Realism and Liberalism in the Naturalistic-Psychological Roots of

Averroës Critique of Plato’s *Republic*

This paper endeavors to achieve three main goals. First it tries to contextualize Averroës’ main contribution to political philosophy as represented in his critical summary of Plato’s Republic. Second, and more importantly, the paper investigates the grounds of Averroës’ critique of what he saw as the dialectical rather than demonstrative method in approaching the question of the possibility of attaining a perfect state and, in this vein, the relation between the perfect constitution and other degenerative forms of constitution that Plato puts forth in the Republic. Finally, the paper uses the transformation that takes place in Averroës’ psychology from the *Long* to the *Middle Commentary* on the De *Anima* to further elaborate on the scientific grounds of his critique of Plato and through this extrapolate his own political thought in a novel way.

1. Averroës’ critical summary of Plato’s *Republic* in the general context of Muslim Political thought

As numerous commentators have pointed out, Muslim political thought was forged under two main influences: the Persian and the Greek. The former, which tended to be more pervasive, particularly in the eastern part of the Muslim world, did not involve any real critical attempt at investigating political phenomena. Rather, it mainly assumed the form of compendia about the protocols and manners of treating kings and in certain cases
advice to existing kings about how to best govern their subjects in order to further their rule. With the introduction of the Greek heritage in the first half of the ninth century, a different approach to the study of politics was presented. In this vein, the second key Muslim philosopher after al-Kīndī, Abu Nasr al-Fārābī was the first leading Muslim thinker to pay special attention to the ethical and political aspects of Plato’s and Aristotle’s thought. He composed numerous treatises on the nature of the perfect state, the connection between ethics, metaphysics and politics and civil politics. In all of these writings, al-Fārābī devoted a considerable proportion of his efforts to show how a perfect state inspired by religion should be the same as one inspired by philosophy, and that the first ruler of the former, namely the prophet, and first ruler of the latter, viz., the philosopher king, should preach the same theoretical and practical doctrines. While the interest in reconciling religion and philosophy is also taken over by Averroës, a radical break from al-Fārābī, particularly in political philosophy, is made. Due to the prevalence of the Neo-Platonic influence on his thought, al-Fārābī was interested in politics as far as it is extrapolation or more precisely a concrete representation of the Platonic metaphysical system. Averroës, due to the empirical and realistic orientation of his thought, which he more or less owes to Aristotle, was more interested investigating politics as a ramification of the study of man as a natural living substance. Politics for Averroës, as he explicitly states in the introduction to his critical summary of Plato’s Republic, should properly be founded on psychology, psychology being the branch of physics concerned with the form of all animate substances and so man among them.
However, this does not mean that Averroës was not concerned with reconciling the fruits of his philosophical inquiry with the general political schemata of Islam. It is rather that his point of departure was different. Such difference, in and of itself, led him to a more liberal and realistic view than that of al-Fārābī’s.

Against this background the importance of Averroës commentary can be appreciated. Not only is it his key work on Plato but the fact that he wanted to construct Aristotle’s *Politics*, to which he had no access, based on a critique of Plato in light of Aristotle’s psychology and ethics and in light of the Muslim political context of his time — which was a time of great political turmoil and corruption⁴— makes a unique doctrine that is most representative of Averroës own thought rather than his interpretation of Aristotle.

2. The core of Averroës critical commentary on Plato’s *Republic*

Unlike his commentaries on Aristotle, Averroës does not attempt to present a fully fledged account of Plato’s *Republic*. Rather, Averroës skips almost all of Books I and II of the *Republic* to focus on the core of the Platonic argument for a perfect city. In addition Averroës devotes a huge part of his work to a discussion of the different types of governments and constitutions identified by Plato. Though he adds a lot to Plato’s arguments about the nature of these different constitutions and how they degenerate into each other, Averroës continues to follow Plato’s argument in a rather strict sense. It is only towards the end of such discussion and the end of the whole book that Averroës starts to radically criticize Plato. First, he criticizes Plato for claiming that the perfect city cannot be achieved on earth. Subsequently, he writes:
What Plato has said is indubitably not necessary; it is rather what is most likely to happen. The reason is that any existing kind of constitution is bound to make the one evolving under its rule acquire certain characteristics... Since this is the case the transformation of the human behavior from one state to the other may follow the transformation of the constitution of the city... Necessity is only found in natural matter.5

The last sentence provides the key to understanding Averroës critique of Plato. Plato thought that the achievement of the perfect state was almost impossible and that the cycle of degeneration from one form of constitution to the other is bound to follow in the order he delineated because he did not realize that human matters are based on will rather than deterministically following rigid laws and rules like any other natural phenomenon.

But one should immediately pose the following question: how come Averroës rejects the analysis of the human phenomenon in terms of a naturalistic perspective if he starts, as mentioned above, by saying that the roots proper of politics and ethics should be sought in physics and so the branch of physics that inquires into the nature of human living substances: De Anima? Would not the inquiry into psychology reveal the nature of the human substance in terms of necessary causal relation? Further would not these causal relations, once properly understood, tell us how man is bound to act and so allow us to draw a trajectory of the evolution of human societies? In order to respond to these problematic questions one thereby needs to refer to Averroës’ psychology. The question
is which work on psychology. De Anima is among Aristotle’s key works on which
Averroës composed three commentaries: short, middle and long. Each of these of
commentaries, however, reflect a slightly different taking on the text—particularly the
long and the middle commentaries—especially on the question of the material intellect
which, as Alfred Ivry⁶ and Herbert Davidson⁷ rightly remark, constitutes the main focus
of Averroës interpretation of the De Anima.

Here I would like to propose resorting to the Middle Commentary. A number of reasons
underlie such a preference. First and most important, it has been decisively shown by
Alfred Ivry and others that the Middle Commentary on the De Anima, contrary to the
traditional view, was written after the Long Commentary on it, the text most known to the
medieval West⁸. Indeed Averroës refers to the latter several times in the former. This
means that it belongs to the last stage of Averroës’ life. In parallelism to this claim,
Muhammad ‘Ābid al-Jābrī has in a recent study argued, along the same line as Alfred
Ivry, that Averroës critical commentary on Plato’s Republic was also composed around
the same time towards the end of Averroës life. What supports this claim is not only the
manuscript dates, but primarily the fact that it in several of its paragraphs, Averroës refers
to his current political scene and the corruption he was witnessing let alone his own
persecution and imprisonment. For this reason, as one can easily glean from the text,
Averroës criticizes Plato for claiming that the perfect state cannot be achieved in reality
as he was calling upon people to try to make a change and oppose the tyranny prevalent
in Andalusia at the time. Further, in both texts there is an explicit interest in putting
philosophy in direct dialogue with Muslim principles and convictions with the aim of
bringing about an actual reformation in the society. Against this background I may now
turn to the *Middle Commentary* in an attempt to respond to the questions raised above.

3. Averroës' theory of the material intellect and realistic possibility of a perfect state

As indicated above, Averroës, unlike his two key peripatetic forerunners, al-Fārābī and
Avicenna, was consistently concerned with the place and role of the material intellect (*al-
‘ql al-Hyūlānī*) and its relation to the Agent intellect. In the long commentary on the *De
Anima*, Averroës treats the Agent intellect and material intellect as two separate
hypostases. In the *Middle Commentary*, the picture radically changes. The material
intellect, which for Averroës represents the form proper of the human being in actuality
since it is the faculty the actualization of which allows one to attain the highest
perfection, is completely re-defined. Like Avicenna in his characterization of the rational
soul, Averroës goes back to the internal senses (*al-Hawaṣ al-Bātīna*). In this vein
Averroës argues that the material intellect is actualized through the aid of the purposive
inclination of the faculty of imagination to become rational and get connected with the
Agent Intellect. Once the material intellect is actualized in thinking and contemplation it
can, though in an intermittent fashion, attain perfection by uniting with the Agent Active
Intellect. Accordingly, the middle intellect is an intermediary stage between pure thought
thinking itself or what can be described, using a more modern Kantian inspired
terminology, as a rational transcendent self on the one hand, and an empirical self that is
synthesized through imagination out of experience and that strives to be rationally
actualized on the other hand. But how can this theory of the material intellect respond to
the above dilemma regarding the tenability of Averroës’ criticism of Plato’s
deterministically degenerative transformation from one constitution to the other and his radical skepticism about the possibility of achieving a perfect state?

In response to these questions I propose the following answers. As for his conviction of the possibility of attaining the perfect state, Averroës seems to have a different conception of the perfect state from that of Plato. Averroës’ perfect state is not a state achieved by those who are in a constant state of meditating the forms. Plato himself was aware of this problem and so presented it as one of Glaucon’s challenges to Socrates. By contrast, Averroës, who both in his Middle Commentary on the De Anima and the Long Commentary on Metaphysics asserts that no one can maintain the transcendent state of thought thinking itself except on a very sporadic basis, would argue that the perfect state could be established by someone who, given his theory of the material intellect, is constantly striving to connect his two senses of the self or ‘we’s’ as Plotinus would argue in Enneads I.1. The psychological ground upon which Averroës bases his view of the perfect state is more realistic in the sense that perfection is measured by the degree to which one can actualize his rationality. He does not thus set a farfetched metaphysical model of perfection based on purely abstract thought. By contrast he defines perfection, if his theory of the material intellect is properly incorporated into his political thought, in terms of a realistic struggle to relate to and concretely bring into being the pure transcendent norms of reason in the immanence of concrete experience. Perfection is thus set and defined within the limits of what is essentially humanly possible. The perfect state is thereby a state wherein all citizens are in constant strife to actualize their full
rationality in their everyday lives; inasmuch as they persist in this strife they approach the perfection of their humanity.

This leads us to the answer to the second question regarding the relation between the different forms of the constitution. Averroës theory of the material intellect in the *Middle Commentary* is essentially a more liberal theory than that of Plato’s. First of all it overcomes the problem of the myth of metals in which al-Fārābī was also stuck, namely, seeking or waiting for the gold factions of the society to assume power and govern the bronze and silver ones. Alternatively, the theory of the material intellect as it is represented in the *Middle Commentary* depicts the human condition as essentially a condition of striving to relate the transcendent rational dimension of our humanity to the empirical sensual one. It thus advocates an egalitarian view of the human condition. The citizens of any state start from an almost equal condition. Then, based on their strife to relate the rational forms and ideas of their reason to their empirical realities, they can approach the state of perfection. Accordingly, the key factor in determining the evolution of a state into a better form or its degeneration into a worse one is not the naturalistic determinism of the existence of gold or perfect citizens. Rather, the key factor in determining social progress or regress is the will and intention of the totality of the citizens of the state to strive for the actualization of their humanity by applying the transcendent rational principles of reason into the immanence of their lives. This view thus overcomes the implied determinism of Plato’s theory of constitutions in the *Republic*. 
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1 See Ahmad Sha’lān, Al-Ḍarūrī fī Al-Sṣyāṣa: Mukhṭas+ar Kitab Al-Sṣyāṣa l-Aflāṭūn (Beirut, Lebanon: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1998), 14-21.


3 See Ahmad Sha’lān, Al-Ḍarūrī fī Al-Sṣyāṣa: Mukhṭas+ar Kitab Al-Sṣyāṣa l-Aflāṭūn (Beirut, Lebanon: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1998), 48 & 72-75.


5 Ibid, 68.


