



SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF METAPHYSICAL MODIFICATIONS IN AVERROES' PHILOSOPHY

Prof. Mag. Meline Costa Sousa¹

Universidad federal de Minas Gerais, Brasil

Resumen: El propósito de este artículo es señalar algunas consecuencias de modificaciones metafísicas llevadas a cabo por Averroes en sus obras. Después de abandonar la teoría de los emanacionistas, Averroes piensa nuevamente la relación causal entre Dios y las sustancias celestes. Ahora, Dios es la causa final y la causa formal de la existencia cuando Él es el pensamiento inteligible de los intelectos celestiales. Así, el intelecto agente no participa en la multiplicidad de la creación; su única actividad es ser causa del conocimiento humano a través de la conjunción entre el intelecto material y él.

Descriptor: Averroes · Metafísica · Epistemología · Filosofía árabe

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is pointing some consequences of metaphysical modifications performed by Averroes in his works. After the abandon of the emanation's theory, Averroes rethinks the causal relation between God and the celestial substances. Now, God is the final and formal cause of the existence when He is the intelligible thought of the celestial intellects. So the agent intellect does not participate in the multiplicity of the creation; its unique activity is being cause of the human knowledge through conjunction between the material intellect and it.

Keywords: Averroes · Metaphysics · Epistemology · Arabic philosophy

Enviado: 18/01/2015. Aceptado: 28/04/2015

INTRODUCTION

Avicenna's and Averroes' interpretations of Aristotle's *De anima* III, 5, 430a10-25, have been explained by numerous contemporary scholars as a result of external influences; the adoption of the ontological status of agent intellect comes from the incorporation of Alexander of Aphrodisias' and Themistius' interpretations.² According to Gilson (2001), p. 426, the Arabic thought from its beginning has adopted the existence of a unique agent intellect for all men and, at the same time, the existence of a particular possible intellect for each man; all this above Alexander's influence. Following Selles

¹ Departamento de Filosofía. E-mail: melinecostasousa@hotmail.com

² Shroeder & Todd (1990). Davidson (1992). Ghisalberti (2006).

(2006), Alexander's texts about the agent intellect have influenced the Arabic thinkers as Avicenna and Averroes; Thomas Aquinas was the only one able to point out the incorporation of Alexander's theory into the interpretation of Aristotelian passages. And, according to Davidson (1992), p. 13, "Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, like virtually all Islamic and Jewish philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition, accepted the transcendent interpretation without question". I can mention other possible scholars that, as the previous ones mentioned, have explained the ontological status of the agent intellect from a previous interpretation defended by a precedent philosopher.

Differently, by comparing between the passages of Averroes' youth and his mature works, I will research into: 1) the abandon of the emanation theory and the new causal relation between God and the celestial intellects; 2) in which ways these metaphysical modifications changed the role of the agent intellect concerning the human knowledge.

1. THE ABANDON OF THE EMANATIONIST THEORY AND THE NEW CAUSAL RELATION BETWEEN GOD AND THE CELESTIAL INTELLECTS

Averroes in his original version of the *Epitome to Metaphysics* (*Jawāmi' kitāb mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a*) uses Avicenna's emanation theory³ to explain the creation (*ibdā'*)⁴ of the universe from its first cause, God. Each one of the celestial intellects originates the next one through an activity of thinking its own nature and the essence of the First One. As Marmura⁵ suggests, the priority of God in Avicenna's *Metaphysics* IV.1 is established by His prior existence in relation to the other existences (ontological priority). The founding principle of the emanation's model⁶ comes from the divine nature. Because God is simple and His essence (*dāt*) is equal to His existence (*mawjūd*), there is no plurality in Him and He creates only one thing, the first created intellect. And, through the intellection that each one of the celestial intellects performs, the plurality is originated. God operates as a final cause, the end of all perfection, and efficient cause, the origin of movement and origin of all existence⁷.

Averroes considers that God is the efficient cause (*'illā fā'il*) of the word;

³ Cf. Goichon (1937), pp. 136-139.

⁴ Avicenna (1933), §105 (70), p. 60.

⁵ Marmura (1997), p. 65.

⁶ Cf. Lizzini (2011). And Colish (1975), pp. 47-71.

⁷ According to Wisnovsky (2002), p. 100 and p. 107, the final cause enjoyed explanatory priority when an effect was explained in terms of its essence and perfection, while the efficient cause enjoyed explanatory priority when an effect was explained in terms of its existence.



He gives the existence of the first celestial intellect and indirectly of the others. In consequence of His eternal act, God is the final cause because these intellects desire Him. According to Davidson (1992), p. 223, “the spheres do not move as the physical elements or animals do (...) spherical motion must result from a desire accompanying an intellectual conception in a rational soul belonging to the sphere”. In view of that, the Arabic Tradition (Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes) conceives the Aristotelian God as the creator, the only one that exists by virtue of itself; the existence of all the possible creatures becomes necessary by virtue of Him.⁸

For each intellect is the cause of the existence of the next one, the causal hierarchy can only be understood in view of the impossibility of God directly creates the multiplicity. The ultimate source of the unity that maintains the universe together is unitary, and, because of the rule that only one thing proceeds from what is unitary, the ultimate source of unity in the universe can only have a single caused thing.

However, in Averroes' late works, *Incoherence of Incoherence (Tahāfut al-tahāfut)*,⁹ and *Long Commentary on Metaphysics (Tafsīr mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a)*,¹⁰ the causal explanation is criticized and abandoned. Now, I am going to investigate which are the modifications concerning the divine causality; in other words, how God is cause of the multiplicity of the universe in Averroes' late works.

Even if Averroes maintains the emanation's cosmological structure in his late works, the causal link between the intellects and their relation to God is completely revised. According to Averroes (1987), 197.13-198-5, pp. 118-9:

It is here that Avicenna erred, for he believed that unity is an addition to the essence and also that existence, when we say that a thing exists, is an addition to the thing. This question will be treated later. And the first to develop this theory of the existent, possible by itself and necessary through, was Avicenna; for him possibility was a quality in a thing, different from the thing in which the possibility is, and from this it seems to follow that what is under the first is composed of two things one to which possibility is attributed, the other to which necessity is attributed; but this is a mistaken theory.

Averroes' strategy in his (1987), influenced by Gazali critiques, is to review Avicenna's distinction between the nature of God and the nature of the other

⁸ According to Verza (2010), p. 35, n. 2, it is said that something is a necessarily of existence when the necessity belongs to its essence by itself or when the necessity belongs to its essence in view of some conditions. Then, if something is a necessary of existence by itself, it can not be created.

⁹ Averroes (1919). Davidson (1992).

¹⁰ Averroes (1987).

existents.¹¹ Avicenna uses the idea of simplicity in view of the absence of duality essence-existence.¹² God is simple because His essence coincides with His existence for He did not receive the existence from another one. So He is the Necessary Existent by Himself. Respect to the created existents that depend on a cause, another substance, to give them existence, Avicenna calls them possibly existents; in other words, they are non-existents whose existence is received.

The composition that Avicenna attributes to the possible existent can be understood in three ways: related to the essential parts; related to the relation and related to the accidents.¹³ The first and the third ways are the unique situations that involve real composition. However as they are incorporeal intellects, their composition essence-existence can only be understood in the first way. If the attribution of possibility to the possible existents is relative and it is not a property neither an accident,¹⁴ for they have only mental existence, not extra-mental one. Indeed, according to Averroes (1987), 199.3-201.3, pp. 119-20:

But the possible into which Avicenna divides existence is not an entity actually outside the soul, and his theory is wrong, as we said before (...) As to what is necessary through another, the mind perceives in it a composition through cause and effect; if it is a body, there must be in it both a unity actually, and a plurality potentiality; if it is, however, incorporeal, the mind does not perceive a plurality either in act or in potency. For this reason the philosophers call this kind of existence simple, but they regard the cause as more simple than the effect and they hold that the First is the most simple of them, because it cannot be understood as having any cause or effect at all. But composition can be understood of the principles which come after the First; therefore, according to the philosophers, the second principle is more simple than the third, and it is in this way that their theory must be understood.

The above-mentioned passage points a difficulty concerning the attribution of simplicity only to God. As I said, for the composition is relative but not real because

¹¹ Averroes distinguishes two senses of existence: one is the true, and the other one is the opposite of non-existence, and it is divided into ten categories. In other words, existence is used concerning the substance and concerning their accidents. Cf. Averroes (1987), p. 180. Cf. Belo (2009), pp. 403-426.

¹² The antecedents of this distinction between existence and essence can also be found among the Muslim authors. Cf. Frank (2000), p. 4, n.16.

¹³ Averroes (1987), p. 179.

¹⁴ According to Belo (2009), p. 221, Averroes considers that Avicenna made a mistake when it is said that the existence is an accident, for if the accident is an essence's property, its existence is an accident. In this way, the accident is predicated of the existence and the accident is predicated of accident ad infinitum. "In employing wujūd, which in Arabic is a derived noun, Avicenna was misled into believing that it stands for an accident rather than the essence of a thing".



it is something constructed by ours intellects, the possibly existents are as simple as God.

So, from this first alteration, the suppression of the actually duality essence-existence in the celestial bodies, Averroes rethinks the kind of causal relation involved in creation. Because the creation is an eternal act and the possibly existents necessarily exist, they are actually existents whose nature does not bear real, but only categorical composition (relation between cause and caused thing).¹⁵ They exist and they are going to continue in their existence. So those intellects may only be considered non-existents in the thought. Averroes (2009), p. 174, says:

The habit of our contemporaries to say that such-and-such a mover proceeds from such-and-such a mover or emanates from it, or follows necessarily, or similar expressions, is something which is not correct in the case of these separated principles. All these are supposed to be attributes of agents but are not so in truth; for we have said before that what proceeds from the agent merely passes from potentiality into actuality. But there is no potentiality there, so that there is no agent either. There is only intellect and intelligible, perfecting and perfected [...]

Now, the causal relationship between God and other intellects, respect to their creation, is not understood as an efficient causality: “final causality becomes the primary driving force in the sublunary as well as in the word above the moon”¹⁶. An example to elucidate this relationship is the analogy to the leader and the army or the king and the city. In the army, the leader is responsible to the order and he conducts the army’s actions, but he does not give the existence of the army.

According to the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, the existence of all separated principles depends on the way they conceive God. As a concept, it is possible God to be simple and at the same time He can be thought by a plurality of intellects. In this way, Averroes considers all celestial bodies think a unique concept. And, when they intellect God, they acquire their form and their finality (for as they are simple, their form and their end are a unique thing). The first originator principle is the principle of all things and He is the form e the final cause. Nothing proceeds from it because efficient causation “consists merely in ‘leading what is potential to actuality’”.¹⁷ So this kind of causation cannot be used to explain the existence of the celestial bodies.

¹⁵ In his *Long Commentary on Metaphysics*, Averroes assumes that the real duality necessary-possible is only possible in case of motion. Cf. Averroes (2009), p. 165.

¹⁶ Belo (2009), p. 422.

¹⁷ Davidson (1992), p. 229.

According to Davidson (1992), p. 227, the first unitary being can act on the incorporeal intellects, and not on only one intellect, as a formal cause, providing them with form insofar as each intellect enjoys a conception of the first being according to the intelligence's level of existence. The soul of each intellect receives its measure of existence through its unique conception of God. As Davidson (1992), p. 229, says:

the ultimate cause of the universe acts as a cause in the sense that the 'intellects' have an 'intelligible thought' and 'concept' of the first being in 'divers' and 'differing' degrees, depending on their rank in the hierarchy of existence, the ultimate, absolutely simple cause can, and does, have multiple effects.

2. METAPHYSICAL MODIFICATIONS AND THE ROLE

OF THE AGENT INTELLECT CONCERNING THE HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

Averroes in his (2009), III.5 430a10-25, mentions three kinds of intellect: possible or material intellect (*intellectus qui est in potentia*), intellect in act (*intellectus qui est in actu*) and agent intellect (*intelligentia agens*).¹⁸ Here, he follows the classification of the elements that participate in originating the sublunar existents (agent, patient, product). Because "the soul's consideration is a consideration of what is natural, for the soul is a natural being (*rebus naturalibus*) (...) then it is necessary that there be these three differences in the soul".¹⁹ From this analogy with other beings, Averroes distinguishes a cause, the agent intellect, a patient, the material intellect and the product, the intellect in act.

Unlike Avicenna, for who only the agent intellect is a separated substance²⁰, in the *Long Commentary*, also the material intellect is a separated one. The argumentation to justify its separated existence is the nature of the intelligible forms, the contents of the intellect. Because they are completely abstracted from the matter, they cannot be provided to the intellect through the senses, and they cannot be the proper content of a soul's faculty that uses the body to act. If the agent intellect is mixed with the body, it could not have the intelligible forms in actuality; in the moment that it judges infinity things, which ones are not perceived through the senses, it can only be a power *non mixtus*.²¹

¹⁸ Cf. also Tornay (1943), pp. 275-276.

¹⁹ Averroes (2009), p. 349.

²⁰ Wolfson (1958), pp. 244-51.

²¹ Respect to the nature of material intellect, cf. Bazan (1981), p. 426. Also, Davidson (1992), pp. 258-314.



In the theory of emanation,²² there are two notions to explain the origin of the multiplicity. One is the creation (*ibdā'*) used to elucidate the God's eternal and unique act and the other one is creation or origination (*huḍūt*) used to elucidate the act performed to the other intellects, including the agent intellect. This second notion is interest here for helping us to understand the metaphysical role of the agent intellect. As God does not create the sublunar multiplicity, the agent intellect is the *dator formarum*²³ and their origin.

The intelligible forms qua intelligible things do not exist in the sublunar world, but they are in actuality in the agent intellect. They are not directly created in the word, but they exist in an intermediary from which they receive a particular existence in the sublunar realm. So, the knowledge that the human intellect cannot be completed when we abstract the material forms using the senses.²⁴ It is necessary that the human intellect receives the middle term from the agent intellect.

As stated, according to *Incoherence of Incoherence* and on *Long Commentary on Metaphysic*, Averroes abandons the emanation's theory and he uses another kind of creation's theory to explain God's act concerning the origin of world. Even if the agent intellect does not play an intermediary role in creation, it is the last celestial intellect. For the necessity of joining the cosmological structure of the emanation's theory together to the new kind of creation without intermediary intellects, Averroes maintains both intellects (material and agent intellects) as two existents substantially different from each other, but they are similar because of their nature. It is necessary the union of the agent intellect with the material one because the former does not emanate forms to it, but the form is actualized between things of same species.

The central points of Averroes' *Long commentary on De anima*²⁵ to establish the separated existence of both intellects are:

1) the classification of the elements that are involved in generation of sublunar beings; just because the "soul's consideration is the consideration of natural things (*rebus naturalibus*) by being one of the sublunar beings, it is necessary to exist those three differences in the soul (*intellectus qui est in potentia, intellectus qui est in actu, intelligentia agens*)"²⁶

²² Gutas (2001), pp. 1-38.

²³ Davidson (1992), p. 78.

²⁴ Cf. Hasse (2001), pp. 39-82. Gutas (2012), pp. 391-436.

²⁵ Cf. Ivry (1966), pp. 76-85. Ivry (1995), pp. 75-92. Davidson (1997), pp. 139-151. Ivry (1997), pp. 153-155. Ivry (2001), pp. 59-77.

²⁶ Averroes (2009), pp. 348-9.

2) The establishment of the nature of the intelligible forms which are the proper subjects of both intellects; by being completely abstracted from matter, the intelligible forms can not arrive in the material intellect through the senses and cannot be the proper subject of a soul's faculty that depends on the body to act. So "it is necessary the material intellect to be separated and *non mixtus* while it is the thing receives all forms".²⁷

Averroes (2009), p. 360, considers both intellects as two different existents that "in a way they seem to be two and, in another way, they seem to be only one". They are two concerning the "diversity of their activities". The proper activity of the agent intellect is being the cause and the proper activity of the material intellect is receiving the intelligible forms. However, both intellects can be considered a unique intellect when they are together during the activity of knowing.

Concerning the metaphysical role of the agent intellect, it does not create anything, since the existents do not depend on it to exist, but it is responsible for they passing from a potential state to an actual one.²⁸ Then, the agent intellect is not the *dator formarum*. The defense of the idea that a form receives a matter through another thing belongs to the same species is Averroes' denial of the existence of separated forms. So, it is not necessary to affirm an intellect that emanates forms to the sublunar world if the substance gives the form to another substance of the same species as, for example, the man and the sperm (man's form). From the adoption of a creation's conception without intermediary substances, the agent intellect does not emanate forms to the world (ontological range) or to the human intellect (epistemological range). It is the cause of an actual knowledge already present in the material intellect even if the conjunction is necessary.

An epistemological consequence is the fact that the material intellect depend on the agent intellect to know the intelligible things through its union with it since cause and product a unique thing concerning the activity of knowing (*intellectus et intellectum sunt idem*).²⁹

CONCLUSION

From the mentioned points, we can consider that Averroes in his interpretation of Aristotle's *De anima* III.5 uses the causal argument to distinguish between an agent intellect and a material one. By establishing the existence of a cause that is responsible for the actualization of the capacity for knowing, that is proper to the

²⁷ Averroes (2009), p. 353.

²⁸ Genequand (1986), p. 29.

²⁹ Bazan (1981), p. 425. Black (1999), pp.159-84.



material intellect, he considers that the intellect produces all things (νοῦς τῷ πάντα ποιεῖν) is the agent intellect and they consider the intellect becomes all things (νοῦς τῷ πάντα γίνεσθαι) is the material intellect. But the kind of distinction and relation is different. According to Averroes' *Long Commentary on De anima*, both intellects are two separated existents but, during the act of knowing, they become a unique intellect.

The distinction and relation between the intellects come from metaphysical considerations. For the agent intellect does not participate in creation, its unique role is being cause of human knowledge. So, the man by itself it is not able to know without a different substance, the agent intellect.

BIBLIOGRAFÍA

Averroes. 1919. *Compendio de Metafísica*. Texto árabe. Traducción de C. Quirós Rodríguez. Madrid: Real Academia de Ciencias Morales y Políticas.

Averroes. 1987. *Averroes' Tahāfut al-tahāfut*. Translation by S. Van Den Bergh. Book Production Consultant Cambridge, England: EJW Gibb Memorial Trust.

Avicenne. 1963. *Livre des Définitions*. Traducción editada y anotada por A M. Goichon, Paris: L'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire.

Averroes. 2009. *Long Commentary on the De anima of Aristotle*. Translated by R.C. Taylor. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Bazan, B.C. 1981. "Intellectum Speculativum: Averroes, Thomas Aquinas, and Siger Brabant on the Intelligible Object". *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 19, No. 4, pp. 45-63.

Belo, C. 2009. "Essence and Existence in Avicenna and Averroes", *Al-Qantara*, Madrid, volume XXX, 2, pp. 403-426.

Black, D. 1999. "Conjunction and the Identity of Knower and Known in Averroes", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 73, pp. 159-84.

Colish, M. L., 1975. "Avicenna's Theory of Efficient Causation and Its Influence on St. Thomas Aquinas", en: *Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo settimo centenario. Atti del Congresso Internazionale* (Roma-Napoli, 17-24, aprile 1974), pp. 296-306. Napoli: Edizioni Domenicane Italiane.

Davidson, H. 1992. *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davidson, H. 1997. "The Relation between Averroes's Middle and Long Commentaries on the *De Anima*". *Arabic Science and Philosophy* 4, 1997, pp. 139-151.

Frank, R.M. 2000. "The Non-Existent and the Possible in Classical *Ash'arite* Teaching". *MIDEO*, 24, pp. 1-37.

Genequand, C. 1986. *Ibn Rushd's Metaphysics*. Leiden: Brill.

Ghisalberti, A. 2006. "La Dottrina Peripatetica dell' Intellecto nel *De Unitate Intellectus* di Tommaso d'Aquino". En: *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale*. M.C. Pacheco & J. Meirinhos (eds.). *Actes du XIe Congrès international de philosophie médiévale de la Société Internationale pour l'Etude de la Philosophie Médiévale* (S.I.E.P.M.). Porto, 26-31, août 2002.

Gilson, E. 2001. *A Filosofia na Idade Média*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.

Goichon, A.M. 1937. *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sn (Avicenne)*, Paris: Desclées de Brouwer.

Gutas, D. 1988. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*. Leiden: Brill.

Gutas, D. 2012. "The Empiricism of Avicenna". *Oriens*, vol. 40, 2012, p. 391-436.

Hasse, D. N. 2001. *Avicenna on Abstraction*. In: Wisnovsky, R. (Ed.). *Aspects of Avicenna*, pp. 39-82. Princeton: Princeton Press.

Ivry, A. 1966. "Averroes on Intellection and Conjunction". *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 86, no. 2.

Ivry, A. 1995. "Averroes' Middle and Long Commentaries on the *De Anima*". *Arabic Science and Philosophy* 5, pp. 75-92.

Ivry, A. 1997. "Response <to Davidson (1977)>". *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 7, pp. 153-155.

Ivry, A. 2001). "The Arabic text of Aristotle's *De anima* and its translator. *Oriens* 36, pp. 59-77.

Lizzini, O. 2011. *Fluxus: Indagine sui fondamenti della metafisica e della fisica di Avicenna*. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina.

Marmura, M.E. 1997. *Avicenna on Causal Priority*. In: MOREWEDGE (Ed.). *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, pp. 65-84. Delmar: Caravan Books.

Selles, J.F. 2006. "La crítica tomista a la interpretación griega y neoplatónica del intelecto agente". In: *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale*. M.C. Pacheco & J. Meirinhos (eds.). *Intellect et imagination dans la Philosophie Médiévale, Actes du XIe Congrès International de Philosophie Médiévale de la Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale* (Porto, 26-31, Agosto 2002), vol. III, pp. 1389-1404: Brepols.

Schroeder, F.M., & Todd, R.B. 1990. *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators on the Intellect: the *De Intellectu* attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius' Paraphrase of Aristotle, *De Anima* 3.4-8*. Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.

Tornay, S.C. 1943. "Averroes' Doctrine of the Mind". *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 52, no. 3.



Verza, T. M. 2010. “Do agente deriva apenas a existência: Avicena e a concepção comum de causa eficiente na *Metafisica* VI.1”. *Analytica*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 14, no.2, pp. 27-43

Wolfson, H.A.1958. “The Plurality of Immovable Movers in Aristotle and Averroes”. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 63.

Wisnovsky, R. 2002. “Final and Efficient Causality in Avicenna’s Cosmology and Theology”. *Quaestio*, 2, pp. 97-123.

