in Averroes, *Faith and Reason*, ed. Najjar.
- 12 On the history of this exegetical problem, see Adamson and Wisnovsky, “Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī.”
- 13 For this and further references, see Griffel, “Al-Ghazālī’s Use.”
- 14 Again, one might wonder whether it is really fair to ascribe these arguments to the philosophers. But the idea of design in nature, and anthropocentric design in particular, can be plausibly ascribed to Aristotle. See Sedley, “Aristotle’s Teleology.”
- 15 In addition to the example that follows, this is shown by a passage at *Exposition* 172, which discourages non-scholars from inquiring into God’s corporeality, since the issue is “not even close to being self-evident” (*laysa huwa qarīban min al-ma‘rūf ni-nafsīhi*). In other words, it is a matter concerning that for which we have no access to accepted premises, such as those which are useful for arguing with the many.
- 16 Indeed, he says in *Paraph. Rhet.* (§1.1.18–19) that even though both dialectic and rhetoric can be used to argue on either side of an issue, arguments based on true premises are superior.

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