

Jon McGinnis

Avicenna.

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Avicenna is one of the most important and influential thinkers in the medieval period, yet few monographs devoted to his systematic philosophy exist. Given his lasting contributions to the fields of metaphysics, modality and logic, optics, cognitive psychology, philosophical theology and medicine—all making for treasure-trove of material to be mined—one would expect a wealth of publications introducing readers to his thought. It is surprising, then, that few monographs devoted to his systematic philosophy exist: Lenn Goodman's *Avicenna* (1992) is the only work of this kind published in English in the last 40 years. So it is welcome news that Oxford University Press has released a book in its 'Great Medieval Thinkers' series by Avicenna scholar, Jon McGinnis, that is devoted to introducing Avicenna's thought to new readers.

Unlike some books on philosophers from history, *Avicenna* does not dwell on detailing individual arguments or assessing the merits or weakness of its subject's position; nor does it track the evolution of Avicenna's thought over time. Instead, the book's focus is on explaining Avicenna's philosophy as it is found in his encyclopedic work, *The Cure (al-Shifa')*. And for this, entrants into Avicenna's thought should be thankful, for this focus allows McGinnis not simply to lay out the conceptual terrain and presuppositions that facilitate an understanding of specific aspects of Avicenna's philosophy, but also to appreciate the systematic nature of his thought.

McGinnis divides his book into ten chapters. There is an introductory chapter on Avicenna the man and his historic-cultural context; one on Avicenna's logic and its relation to science; a chapter devoted to natural philosophy; two chapters on psychology; two on metaphysics; and then three shorter chapters on value theory, medicine, and Avicenna's historical impact, respectively. Rather than focusing on each topic in isolation from the others, McGinnis sets up his book in such a way that each chapter builds upon material introduced in previous sections. Given the challenging and often alien material confronting the reader uninitiated in this period (e.g., the Active Intellect and its role in intellectual perception), this approach is not without danger. However, McGinnis routinely and unobtrusively reminds his reader of the relevant bits required to proceed, and he often supplies cross-references, comments and diagrams in footnotes or appendices that illuminate his discussion.

Following a brief background on Avicenna's life, the book begins by introducing Avicenna's view on the relationship between logic and science. It is in the early stages of

explaining this relationship that McGinnis introduces Avicenna's peculiar doctrine of common natures. Briefly, Avicenna believed that the natures or essences shared by objects have both a mental and concrete aspect. For example, humanness can either be represented mentally as a specific (*species*) concept, or be realized in an individual thing, e.g., a particular human. What links our specific concept of humanness with the humanness of the individual is something neither conceptual nor concrete: it is an essence in itself, i.e. humanness in itself. By adopting a view of common natures that admits of essences in themselves, Avicenna has an (unusual) ontological basis for grounding logic and science as mutually informing enterprises. What makes this important is that Avicenna views scientific inquiry as the study of causes and their interrelations, where causes are themselves natures realized in concrete things. Since logic appeals to these same natures in its construction of definitions (e.g., all humans are rational), scientific inquiry can verify or falsify these definitions, while logic can provide certain knowledge of the world by constructing syllogisms grounded in known principles and verified definitions. With this relationship noted, McGinnis proceeds to explain both Avicenna's method of inquiry, one that—despite its bent for certainty—is firmly rooted in empirical investigation, and how it is applied throughout Avicenna's work.

Once the discussion of methodology is complete in Chapter 2, McGinnis takes up Avicenna's natural philosophy. While the primary focus of this chapter is Avicenna's explanation of motion, it unveils Avicenna's views on time, the (non-)existence of a void, his rejection of atomism, his explanation of substantial change, and his theory of dynamics (or as he calls them inclinations). As is characteristic of each major chapter in his book, McGinnis introduces primary texts from Avicenna to inform his presentation, and generally he follows up with an interpretation of the text. McGinnis presents the reader with many of the important arguments Avicenna uses to establish his positions, though often these arguments are not subject to critical appraisal—a decision that is sensible given the book's task. But what is particularly notable about this and other chapters is that McGinnis seamlessly weaves background knowledge into his presentation that is helpful to the novice and initiated reader of Avicenna alike. For example, in his discussion of the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) and their role in explaining the natural inclinations of objects and substantial change, McGinnis provides just enough information on elemental theory so that readers understand both its applicability to physical theory and the role elemental change plays in producing a change in kind. So, for instance, we learn that possessing certain kinds of elemental (material) properties is necessary for a material object's being receptive to a certain kind of (immaterial) form—a form that makes it the kind of thing it is—and that once the elements' properties combine, substantial change is instantaneous. Much more could be said about the four elements in this chapter, but McGinnis wisely holds off until such information is necessary, e.g., in the chapters on psychology, when the elements are necessary for explaining the receptive and retentive abilities of the internal senses.

Avicenna's psychology is divided into two chapters. Chapter 3 focuses on the

nature of souls and the internal senses, while Chapter 4 explores the nature of the intellect, including how humans are capable of intellectual perception and how prophecy is possible. Among the topics treated in Chapter 3 are Avicenna's division of souls, how souls come into being, and the powers possessed by each of the three different kinds of soul. (Note that for Avicenna, like many of his predecessors, souls were not automatically assumed to be immaterial, but rather, where a soul is initially understood as the animating principle or cause of a living body, not necessarily as some immaterial substance.) Here, substantial coverage is given to the powers of the human soul as they pertain to the material aspect of human beings, namely, (a) the faculties rooted in sensory perception, i.e., the common sense, the retentive imagination, the compositive imagination, the estimative faculty and memory, and (b) the capacities of the five external senses to obtain the relevant sense data needed by those faculties. In addressing '(b)', McGinnis provides a brief but illuminating account of the dominant theories of optics and light, theories have important implications both for his account of sensory perception as well as for his account of the way in which the Active Intellect makes intellectual perception possible for human beings. McGinnis shows how Avicenna argues against and replaces those theories with his own. Chapter 4 continues the exploration of Avicenna's psychology by examining a multitude of topics related to the human intellect, though the focus is primarily on the psychological processes by which humans can obtain rational understanding—the kind of understanding which forms the basis of scientific knowledge for Avicenna. Readers are acquainted with the nature and origin of the immaterial intellect, and with how it is capable, with assistance from an individual's material perceptual faculties and the Active Intellect (or as McGinnis often calls it, after Avicenna's own terminology, 'The Giver of Forms'), of achieving intellectual perception. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Avicenna's explanation of how prophecy is possible.

The last major section of the book is in Chapters 5 and 6, which take up issues in metaphysics. The general subject of Chapter 5 is Avicenna's philosophical theology, where we encounter Avicenna's influential modal proof for the existence of God, a section on the divine attributes, and finally a section on how Avicenna's God is capable of knowing particulars while preserving divine simplicity. Given both the richness of the source material in Avicenna on these issues and their lasting influence, one might walk away from this chapter wishing that there was more depth of coverage in each of these sections—a feeling that is amplified, perhaps, by the fact that, unlike the chapters on psychology, natural science and logic, many readers will have some familiarity with this part of Avicenna's thinking. Nonetheless, McGinnis' method of coverage is a wise choice, as a deeper discussion would defeat the volume's overarching purpose of the volume of providing an uncomplicated but informative introduction to Avicenna's thought. And McGinnis, as he does elsewhere, guides the reader to secondary literature for further enrichment.

The subject of Chapter 6 is cosmology, a difficult aspect of Avicenna's thought but one made substantially easier by the groundwork McGinnis lays in previous

chapters. Avicenna's emanationist views of creation and of the eternity of the world are the primary topics under review, and readers are treated to several arguments in this section showing Avicenna's ingenuity and foresight (particularly on infinity).

The final three chapters are not inconsequential but clearly seem to be the least important to the book—indeed, excepting the introduction they are the shortest in the volume. Nonetheless, the chapter on medicine is quite enlightening and fits well with earlier discussions in the natural philosophy section, and the chapter on value theory identifies areas within Avicenna's thought that produced potentially controversial conclusions for Muslims and how he avoided them. The last chapter does seem a bit of an afterthought, as it contains no more than a quick summary of Avicenna's impact on philosophy; but it does at least give the reader a sense of how Avicenna's ideas were picked up by and influenced medieval thought.

In sum, McGinnis' *Avicenna* is a boon to those interested in becoming acquainted with this rich, complex, and challenging thinker. It is a worthy addition to the 'Great Medieval Thinkers' series.

Jonathan Evans

University of Indianapolis