Review of La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination, by Jean Michot

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La destinée de l'homme selon Avicenne: Le retour à Dieu (ma'ād) et l'imagination. By JEAN MICHOT. p. xlvii + 237.
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It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the writings of Avicenna (d. 428/1037) have played a role in subsequent schools of Islamic thought in many ways comparable to that of Plato and Aristotle in the West. Hence such outwardly disparate intellectual traditions as post-Ghazalian *kalām,* the many attempts to formulate a speculative framework for Islamic mysticism, and the self-styled "Peripatetic" school all drew much of their conceptual apparatus and systematic expression--if not always their more original inspiration—from the works of the "Leading Master." In addition, the widespread popular adaptations of Avicenna's cosmological, psychological and metaphysical notions offered a systematic world-view providing a scientifically persuasive, yet religiously acceptable, framework for many less intellectual forms of mysticism and spirituality reflected throughout the Sufi poetry and literature of later centuries.

In this context, Professor Michot's long-awaited study should provide a greatly needed comprehensive introduction to the Avicennan features of those later Islamic traditions, as well as indispensable background for students without direct access to the original sources. Its usefulness in that regard is especially enhanced by lengthy translations of many supporting texts, as well as by its detailed bibliography. Moreover, the approach adopted here provides the uninitiated reader with a clear idea of the full *interdependence* of the elements in Avicenna's philosophic system—essential interconnections which are often dealt with only tangentially in the classic studies of narrower areas of his thought. In particular. this approach brings out the potential importance of cosmological elements or Islamic theological issues that modern readers would otherwise naturally tend to overlook. Finally, the author has placed Avicenna squarely in his original historical context, not only through continuous citations from the philosopher's own writings, but also by references to his most influential commentators (Ghazālī, Rāzī, Tūsī, Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā). The result is often to suggest philosophic possibilities (especially with regard to religious and *kalām* topics)

substantially different from those discussed in earlier works focusing on Avicenna's relations to the Aristotelean tradition. or to Averroes and their reception in medieval Europe.

The central theme of this work is the problem posed by Avicenna's scattered references to the hypothesis of an "imaginal," sensible afterlife (corresponding to the scriptural promises of corporeal rewards and punishments) for that vast majority of mankind who have not yet reached their ultimate, intellectual perfection. After presenting the framework of this problem in terms of Avicenna's theory of the twofold functions of prophecy and revelation and his underlying "anthropological dualism," the author carefully examines the possible theoretical grounds for this imaginal eschatology in every relevant area of Avicenna's thought. His method, in each instance, involves three interrelated levels of interpretation: 1) the textual presentation and analysis of Avicennan arguments that could support this hypothesis; 2) summary reference to similar interpretations from later commentators who more openly adopted this "Avicennan" theory: and 3) his own independent suggestions of philosophic possibilities implicit in key Avicennan concepts—an approach in which he often follows the tendencies (and even the conclusions) of such later Islamic thinkers as Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā.

While the particular problem of an imaginal eschatology might at first seem to be of relatively minor significance in the overall context of Avicenna's philosophy, the wider interest of this work lies in the richness of its documentation and its insightful presentation of all the related dimensions of Avicenna's systematic thought-especially those metaphysical and epistemological questions, usually presented in ambiguous religious terms, which came to dominate consideration of his work in the Islamic world. Prof. Michot's dense, but impressively clear analysis begins with the Neoplatonic, spiritualist tendencies in Avicenna's metaphysics and ontology; goes on to outline the corresponding epistemological possibilities (especially the role of the angelic intellects and souls); continues with a suggestive discussion of his "idealism of sensation" and the possible modes of survival of these unenlightened souls; and concludes with the problems still posed by Avicenna's rigorous intellectualism, as highlighted by the contrast with Ghazālī and Ibn ʻArabī. Not surprisingly, the author consistently focuses on the Neoplatonic, spiritualist and religious potentialities in each of these areas of Avicenna's thought. This interpretive emphasis has considerable advantages, but could also pose certain dangers for readers unacquainted with the full scope of Avicenna's writing and alternative interpretations.

In short, this study beautifully illustrates four fundamental features of all of Avicenna's writing that accounted for the extraordinary variety of treatments it received in later Islamic thought. First, there is his clearly intentional. but often ambiguous, use of religious language (including frequent allusions to issues in *kalām* and Ismaili theology), a rhetorical feature which was one of his more noticeable departures from the philosophic tradition of al-Fārābī. Like Prof. Michot, subsequent Islamic interpreters—especially those defending *kalam* positions or forms of Islamic mysticism--tended to take Avicenna's apparent "eschatology," "prophetology." "angelology." etc. (i.e., understood in an explicitly Islamic framework) to be the primary focus of his remarks concerning those subjects, as though his philosophic discussions were intended as supporting explanations of religious beliefs in those areas, and as though popular assumptions concerning those topics could in turn be used to interpret his philosophic thought. In fact,

however, the same remarks could often be construed more rationalistically--i.e., in precisely the opposite direction--as suggesting alternative, critical philosophic perspectives for judging or interpreting such religious beliefs. Secondly, there is Avicenna's notoriously problematic combination of what could be called "Neoplatonic" and "Peripatetic" concepts and tendencies, a pervasive characteristic that has been noted by virtually every later commentator. Often such inner conceptual ambiguities are not simply matters of scholastic doctrine: their bearing on inescapable practical issues involving the aims and presuppositions of man's philosophic (and religious) life is strikingly exemplified in the radically opposing tendencies of later Islamic "Avicennan" traditions.

A third characteristic feature of Avicenna's philosophy is the indeterminacy of many of his most basic notions. A vagueness that was often developed in radically different directions. Many of these areas—such as his conception of the roles of material (or intellectual) "preparedness" for "illumination" and "emanation": the ambiguities in his "formalism" (both ontological and epistemological) between "intellectualist" or far more wide-ranging "spiritualist" interpretations; the exact nature and extent of the contents (spiritual. ethical. etc.) "revealed" by the angelic souls and intellects: the uncertainties surrounding his discussions of the practical intellect-are thoroughly illustrated in this book. (Similar cases. such as Avicenna's conception of the relations between existence and essence, or between his "general metaphysics" and theology, were equally important in later traditions of Islamic thought.) Finally, there is the related problem of the restrictions (and occasionally surprising philosophic opportunities) posed by the ostensibly systematic character of Avicenna's thinking. a feature which—as critics as diverse as Averroes and Ibn Taymīya pointedly remarked—often closely parallels the procedures and results of *kalām.* Given such a logically and metaphysically coherent (and theologically persuasive) structure. it was very hard to liberate thought and expression from the implicit constraints of that system. even for later thinkers starting from radically different insights or presuppositions. Where thinking could be dictated by such inherent conceptual possibilities, rather than by a more profound reflection on reality, the dangers of scholasticization (as with later *kalām)* were very real.

Dr. Michot's book, because of its ambitious scope and rare combination of clarity and thorough attention to detail. sheds much new light on the "Islamic Avicenna" and should become a classic reference for students of the many related traditions of later Islamic thought.

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