Averroes on the Relationship between Philosophy and Scripture:
A Conditional Hierarchy

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Introduction

This essay is an attempt to study the manner in which Averroes constructs the relationship between philosophy and scriptural discourse in *Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl wa-taqrīr mā bayna al-shari‘ah wa-al-hikmah min al-ittiṣāl* (henceforth, *Faṣl al-maqāl*).¹ There are numerous instances in *Faṣl al-maqsāl* where Averroes states that philosophy and scriptural discourse share a non-antagonistic relationship. In fact, demonstrating that philosophy and scriptural discourse employ compatible and “harmonious” modes of reasoning in their articulation of the truth is one of Averroes’ express aims in the treatise.² Though it is useful, this general characterization of philosophy (*hikmah*) and scripture (*shar‘*)³ as compatible and non-competing forms of discourse is a preliminary description; it does not display the specificity of Averroes’ construction of the relationship between the two. For example, this general statement does not display whether philosophy and scripture form a hierarchical relationship, wherein one of the two offers a surer path for the comprehension of truth and salvation, or whether Averroes maintains that scripture and philosophy are equally legitimate perspectives that offer parallel, non-competing accounts of the same phenomena. My basic purpose in this essay is to describe and examine Averroes’ specific construction of a harmonious relationship between philosophy and scripture.

The implications of this examination are not limited to the particular question of Averroes’ position on the relationship between philosophy and scripture. The study has bearings, too, on understanding the general epistemological framework within which Averroes operates. As an illustration, Oliver Leaman’s interpretation of *Faṣl al-maqsāl* leads him to the conclusion that Averroes allows for multiple, equally legitimate rationalities and works with a perspectival epistemological framework.⁴ Conversely, Richard Taylor’s examination of *Faṣl al-maqsāl* constructs a rationalist Averroes whose commitment to the “unity of truth” precludes the possibility of a non-hierarchical relationship between philosophy and other modes of discourse, including scripture.⁵ This essay, while it is primarily a modest, exegetical study of the relationship between philosophy and scripture in *Faṣl al-maqsāl*, also discusses some of these

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¹ George Hourani translates the title as: “The book of the decision (or distinction) of the discourse, and a determination of what there is of connection between religion and philosophy.” (Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, trans. George F. Hourani, [Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012], 1.) Hourani translates the term *hikmah* as “philosophy” or “philosophical discourse” and *shar‘* as “law” when Averroes uses it as a source of commands and as “scripture” when it is used in *Faṣl al-maqāl* to refer to an object of study. Since I am examining both *hikmah* and *shar‘* as modes of discourse, I use the terms “philosophy” and “scripture” throughout. For an introduction and historical contextualization of Averroes’ text, see Averroes, *Harmony*, 1–43. This essay follows Library of Congress’s Transliteration Scheme for Arabic.


³ See fn. 1 for the translation of *hikmah* and *shar‘* as “philosophy” and “scripture.”


larger epistemological implications. The general goal of my interpretive exercise is to parse out and mediate the differences between the reception of Averroes as a strict rationalist and a multivocal, perspectival thinker.

There are two parts to this study. In the first part, I discuss Averroes’ description of philosophy as a discourse that relies exclusively on demonstrative reasoning and scripture as a mode of discourse that employs demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical reasoning for the production of concepts (tasāwwr) and judgments (taṣdiq). This discussion parses out the commonalities and differences between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical reasoning. I also take up the issue of how these different modes of reasoning relate their practitioners to truth and being. In the second part of this study, I explore Averroes’ resolution of the implicit tensions between his conceptions of philosophy and scripture. These tensions arise because Averroes maintains that philosophical discourse relies purely on demonstrative proof and propositional content that is necessary and true, whereas scriptural discourse, in addition to demonstrative proof, relies on symbolic, dialectical, and rhetorical propositions that may not accord with truth. I also discuss Averroes’ employment of allegorical interpretation (tawil) as a means of averting conflicts between philosophical and scriptural truth-claims. I conclude this section with a sketch of the way that Averroes constructs a relationship between philosophy and scripture such that the former in relation to the latter is a privileged form of discourse, but in the specific sense of affording a more secure and accurate means for the theoretical investigation of truth and being.

I. Philosophy, Scripture, and Truth

In Faṣl al-maqāl, Averroes describes philosophy as an activity that consists of the examination and study of “existing beings” (mawjūdāt). Philosophical examination builds on prevailing knowledge and enables the philosopher to draw inferences that extend knowledge of existing beings. The defining characteristic of philosophic discourse is its exclusive reliance on demonstrative reasoning (burhān) as the means of forming concepts (tasāwwr) and arriving at judgments (taṣdiq) in the form of propositions about the subject matter (i.e., mawjūdāt) of its investigation. Part of the project of Faṣl al-maqāl is to display the superiority of demonstrative reasoning in relation to dialectical (jadali) and rhetorical (kaṭabī) reasoning as a means of producing assent to propositions and forming concepts. In terms of their purposes, then, these three forms of reasoning are not distinct, since each aims at the production of judgments and concepts. The distinction between demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical “ways” (turq) of reasoning and, consequently, between philosophy and other modes of discourse lies in the specific kind of assent and conceptualization they have the capacity to generate.

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6 Throughout the article I have translated the word tasāwwr as “concept” and the word taṣdiq as either “judgment” or “assent” depending on the context of its application. See Harry A. Wolfson, “The Terms Taṣawwr and Taṣdiq in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents,” The Muslim World 33, no. 2 (1943): 114–28, Roger Arnaldez, Averroes: A Rationalist in Islam, trans. David Streight, English Language Ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 144, and Majid Fakhry, Averroes: His Life, Works, and Influence (Oneworld, 2001), 31–39. The first section of this paper conducts a detailed discussion of Averroes’ use of these terms in Faṣl al-maqāl.

7 Averroes, Harmony, 44. Roger Arnaldez describes mawjūdāt as “that which is given, that which is found, and that which is not thought until after it has been found” Arnaldez, Averroes, 36). For an etymological and philosophical treatment of the term mawjūdāt, see Arnaldez, 35-37.
Averroes is not unique in describing the ends of philosophical discourse as the generation of assent and concepts. Deborah Black notes that the “epistemological couplet” of tašawwur and tasdīq plays a central role in the thought of Islamic Aristotelians in general. Consequently, an exploration of this couplet is crucial for understanding the epistemological distinction of philosophy in relation to other modes of discourse for Averroes. Black describes the formation of tašawwur as an activity through which the mind grasps the “essence” of something. Tašdīq, on the other hand, consists of “a determinate judgment to which a truth-value can be assigned.” As an illustration: the concept of a horse, which would be a description of its essence, would constitute a tašawwur, but when this concept is employed for the sake of making particular truth-claims (e.g. “This is a horse” or, more generally, “Horses exist”), we move from concept-formation to judgments that entail truth-values. Similarly, H. A. Wolfson shows that Averroes’ commentary on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione is one of the instances in which he connects conceptualization with Aristotle’s description of “words” and judgments or assent with “propositions.” Majid Fakhry interprets tašawwur as a description of the meaning of a term (e.g. “A horse is a four-legged mammal”) and tasdīq as an existential claim in relation to a term (e.g. “My horse, a four-legged mammal, is a loyal and noble creature”). Charles Butterworth traces the meaning of tašawwur to the word šīrāh and shows that Averroes takes it to mean “the mental image of the form of something” whereas tasdīq concerns the existential affirmation or denial of something.

Averroes’ construction of the epistemic superiority of philosophy in relation to other modes of discourse in Faṣḥ al-maqāl is a consequence of the fact that demonstrative reasoning allows for a particular relation between concepts and judgments with the things about which concepts and judgments are formed. Demonstrative reasoning enables the philosopher to form concepts and judgments that “accord” with the actual or existent beings that she examines.

But what does it mean for a concept or a judgment to “accord” with the objects or beings that one examines? In Faṣḥ al-maqāl, Averroes notes that there are two basic ways of forming concepts. One can either rely on the “object itself” to form a concept of it or one could rely on symbols to aid the process of conceptualization. To claim that the concepts used in demonstrative reasoning rely on the “object itself” essentially means that the concept is a “direct representation of a thing itself.” In terms of Black’s description of conceptualization, the concepts used in demonstrative reasoning grasp the real or actual essence of the object under investigation. Similarly, the judgments or assent to which demonstrative reasoning leads are in accord with the objects of one’s investigation in that, as Averroes notes, “[W]ith demonstration, we arrive at assent which is certain through our assenting to premises because to our minds they

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9 Ibid.
10 Wolfson, “The Terms Tašawwur and Tašdīq in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin and Hebrew Equivalents,” 199. For the passages in De Interpretatione where Aristotle discusses the distinction between words and propositions, see De Interpretatione, 16b - 17a.
11 Fakhry, Averroes, 34–35.
13 Averroes, Harmony, 64.
14 Ibid., 110.
appear just as they are externally.”15 Demonstrative premises consist of cognitive or mental content that is in some sense identical to the extra-mental beings or objects to which it refers. This is not just to suggest that the human intellect or mind serves as a “perfect mirror” for reflecting the objects of its examination. Instead, following Aristotle, Averroes maintains that genuine cognition is premised on an ontological or participatory relationship between the “knower” and the “known.” Not only are the object of thought and the thought itself identical, they are also in some sense “identified” with each other.16 Black states that Averroes extends the notion of conjunction (ittiṣāl) to all levels of cognitive activity, which essentially means that, for Averroes, cognitive activity must entail an ontological relationship between the knowing subject and known object.17 Furthermore, the propositions and judgments used in demonstrative reasoning are not probabilistic but rather carry the force of necessity. It follows that the ontological correlate of a demonstrative concept or judgment is not a transient or ephemeral phenomenon. Instead, demonstrative judgments contain within themselves the necessary “causes” that underpin the object of one’s examination.18

Unlike philosophy, Averroes characterizes scripture as a mode of discourse that uses demonstrative and non-demonstrative modes of reasoning alike. He argues that the variety of reasonings found in scripture is a function of the fact that people differ in terms of their capacities to form concepts and judgments. Since scriptural discourse must address all possible audiences, it contains dialectical and rhetorical arguments to convince and persuade those who would not be able to follow a demonstrative argument.19 In creating distinctions between the modes of reasoning scripture employs—demonstration, dialectics, and rhetoric—Averroes constructs corresponding distinctions between various “classes” of individuals who are distinguished on the basis of natural ability and appropriate training. Dialectical and rhetorical arguments or classes of individuals differ from demonstrative arguments or class of individuals, firstly, because they may employ symbolic or metaphoric devices for communicating a particular concept. Secondly, the propositions or premises used in non-demonstrative reasoning do not necessarily have ontological correlates with which they are identical; a non-demonstrative assent or judgment may be extended to a symbolic referent of an object. Averroes uses an illustration to convey this difference: if a woman belonging to the rhetorical or dialectical class gives assent to the proposition that God “resides” in the sky, she is really giving her assent to a symbolic statement about God’s actual character. Since she lacks the training, natural aptitude, and education required to make demonstrative conceptions and judgments, therefore, her assent to a

17 Ibid 159-184. The process of conjunction is a very complex issue in Averroës’ corpus. For a detailed treatment of Averroës’ complicated and varying positions on the possibility of the relationship between the active intellect and the intellect “embodied” in human beings, see Herbert Alan Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 258–282, 315–321.
18 The basic point, however, is that the intellect becomes “identical” to the thought that it thinks. Aristotle’s discussion in the De Anima provides some of the resources out of which Averroes constructs his position: “Actual knowledge is identical with its object,” (De Anima, 431a). See De Anima 429a-432a for a discussion of the process through which thoughts and objects become “identical.”
20 Averroes, Harmony, 49.
symbolic judgment about God’s being is appropriate. It is important to note that the person in question is not aware of the symbolic character of the assent—she believes that her proposition is literally (non-metaphorically) true and has an actual ontological correlate. For Averroes, this does not take away from the legitimacy of her assent, which only the philosopher knows is symbolic. Averroes justifies the presence of symbolic and non-demonstrative content of scriptural discourse as an act of God’s graciousness towards His servants: “With regard to things which by reason of their recondite character are only knowable by demonstration, [God has been gracious to His servants and] coined for them images [amthāl] and likenesses [ashbāh] of these things, and summoned them to assent to those images.”

The most significant difference between demonstrative and non-demonstrative arguments stems from the character of the propositions that are used as premises in their construction. Black notes that the “epistemic status” of the propositions used in the various forms of reasoning is the plumb-line that distinguishes these forms from each other. Whereas the propositions employed in demonstrative reasoning are necessary and certain, those employed in dialectical reasoning are chosen because they are popular and generally accepted. They are also probabilistic rather than necessary and absolutely certain. Similarly, the propositional content of rhetorical reasoning consists of popular ideas and ordinary, everyday discourse that is “trusted” by one’s audience.

Averroes also contrasts the degree of certainty (yaqīn) that demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical arguments provide. We noted earlier that demonstrative arguments lead to indubitable certainty. The judgments or conceptions that are derived through dialectical arguments lead only to suppositions. Suppositions are probabilistic conclusions such as the inference that “All bodies are created” from our observations of some bodies. Rhetorical arguments also provide, at best, probable suppositions. It is important to note the perspectival element of these comments about the strength of dialectical and rhetorical arguments: the philosopher alone is aware of the probable or dubitable character of dialectical and rhetorical judgments. For Averroes, in the case of a person who belongs to the rhetorical class and believes that God is in the sky, the judgment does not carry any doubts or uncertainty. Similarly, if a doctor addresses an individual from the rhetorical class and convinces him through rhetorical means to take a medicine, citing, for instance, an example of the medicine’s effectiveness for someone in the past, the individual from the rhetorical class does not doubt the doctor’s judgment. In fact, Averroes goes so far as to state that for the dialectical reasoner, dialectical arguments provide the same degree of certainty that a demonstrative reasoner reaches through demonstrative arguments:

One of them comes to assent through demonstration; another comes to assent through dialectical arguments, just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstration, since his nature does not contain any greater capacity; while another comes to assent

20 Ibid., 59. For the example of the woman who believes God is in the sky, which Averroes adapts from a hadīth, see Averroes, Harmony, 59-60.
21 Black, “Logic in Islamic Philosophy,” 710.
26 For the source of the example, see Butterworth, Averroës’ Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s “Topics,” “Rhetoric,” and “Poetics. 63.
through rhetorical arguments, again just as firmly as the demonstrative man through demonstrative arguments.\textsuperscript{27}

There are two important clarifications I want to make about the character of dialectical and rhetorical reasoning. Firstly, the preceding discussion of the contents of dialectical and rhetorical arguments should not be taken to mean that they are always devoid of real ontological correlates. It is possible for the ideas and propositions used in non-demonstrative reasoning to accord with reality and facts. Secondly, non-demonstrative arguments, like their demonstrative counterparts, generate assent through rational force. Salim Kemal argues that Averroes “does not see poetic, metaphorical or figurative language in terms of merely emotional motivations. Thus, he does not simply suppose that some people are moved by rational discourse, others by emotive poetic and figurative language.”\textsuperscript{28} Non-demonstrative discourse carries and exerts rational force on its practitioners and is not necessarily devoid of truth.

\section*{II. Mediating Rationalism and Perspectivalism}

The preceding discussion of the character of demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical arguments problematizes Averroes’ claim in \textit{Fāṣl al-maqāl} about the non-antagonistic and harmonious relationship between demonstrative reasoning and scripture.\textsuperscript{29} How can Averroes characterize philosophy as purely demonstrative and scripture as a mix of demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical reasoning and simultaneously maintain that both lead to truth and do not oppose each other? How is it possible for him to “harmonize” a discourse that produces a necessary relationship with truth with a discourse that relies on symbols and metaphors? In this section, I explore these questions and map out paths for resolving the pressing questions that arise because of the differing natures of demonstration, dialectics, and rhetoric. I do so by asking two broad sets of questions:

1) Given the fact that the ideas that metaphors and symbols excite in the mind do not correlate with things “just as they are externally,” how can Averroes justify the act of giving assent to the symbolic content of scripture? Is he implicitly conceding that those individuals who lack the capacities and training to understand complex questions about God’s being believe in symbolic fictions? Is Averroes, ultimately, expressing “pastoral” concerns for “ordinary Muslims”\textsuperscript{30} by rationalizing the use of metaphorical fictions, or is it possible to somehow link symbols with truth?

2) Scripture employs dialectical and rhetorical arguments to convince its audience and the contents of such arguments do not necessarily have ontological correlates that are identical to the ideas they generate in an individual’s mind. Given this fact, is Taylor accurate in arguing that the “harmonious” relationship that Averroes upholds between philosophy and scripture is strictly hierarchical? Or is Leaman’s interpretation of

\textsuperscript{27} Averroes, \textit{Harmony}, 49.

\textsuperscript{28} Kemal, \textit{The Philosophical Poetics of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes}, 338.

\textsuperscript{29} “[W]e the Muslim community know definitely that demonstrative study does not lead to [conclusions] conflicting with what Scripture has given us; for truth does not oppose truth but accords with it and bears witness to it” (Averroes, \textit{Harmony}, 50).

Averroes as a perspectival thinker who allows for the co-existence of “a variety of paths to the truth”\(^\text{31}\) more faithful to Averroes?

The first set of questions is intimately related with the manner in which symbols, images, and metaphors relate to their referents and how those referents relate to the truth. One possible way to relate symbols with their referents is to argue that these relationships are ordered through certain conventional structures, rules, or habits. This would effectively mean that symbols arise in particular socio-cultural contexts and that the basic determinants that relate symbols with their referents are environmental and culture-specific. Additionally, since there is no guarantee that conventional and popular opinions are identical with “existent beings,”\(^\text{32}\) both symbols and their referents would not share a necessary ontological relationship with the truth. This scheme of symbolization would confirm that for non-demonstrative classes, Averroes condones erroneous beliefs. Even if it is argued that such erroneous beliefs lead ordinary Muslims to piety and virtue, they are pious fictions at best.

Contrary to the possible path I have charted for describing the process of symbolization, Averroes’ remarks strongly suggest that he does not conceptualize the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized as an arbitrary and purely conventional process. At least as far as scriptural discourse is concerned, there is an organic connection between a symbol and the thing to which it refers. As noted earlier, Averroes argues that God uses symbolic language in scripture to signify complicated and recondite ideas that lie beyond the grasp of “ordinary” individuals.\(^\text{33}\) Whereas the demonstrative class is able to understand these ideas themselves, the non-demonstrative classes have to rely on “likenesses” of such complicated ideas. This means that the meaning of a symbol is not purely a product of conventional rules or habits of interpretation. A symbol shares some form of likeness with that which it symbolizes and its meaning is the reality that God intends to signify through its use. Salim Kemal argues that Averroes does not conceptualize images, metaphors, and symbols as linguistic devices that are determined solely by cultural and linguistic conventions. Kemal notes:

> Averroes clarifies that symbols, images and likenesses *intend the thing of which they are images*. The relation between symbol and thing symbolized is not arbitrary, like that between a sign and what it signifies, because the symbol is an allegorical, metaphorical or analogical expression of *the thing being symbolized*.\(^\text{34}\)

The fact that a symbol is an allegorical or metaphorical expression of the truth does not change the fact that symbols do not *mirror* and correspond with real ontological correlates. To use Averroes’ vocabulary, symbols have an apparent meaning (*ğāhir*) and an inner or interpreted meaning (*bātin*), and it is the latter which is identical with truth.\(^\text{35}\) The non-demonstrative classes only have access to the apparent or literal meaning of symbols in scripture while the demonstrative class has the ability to interpret such symbols. Even though Averroes has

\(^{31}\)Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy*, 193.

\(^{32}\) The subject-matter of philosophic reflection. See fn. 7.


identified real connections between symbols, their interpretations, and the truth—thereby showing that symbolization is not a purely conventional, linguistic phenomenon—he still has to resolve a pressing problem. Non-demonstrative classes believe in the apparent meanings of symbols, which are not identical with reality. How can Averroes claim that it is legitimate to believe in the apparent meaning of such symbols? The resolution to this question lies in the fact that symbols are likenesses, imitations, and approximations of actual things. Even though belief in these likenesses or approximations does not lead to the kind of ontological participation that occurs when the thought in the mind is identical to that which exists outside the mind, there is still an indirect, iconic relationship between a symbolic thought and the reality to which it refers. This indirect connection, secured by the fact that images have been “coined” to serve as “likenesses” of reality, gives Averroes the space to claim that reposing belief in a symbol is not the same as believing in a pious fiction that has no bearing or relationship with truth.

The distinction between the apparent and inner meanings of scripture opens up the basic source of the potential conflict between scripture and philosophy. Averroes notes that the propositional content of scripture either accords with the conclusions of demonstrative reasoning or it is at variance with it. As discussed earlier, this variance is a product of the fact that scripture uses symbolic language, dialectics, and rhetoric to convince ordinary individuals of its veracity. If these symbols are not “excavated” for their inner meaning, the tension between philosophy and scripture cannot be resolved. Averroes argues that it is the prerogative of philosophers to employ allegorical interpretation (ta‘wil) to decipher the real meaning of the symbolic content of scripture. Black describes Averroes’ position in the following terms: “[T]he philosophers alone truly understand the logic and language of Scripture itself… Hence it is the philosopher who determines not only what is true, but even what is a legitimate reflection and imitation of the truth. The philosopher, then, is the ultimate scriptural exegete.” Philosophers “pierce” the scriptural image through their “certain hermeneutics” to unveil its actual meaning. Similarly, Wohlman argues that for Averroes “logico-philosophical truths” serve as the “plumb-line” that guides the process of interpreting the symbolic content of scripture.

My investigation of the first set of questions at the beginning of this section suggests that scriptural discourse is subordinate to philosophy in two basic respects. Firstly, philosophy places its practitioners in a direct ontological relationship with reality while the symbolic content of scripture can only ensure an indirect and approximate relationship with reality. Secondly, scriptural discourse is in need of philosophical interpretation to explicate its meaning. On both these counts, philosophy applies the resources at its disposal to scriptural discourse, which depends on the application of philosophical tools in order to articulate its meaning.

The conclusions of my examination so far are in accord with Richard Taylor’s interpretation of the relationship between philosophy and scripture in Averroes. For Taylor, the principle of the “unity of truth” in Averroes amounts to the fact that philosophical discourse is

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36 Avital Wohlman describes Averroes' understanding of the power of scripture to persuade its audience in the following terms: “For everyone to whom this Word is addressed, it is by virtue of this criss-cross of methods of affirmation—be they by images, plain senses, rigorous proofs, or examples—that God’s will is realized in such a way that He is able to convince any reader” (Avital Wohlman and David Burrell, Al-Ghazali, Averroës and the Interpretation of the Qur’an: Common Sense and Philosophy in Islam [New York: Routledge, 2010], 60).
39 Azadpur, Reason Unbound, 91.
40 Wohlman, Al-Ghazali, Averroës and the Interpretation of the Qur’an, 59.
the “primary methodology” through which scriptural discourse in particular and reality in general can be understood:

…[W]hat Averroes is asserting… is that the primary approach to the understanding of reality and interpreting Religious Law is to be found with the Aristotelian method of philosophical demonstration and that all other methodologies are secondary to this. This is the deeper import of the principle of the Unity of Truth.  

There is a “single standard of truth” to which all forms of discourse are subjected for examination. The next step of my examination is to juxtapose this hierarchical relationship between philosophy and scripture against Oliver Leaman’s interpretation of Averroes as a perspectival philosopher rather than a straightforward rationalist.

Leaman interprets Averroes as a thinker who recognizes that ambiguity and the multiplicity of meaning are essential aspects of the way in which people use language. In Leaman’s reading, Averroes takes account of the fact that claims about reality are issued from differing points of view and that none of these points of view has a privileged or exclusive access to the real:

At one time it was popular for philosophers to argue that, when a physicist and an ordinary person talk about a table, they have in mind different kinds of objects. The physicist knows that a table is ‘really’ a collection of immaterial atoms, while the ordinary people think of it as something solid and stable. Averroes would argue that when we talk about and observe a table, we are looking at one thing from a variety of points of view which are equally valid.

Within this perspectival framework, the vocabulary that is used to understand a phenomenon, such as a table, is determined or governed by the “end” in relation to which we approach the phenomenon in question. So, in the case of a table, when a physicist describes it as a composite of “immaterial atoms,” she approaches it with a view to disclose the physical structure of its constituents. When an “ordinary” individual describes a table as a solid and stable structure, he approaches it as a surface on which to place his food. According to Leaman, Averroes understands that both descriptions of the table are equally accurate because the “accuracy” of linguistic discourse is determined in relation to the context in which it is articulated. Leaman’s

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44 Leaman, Averroes and His Philosophy, 195. Emphasis mine.
45 For the detailed example, see Leaman, Averroes and His Philosophy, 195-196. Leaman describes the way in which Averroes attempts to maintain a multiplicity of approaches to the truth in the following terms: “Ibn Rushd [i.e. Averroes] is trying to highlight the fact that there are a variety of ways of coming to know something, some of which are surer than others, but all of which are acceptable. Once the object of knowledge is acquired then it is known, however that knowledge has been achieved. We know religious truths in different ways, but we really do know exactly the same thing (Oliver Leaman, “Ibn Rushd, Abu’l Walid Muhammad,” ed. Edward Craig, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Volume 4 [New York: Routledge, 1998], 643).
interpretation suggests that Averroes’ epistemological framework does not allow us to speak about (or from) an “ultimate” point of view. The absence of an ultimate point of view complicates the question of comparing different points of view on a particular phenomenon, for comparison between different points of view is possible only in relation to specific purposes and ends.46

The presence of different and equally legitimate points of view in Averroes has important consequences for the performance of ethical actions. Leaman shows that the demonstrative class (or point of view) is not privileged in relation to the non-demonstrative classes when it comes to the performance of ethical action:

It is not correct to say that the non-philosopher has an imperfect view of what he is to do as compared with the philosopher. Indeed, if we take the moral example seriously, a far worthier non-philosopher could be contrasted with a morally weak philosopher. Salvation might be available far more readily to the former than to the latter. Averroes would say that they both know the same thing (how to behave), but they know it in different ways, each way being sufficient to make possible happiness and salvation.47

This radically perspectival presentation of Averroes destabilizes the notion of a strictly hierarchical relationship between different modes of discourse. It also problematizes the kind of relationship Taylor traces between philosophical and scriptural discourse in Averroes. In my estimation, while Leaman’s position gives us the resources to articulate the specific sense in which Averroes is a perspectival thinker, it also overemphasizes the perspectival aspects of Averroes’ thought. In the last part of my inquiry, I modify Leaman’s position in light of Averroes’ observations and Taylor’s commentary to give a more precise account of the relationship between philosophical and scriptural discourse in Faṣl al-mağāl. I sketch out this modification by pointing out two important respects in which Leaman overemphasizes Averroes’ perspectivalism.

The first sense in which Leaman’s characterization of Averroes’ perspectivalism is overstated is that his position cannot account for Averroes’ claims about the ontological character of human knowing. As I showed earlier, Averroes states that demonstrative judgments and concepts are identical with the extra-mental objects to which they refer.48 This runs counter to Leaman’s assertion that Averroes allows for equally legitimate points of view in relation to a given phenomenon. While Averroes would agree that an ordinary individual’s description of a table as a solid surface is a legitimate approximation, one that serves the purposes and goals with respect to which the individual in question uses the table, he would simultaneously affirm that the description of the solid character of the surface of the table as a conglomeration of “immaterial atoms” is a more accurate conceptualization of the object of our consideration.49

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47 Leaman, Averroes and His Philosophy, 190.
48 Butterworth, Averroës’ Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s “Topics,” “Rhetoric,” and “Poetics,” 48. Please see fn. 17 and the discussion on demonstrative reasoning in the first part.
49 Cf. Averroes parable of a physician in Faṣl al-mağāl: “[A doctor’s] aim is to preserve the health and cure the diseases of all the people, by prescribing for them rules which can be commonly accepted, about the necessity of using the things which will preserve their health and cure their diseases...He is unable to make them all doctors, because a doctor is one who knows by demonstrative methods the things which preserve health and cure disease.” A doctor’s conception and understanding of diseases and medicines is a more accurate conception of how disease and
Leaman’s overstatement of the perspectival aspect of Averroes philosophy is also in some sense a product of his understatement of the difference in Averroes between theoretical and practical truths. Taylor shows that, following Aristotle, Averroes understands that there is a distinction between the pursuit of truth in the theoretical and the practical sciences. In the theoretical sphere, the purpose of investigation is the truth itself whereas in the practical sphere, the purpose of investigation is “truth in the form of good action.”50 This means that Leaman is correct in observing that insofar as various modes of discourse (scripture, philosophy, jurisprudence etc.) intend to produce specific practical outcomes, including virtuous behavior and good action, they are equally legitimate paths or points of view. However, if a mode of discourse aims to carry out the theoretical comprehension of being, the parity of points of view does not hold for Averroes: “Truth in the practical sphere of action is determined with a view to the end to be achieved, while truth in the speculative or theoretical sphere is absolute.”51

Rather than serving as reasons for rejecting Leaman’s position, these two criticisms allow us to modify the way we locate elements of perspectival thinking in Averroes. If the end or purpose with respect to which we approach a phenomenon is theoretical comprehension, then philosophical discourse and demonstrative reasoning serve as our yardstick. The “perspective” that philosophical discourse affords us is superior to all other perspectives, including scriptural discourse, so long as our purpose is confined to the theoretical comprehension of truth and being. But this position affirms the legitimacy of multiple modes of reasoning about and articulating practical and ethical concerns. Consequently, the harmonious and non-contradictory relationship between philosophy and scripture in Faṣl al-maṭāl is best described as a “conditional hierarchy.” With respect to the theoretical investigation of being, philosophy is superior to all other modes of discourse because it has the capacity to represent things “just as they are.”52 With respect to any other form of activity, multiple perspectives may serve as legitimate and equally valid guides to action.

Conclusion

Faṣl al-maṭāl’s concern for establishing harmony between ḥikmah and shar’ is occasioned by Averroes’ perception of discrepancies between the plain-sense of scriptural discourse and the conclusions of philosophic reflection or demonstrative reasoning.53 He traces the tensions between philosophy and scripture to the multiple modes of reasoning employed by the latter. Faṣl al-maṭāl indicates both what is distinctive and shared in philosophy and scripture as it argues for a harmonious relation between them. Both exert rational force on their interpreters and offer the possibility of forming relationships with reality. Both possess the capacity to successfully guide and orient human behavior in the pursuit of practical ends and virtuous action. However, while philosophy guarantees the production of concepts and

medicine actually function, whereas patients know both phenomena in ways that are appropriate for their aims and purposes (i.e. using medicine to move from a state of illness to health).
50 Taylor, “Truth Does Not Contradict Truth,” 5; For Taylor’s detailed exposition please see pp. 4-5 and 7-8.
51 Ibid., 8.
52 Butterworth, Averroës’ Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s “Topics,” “Rhetoric,” and “Poetics,” 47.
judgments that are identical with the real, scripture might sometimes offer approximations and likenesses of the real to its readers. And while philosophy is confined only to a specific class or group of individuals within a community, scriptural discourse makes itself available to the community in general. I have argued that Faṣl al-mağāl’s identification of the distinctions and similarities of scripture and philosophy in order to harmonize them avoids the construction of either radical parity or a strict hierarchy between the two. Instead, Averroes’ position is best understood as a conditional hierarchy that mediates between these poles. Philosophical discourse, with its uncompromising reliance on demonstrative reasoning, is superior in relation to scripture from the perspective of the theoretical comprehension of truth. The symbolic, dialectical, and rhetorical contents of scriptural language are incapable of theoretically articulating truth in the way that demonstrative language accomplishes this task. But neither does scriptural discourse construct pious fictions for its interpreters. For Averroes, non-demonstrative language is a legitimate, though approximate and inexact, iconization of reality, which is sufficient for its interpreters in all practical respects except for the theoretical understanding of truth.
Bibliography


