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Excerpt

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Introduction

Peter Adamson

Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā (known in this volume by his Latin and, hence, English name, Avicenna) should be recognized as the single most influential thinker of the medieval period. As shown in the chapters that comprise this volume, he had an unparalleled impact on Muslim philosophers and theologians – who mostly ceased responding to Aristotle in order to engage instead with Avicenna. He was also greatly (albeit often indirectly) influential on Jewish philosophy. And, of course, he was perceived as a major thinker by medieval and Renaissance philosophers in the Latin Christian tradition. Yet much fairly basic research remains to be done concerning this giant in the history of ideas. As Peter E. Pormann mentions in his contribution to this volume, the study of Avicenna’s epochal contribution to the history of medicine is still in its infancy. On the philosophical side, things are somewhat better. Indeed, a great deal of excellent research has been devoted to Avicenna’s life and thought.¹ Still, we lack such basic tools as reliable editions of some works and translations, even for many major writings. Even major texts such as the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* from the *Cure* have become available in English only within the past few years.

Major figures like Plato, Aquinas, and Kant are, naturally enough, the subject of an ever-growing body of collected volumes, companions, and guidebooks. So it is another mark of the relative neglect paid to Avicenna that there has, until now, been no collection in which leading experts examine all aspects of his thought.² This volume is intended to fill that lacuna. It is not, however, only a companion or guide to what is already known about Avicenna. In keeping with the aims of the series to which it belongs, each chapter in *Interpreting Avicenna* seeks to advance the current

¹ As attested by Janssens 1991 and 1999. See also the annual bibliographies on Islamic philosophy compiled by T.-A. Druart, at <http://philosophy.cua.edu/faculty/tad>.

² There have, of course, been previous volumes of collected papers on Avicenna, but these do not attempt to cover the various departments of his philosophy as the present book does. See, for instance, McGinnis 2004; Reisman 2003; Wisnovsky 2001.

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state of our knowledge. Often, the authors have additionally pointed to areas where work remains to be done. His medical writings have already been mentioned. Another example is the Jewish and Latin reception, where the contributions found here not only present (and, indeed, push forward) the *status quaestionis*, but also show how many questions remain to be answered.

The volume begins by examining the entire Avicennian corpus from two complementary points of view. First, David C. Reisman explains the historical and personal context within which Avicenna wrote. The most valuable document for our understanding of Avicenna's life story is the biography he wrote himself, which was completed by his student, al-Jūzjānī.³ As Reisman points out, Avicenna and al-Jūzjānī both qualify as untrustworthy narrators. Nonetheless, several points emerge with clarity from the work. First, Avicenna's fortunes rose and fell with his access to patronage, to the point that his adult life can appear to be little more than a series of varying successful attachments to regional potentates. This relates to a second point emphasized by Reisman: Avicenna's high degree of methodological self-awareness. He wrote with various audiences in mind, whether students, patrons, or polemical opponents. These different occasions determined the structure and complexity of argument in his various works. A third point, made by Avicenna himself in the biography, is that he was a self-consciously original thinker, well aware of his own genius.

That point emerges likewise from the next chapter in our volume, by Dimitri Gutas. He approaches the Avicennian corpus with an eye to its overall philosophical structure and goal: to realize the single, unified, and comprehensive science only envisioned by Aristotle. The sprawling Avicennian *summae* – including his most important single work, the *Cure* – were intended to fulfill this ambition. This was not merely a matter of filling in gaps in Aristotle's system, but of producing a new, properly Avicennian system. Sometimes this meant grafting original thoughts onto an Aristotelian structure;⁴ sometimes it meant striking off in entirely new directions. Along with the new Avicennian system came a new epistemology against which the system was to be measured. As Gutas explains, Avicenna devised a theory of "verification" which placed great emphasis on experience. For Avicenna, philosophy is syllogistic in structure and thus thoroughly rational, yet it must be grounded ultimately in our experience, both of the world around us and of our own selves.

³ Gohlman 1974.

⁴ See, for instance, Bertolacci 2006, which examines in detail the relationship between the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle and the *Metaphysics* section of Avicenna's *Cure*.

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This mention of syllogistic brings us to the next chapter, on logic. Though Avicenna is among the most important and sophisticated figures in the history of logic, only a handful of scholars have been working on this aspect of his achievement. They include Tony Street,⁵ who here examines Avicenna's syllogistic. He focuses particularly on modality, that is, the notions of necessity, possibility, and impossibility. We see some significant departures from the Aristotelian tradition here. A striking example is Avicenna's "Rule of the Major." Whereas the traditional "Rule of the Weaker" stated that the modal status of the conclusion of a syllogism will be the same as the weaker premise (in other words, a syllogism that combines a necessarily true premise with a possibly true premise will yield only a possibly true conclusion), Avicenna believed that the conclusion would have the same modal status as the major premise. Here Avicenna may appear to have made a serious mistake. But as Street shows, the new Rule is not unmotivated: as so often, Avicenna set out his logic with an eye on metaphysical applications. Street explores these applications and also considers the reception of Avicenna's innovative ideas among later Muslim logicians.

From here we move on to four chapters that deal with Avicenna's natural philosophy. The framework is set out by a chapter on physics by Jon McGinnis who, along with Ahmed Hasnawi and others, has been showing the innovative ideas to be found in this part of the Avicennian corpus.⁶ As with logic, attention naturally focuses on topics where Avicenna diverges from Aristotle. We already find a divergence in his handling of the most central notion in Aristotelian physics, motion. As McGinnis remarks, Avicenna's "analysis is as startling as it is simple": he permits us to consider something as moving at an instant, rather than over a segment of time. This may strike us as obvious, but it is not something allowed by Aristotle in his *Physics*. McGinnis goes on to consider Avicenna's ideas about divisibility and the minimum of natural bodies, in terms of both extension and motion. These points are incidentally crucial for understanding Avicenna's relationship to contemporary theologians (*mutakallimūn*).⁷

One of the most important, yet least researched areas of Avicenna's thought, is medicine. Pormann's contribution is a step towards remedying this situation. He begins by explaining the relationship between Avicennian medicine and Avicennian philosophy. He then explores the extent to which

⁵ See, e.g., Street 2002, 2004, 2010. Also important is the work of such scholars as Paul Thom, see, e.g., Thom 2008.

⁶ See, e.g., Hasnawi 2001. ⁷ Compare Rashed 2005.

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Avicenna was a practicing doctor, or only a systematizer of medical book-learning. The question is crucial not only historically, but also because it bears on Avicenna's medical epistemology. As Pormann shows (and here we find a strong resonance with Gutas's chapter), Avicenna followed Galen in emphasizing the role of experience in medicine, for instance, in order to test the efficacy of drugs. It would thus be ironic if Avicenna barely engaged in actual medical practice, as some have alleged. But Pormann shows that this is unlikely, given the detailed references to Avicenna's own experience in his medical writings.

The final section of Pormann's study looks at the relation between Avicenna's medical theory and his well-known account of the "internal senses." This provides a natural transition to the next two chapters, in which Deborah Black and Dag Nikolaus Hasse explore Avicenna's psychology and attendant epistemology. The central role of experience in Avicenna's epistemology has often been taken to clash with the role he gives to the Active Intellect. If we know through an emanation from this Intellect, why do we also need experience to acquire knowledge? Alternatively, if we can learn empirically, what need is there to invoke a superhuman Intellect? Hasse lays out various possible solutions to this vexed problem, and explains why an emanation from the Active Intellect is necessary, despite Avicenna's abstractive theory of knowledge. Black's chapter further explains how truths gleaned from experience would fit into Avicenna's more general epistemology. He recognizes a range of degrees of certitude, depending on how one has arrived at a given belief. Much as Black has already shown in an earlier study of al-Fārābī,⁸ certitude has for Avicenna both a subjective and an objective dimension. Thus, it is difficult to classify him neatly as an internalist (who would insist that a knower must have access to the grounds on which his or her belief counts as knowledge) or as an externalist (who would deny this).

Avicenna's metaphysics (including his discussion of God) is probably the best-researched part of his philosophy. But even here there is much yet to discover, as shown by the next two chapters in the volume. Menn shows, among other things, that Avicenna reacted to the interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* found in al-Fārābī and Ibn 'Adī in arriving at his own groundbreaking conception of existence. Menn's chapter adds considerable further evidence and detail to an emerging picture of Avicenna as engaging thoughtfully with the Baghdad Peripatetic school.⁹ His attitude towards this group did not, then, consist only of the invective described in

⁸ Black 2006. ⁹ See Rashed 2004.

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Reisman's piece, or the negative self-definition embodied by the "Easterners vs. Westerners" nomenclature. My own chapter studies another aspect of Avicenna's metaphysics, namely, his philosophical theology. The Avicennian proof for the existence of God has deservedly received a good deal of attention. I try to answer a further question: why, according to Avicenna, is the Necessary Existent to be identified with the creator God worshipped in Islam?

Having covered the major areas of Avicenna's thought,¹⁰ the volume concludes with three chapters on his reception. The authors of all three pieces faced daunting challenges, but Robert Wisnovsky had a particularly intractable task. After all, the history of Avicenna's reception in the Islamic world is more or less the history of all philosophy subsequent to Avicenna in the Islamic world. Wisnovsky underscores this point by beginning with a quote from the nineteenth–twentieth-century philosopher, Muḥammad 'Abduh, for whom Avicenna's ideas are still relevant. Wisnovsky manages to cover quite a lot of ground by focusing on the question of which Avicennian texts and themes drew the attention of his commentators and critics across many generations. Gad Freudenthal and Mauro Zonta show that, by contrast, we find surprisingly little in the way of detailed textual engagement with Avicenna among Jewish authors. Freudenthal and Zonta offer explanations for this fact, and also show that Avicenna nonetheless managed to exercise a great deal of influence on Jewish thought, often indirectly.

The final chapter by Amos Bertolacci surveys the Latin reception of Avicenna. The importance of this topic hardly needs argument. Indeed, until not too long ago European scholarship on Avicenna was motivated primarily by his importance as a source for figures like Aquinas. As Bertolacci shows by focusing on the *Metaphysics* of the *Cure* (*Philosophia Prima* in Latin), Avicenna's initial impact on the Latinate Christian world came in three phases, culminating in the sophisticated use of the text made by Albert the Great. Complicating the story is the fact that Averroes and al-Ghazālī were being translated and read alongside Avicenna. Ironically, Latinate readers knew al-Ghazālī primarily as the author of the *Intentions of the Philosophers*, a summary of Avicennian doctrine, so that for them he

¹⁰ One might, admittedly, have included pieces on at least three other disciplines. First zoology, a topic on which Avicenna wrote extensively (on this, see Kruk 2002). Second, his work on the exact sciences. It was originally planned that the volume would include chapters on both of these topics, but this did not come to fruition. Third, there is practical philosophy (ethics and political philosophy). Given space limitations and the fact that this is not an area that drew much attention from Avicenna (as Gutas notes in his chapter), we have not devoted a study to it here. See, however, Black's contribution for some pertinent remarks.

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was an ally of Avicenna, whereas Averroes emerged as Avicenna's primary rival and critic.

I have stressed how much remains to be accomplished in Avicenna studies. In part, that is because the volume is intended to invite and facilitate further work on the Avicennian corpus and tradition. But it should once again be admitted that, despite the gaps in our understanding of him, Avicenna is one of the few classical Muslim thinkers to have received substantial attention from historians of philosophy. Along with al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī, and Averroes, he is at least widely acknowledged as a major medieval thinker. The same cannot be said of other figures who would deserve the same recognition: Ibn 'Adī, Suhrawardī, or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for instance. Their names and works are not well known outside a relatively small, though growing, community of specialists. This is a field whose excitement lies not only in the excellent work already being done – as amply shown by the studies collected here – but also in the fact that generations of scholars to come will have no difficulty finding themes, texts, and authors in need of study. Whatever new insights their research brings, it seems certain that those future generations will continue to see Avicenna as the central philosopher of the Islamic world.

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CHAPTER I

*The life and times of Avicenna
Patronage and learning in medieval Islam**David C. Reisman*

With regard to the textual sources for Avicenna's life, we are both blessed and cursed.¹ We possess two texts that may reasonably be considered as the foundation of the narrative, for the simple reason that they were composed by the actors themselves. One is his so-called *Autobiography*, in which Avicenna plots the contours of his initial studies and provides some information about his early career. The other is a *Biography* of Avicenna written by his student and amanuensis, al-Jūzjānī.² Some time ago, Dimitri Gutas showed that both texts must be approached as tendentious literary documents rather than the "accurate" historiography which the modern historian may hope for but rarely encounters.³ The *Autobiography* is set within a presentation of the Aristotelian curriculum which Avicenna deemed essential to the philosophy of his times – indeed, of all times. The text implicitly assumes that readers will construe that account of the Aristotelian curriculum as one that molded the development of his life and education, as legitimated by a narrative of Avicenna's progression through the Aristotelian texts. The *Biography*, on the other hand, has to be approached as a hagiographical presentation of the master by the grateful companion and student. Al-Jūzjānī's narrative defends and justifies his master's genius, and above all, stresses al-Jūzjānī's own participation in Avicenna's career. In what follows I will draw largely on these two texts, but also make use of stray remarks found in Avicenna's personal correspondence. In laying out the trajectory of his life and works, I will highlight the importance of Avicenna's social context, in particular the role of patronage and controversy.

¹ Gutas 1987: 67a.

² Both texts are edited and translated in Gohlman 1974. For a translation, see Gutas 1988: 22–30.

³ *Ibid.*: 149–98 (part 2, chapter 3).

I AVICENNA'S EARLY CAREER

Born in the provincial town of Afshana sometime before 370/980,⁴ and raised in the then cosmopolitan city of Bukhārā, Avicenna's early education seems to have been directed by his father, a provincial administrator for the Sāmānid rulers. At a very young age his informal studies included arithmetic, which probably involved simple sums – it was taught by a greengrocer. His studies in law were guided by the Ḥanafī jurist, Ismā'īl al-Zāhid.⁵ His father then invited his acquaintance, Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Nātilī, whom Avicenna describes as a person “who claimed to know philosophy,”⁶ to educate the young man, beginning with logic. Avicenna notes only that he studied Porphyry's *Eisagoge* and perhaps Aristotle's *Categories* with al-Nātilī, taking on the other Aristotelian texts (presumably through to *Posterior Analytics*) by himself. After Avicenna had also mastered Ptolemy's *Almagest* and Euclid's *Elements*, al-Nātilī advised him to go on by himself. Avicenna notes his continuing studies through Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.⁷ Avicenna also studied and quickly mastered medicine, described by him as “not one of the difficult sciences.”⁸

Medieval readers would pick up on the fact that Avicenna's education follows the Aristotelian curriculum of his day, moving from logic, the “tool” of theoretical research, through the theoretical philosophical disciplines including, importantly, the “primary” disciplinary umbrella of metaphysics.⁹ However, Avicenna's training also had a practical side: after all, disciplines like administration, medicine, and astronomy also got one a job. The arc of Avicenna's education is thus traditional, but his proudly claimed autodidacticism was unusual in a society which emphasized the master–student relationship for conferral of authority. Avicenna justifies himself as a self-taught man, recalling that he expressed novel solutions

⁴ For the location of Afshana, see Gohlman 1974: 119, n. 6. The traditional date given in some sources for Avicenna's birth, 370/980, cannot be sustained; see Gutas 1987–8, where it appears that the date may have to be pushed as far back as 964.

⁵ Gutas, *ibid.*, provides the documentation for Avicenna's Ḥanafī credentials.

⁶ Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥusayn b. Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn b. Khurshīd al-Ṭabarī al-Nātilī was a scholar of the ancient sciences with particular expertise in pharmacology. He prepared a “corrected” (*islah*) edition of the Arabic translation of Dioscurides' *Materia medica* which Avicenna himself used in his *Qānūn*.

⁷ He complemented his studies in the latter two disciplines with the works of Greek philosophers such as Themistius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Philoponus, and his predecessors in the Arabic tradition, al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, and Yahyā b. 'Adī (this list is built from references in his early responses to the scientist al-Bīrūnī, on which, see below).

⁸ Gohlman 1974: 24; cf. Gutas 1988: 190.

⁹ In the last, Avicenna was very much influenced by al-Fārābī's *Aims of Aristotle's Metaphysics*. See Gutas 1988: 238–54; and Bertolacci 2001b.

to logical questions; that al-Nātili endorsed Avicenna's continuing studies on his own; that at an early age he was considered proficient enough to dispense his knowledge to experts; and that he was able to breeze through some disciplines, such as mathematical theory, astronomy, and especially medicine.

In his *Autobiography*, Avicenna gives us a glimpse of his method for self-teaching. He wrote up lists of notational formats for the Aristotelian syllogistic model of logic and used them to evaluate the validity of the arguments put forward by philosophers and theologians of the time. He was able to affirm some philosophical arguments commonly accepted in his time as demonstrative. The method also became a weapon, as he was able to expose the deficiencies of his opponents, such as the Baghdad Peripatetic "school" (see further below). It is striking that in other texts, Avicenna tends to refute such opponents solely on the basis of their faulty reasoning patterns, without focusing on their content. His rigorous self-training in logic became the basis not only for his rejection of the institutionalized pursuit of philosophy in his time, but also the construction of the new ideas he would set forth in his own philosophical system.

But there was at least one feature of contemporary philosophical practice which Avicenna was not at liberty to reject: in the absence of institutions of learning devoted to the non-religious theoretical sciences, Avicenna could find a stable environment for his work only thanks to court patronage. This was offered in exchange for the practical skills that the scholar could offer the patron. Dynastic courts of the time were thus instrumental in Avicenna's intellectual output. As the fortunes of these dynasties rose and fell, so did Avicenna's income and scholarly environment. Unsurprisingly, the tenor and focus of Avicenna's writings were influenced by the audiences provided by the different courts.

At eighteen, Avicenna secured his first post, as physician, at the court of the Sāmānid ruler, Nūh b. Maṣṣūr, in Bukhārā. This environment secured for him two necessary ingredients of a scholarly life: regular access to a good library, and benefactors. Avicenna tells us that the Sāmānid library was filled with books from every branch of learning and that he first concentrated his attention on reading all of the "forerunners."¹⁰ As for benefactors,

¹⁰ Others have translated *awā'il* in this passage as "ancients" (Gohlman 1974: 37; Gutas 1988: 84). But the sciences he lists for his library research – language, poetry, and jurisprudence – suggest he means Arab-Muslim authorities in those disciplines. Thus, he is telling us that he read his own culture's authorities in one room of the library, and then proceeded to and finished the study of Greek philosophical disciplines (called *'ulūm* in the *Autobiography*, properly translated "philosophical sciences" in Gutas 1988: 84).

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Avicenna's first three compositions are addressed to different recipients, who presumably provided some sort of support. The *Compendium on the Soul* was dedicated to his employer, with a typically ornate note of gratitude appended:

Whenever the commander – may God make long his authority – commands me to give a detailed statement on these matters [addressed in the work], I will exert the greatest of efforts to comply, God willing. Once languishing, philosophy now flourishes through the help of the ruler, once obscure, it is now promoted, so that through his rule, its rule is now revived, through his days of power, its days now return, by his status, the status of its scholars now raised.¹¹

The *Compendium* already displays a characteristic feature of Avicenna's thought: attention to the human soul and its salvation is connected to issues of proper philosophical methodology. The work sets out what might be dubbed a "salvationist theory of the human soul," setting out a systematic discussion of the human soul's cognitive capacities, by way of explaining how the soul can realize its innate potential. The soul must overcome the limitations of bodily influence, first by training itself to use the faculties it exercises through the body, and second by balancing the emotional reactions (caused by humoral "imbalance") which disrupt its reasoning process. This training is often articulated by Avicenna within the framework of a broadly Aristotelian ethics.¹² The ultimate goal of such exercises in training the intellect and balancing the bodily influences is to achieve a state of the human intellect that resembles (and even assumes the role of) the universal intellect of Neoplatonic cosmology. Also characteristic is that Avicenna offers a demonstration (*burhān*) of the self-subsisting substantiality of the human soul, alongside a less assertive investigation of the soul's state after the death of the body (usually this topic is pursued in dialectical "adjudication" form, *hujja*).

Two further works dating from this period are the *Philosophy for 'Arūḍī* (*Al-Ḥikma al-'Arūḍiyya*), written for the litterateur Abū l-Ḥasan al-'Arūḍī,¹³ and *The Available and the Valid* (*al-Ḥāṣil wa-l-Maḥṣūl*), with its appendix on ethics, *Piety and Sin* (*Al-Birr wa-l-Ithm*), written for Abū Bakr al-Baraḳī.¹⁴ Avicenna explicitly tells us that both men asked him to

¹¹ Landauer 1876: 372. I cannot agree with Gutas (echoing Landauer's "Ansicht," *ibid.*, 336) that the work displays an unusual "obsequiousness" that helps determine its dating. Here he is actually asking for a raise commensurate with philosophy's importance and the ruler's "status."

¹² His minor essays on love (*Risāla fī l-ishq*, Mahdāvī 1954, no. 90) and sorrow (*Fī Tabayīn māhiyyat al-ḥuzn*, Mahdāvī 1954, no. 59) must be considered in this context.

¹³ For this individual, see Gohlman 1974: 123. ¹⁴ See *ibid.*