

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) of Cordoba

Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle.

Translated by Richard C. Taylor; co-edited by Richard C. Taylor and Thérèse-Anne Druart.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2009.

560 pages

US\$85.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-300-11668-7)

Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* is a notoriously forbidding work: time and again, it has proved remarkably troublesome to translate or even to understand. The problems begin with the Greek, which is corrupt and laden with interpretive landmines all the way. There simply is no way of reading the text without at the same time assuming one side or another regarding questions of crucial philosophical importance. Matters are not aided by the quality, or lack thereof, of Aristotle's prose, which is at its most crabbed and elliptical here. Add to this the fact that the nature of the soul was one of the touchiest issues standing between the Peripatetic and Platonic traditions, whose fortunes nonetheless were for a long time intertwined, and it is no wonder that the correct interpretation of *De anima* has vexed the minds of commentators over the course of two millennia.

In this tangled history of its reception, Averroës' (Abû al-Walîd Ibn Rushd, 1126-1198 CE) *Commentary on De anima* enjoys a prominence shared only by a handful of other works: Alexander's, Themistius', Avicenna's (of whom, incidentally, none bequeathed us an extant full commentary). There is something curious about this, inasmuch as Averroës' influence on the Arabic philosophical tradition was negligible, and considering also how his appreciative Hebrew audience generally preferred Averroës' *Paraphrases*, or middle commentaries, to the longer text-and-commentary works. Where Averroës' *Commentary* exercised the greatest influence was in the Latin world, beginning with the 13th-century rush to assimilate and absorb Aristotelian doctrine as quickly as possible. It is Michael Scot's Latin translation of the *Commentary* that provides the basis for the English rendition offered here.

One of the great advantages of Richard Taylor's work is that it does not stop with Crawford's established Latin text from 1953. Rather more ambitiously, Taylor has endeavored to digest and to incorporate the findings of the French scholars who are presently working on the extant Arabic fragments of Averroës' work. In addition, Taylor has brought to bear on his translation all that we know now concerning the Arabic translations of Aristotle's *De anima* and the corpus of texts that formed around it. The end result is an almost impossibly rich work of scholarship, one whose contours yield insights on every page and in every footnote.

And a lot of footnotes there are. In line with the sometimes rococo practices of scholastic studies, these can eat up the better part of a printed page. The resulting layout looks intimidating on occasion, but does not really detract. Besides, short of a hypertext edition, there really is no other way to convey this amount of information, as Taylor's manifest ambition is to make all his translation choices as transparent as possible and he is willing to go to quite extraordinary lengths in order to accomplish this goal. Taylor

cross-references everything from Aristotle's Greek and the two Arabic versions that Averroës had in front of him, through the works of Alexander and Themistius that he used plus *their* Arabic renderings, to any passages in Averroës' *Paraphrase* and *Compendium* that might elucidate what the Commentator is getting at. This does not yet count the constant citations from the Arabic fragments and the Latin text itself (which Taylor follows for the most part, though not slavishly), nor does it include the references Taylor makes, e.g., to al-Fârâbî and to Ibn Bâjja in order to throw light on the background problems with which Averroës was trying to grapple when composing the *Commentary*. The amount of information on display here is quite simply exhausting.

All this makes for an extraordinarily helpful tool for study and scholarship. Even where one disagrees with Taylor's readings, one always knows where he stands and why. Following on the heels of Alfred Ivry's equally excellent edition and translation of Averroës' *Middle Commentary* (Brigham Young University Press 2002) we may indeed be headed for a new bloom in Averroës studies, particularly as it relates to his psychology—this time, one that pays heed in equal parts to the Greek and Arabic road that led to Averroës and the Hebrew and Latin paths that start with him. One of the salutary effects these new translations may have is a lessening of emphasis on the ages-old chestnut of the status of the material intellect in Averroës, and a renewed attention to Averroës' teaching concerning the sensitive soul.

In this regard it must be said that the translator's Introduction is less than helpful. Taylor's substantive points all have to do with the doctrine of the intellect, which is such a well-worn topic that one would rather wish for pointers towards the other ample materials that have been studied much less but are no less interesting for it, for instance, the account of spiritual intentions that so dominates Averroës' account of perception. (This is not to gainsay the value of what is on offer: the Introduction constitutes Taylor's most thorough statement yet concerning Averroist intellection, a topic on which Taylor has laboured for decades.) Perhaps the Arabic division of Aristotle's work, which has the intellect form the sole subject of Book Three and therefore leads one to view it as the treatise's culmination, did indeed steer Averroës in the direction of a more anthropocentric and intellectualist reading than is currently the custom. But even this does not change the fact that there is much in Averroës to enjoy irrespective of such concerns. It is time to let go of this myopic concentration on one controversy.

Taylor's work will prove indispensable to all students of medieval and Renaissance philosophy. It should find its place next to Crawford on every shelf, and—what is quite extraordinary, given the fact that we are dealing with a translation of a translation—it is the work that henceforth should be consulted first, at least in any study that purports to say something about Averroës' actual views.

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