Averroism

There are numerous indications that Averroes played important roles in 16th-century philosophy: a surge in translations of his work into Latin; intense discussion of his views among academic philosophers, especially within Italian universities; increased use of the term “Averroist” and religious controversy surrounding some of his interpretations of Aristotle. At the center of the storm was Averroes’ account of the nature of intellect and its role in human thinking. According to Averroes, Aristotle held that there is numerically one material or possible intellect; this view, customarily called “the unicity doctrine,” denies that the individual human soul has an incorporeal part or power. Church authorities censured the unicity doctrine in 1489 and in 1513. Their main objection was that discussion of it undermined faith, especially belief in personal immortality.

This chapter examines several aspects of Averroes influence on 16th-century philosophy: translations of his writings (§II); use of the term “Averroist” (§III); Radical Averroism at the University of Padua (§IV); debate and controversy over the unicity doctrine (§V); and examples of non-heterodox Averroism in logic, natural philosophy and metaphysics (§VI). The chapter begins with some preliminary remarks about Averroes’ life and career (§I).

I. Averroes’ life and career

“Averroes” is the Latinized name of the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd born in Cordoba in 1126. Averroes was learned in several disciplines: philosophy, medicine, law, and Qur’anic interpretation. His most prominent role in the history of philosophy is as a commentator on Aristotle. Between 1169 and 1195, Averroes wrote commentaries on most of the Aristotelian corpus. (One important exception is Aristotle’s Politics, which was unavailable to him; he
commented on Plato’s Republic in its stead.) His commentaries were of three types: short, middle and long. Long commentaries contained the complete text in Arabic along with detailed discussion of the arguments, while short and middle commentaries offered summaries and clarification of key ideas.

Averroes enjoyed positions of prestige for much of his lifetime. He served as chief judge in Cordoba, a position also held by his father and grandfather. His middle and long commentaries on Aristotle were undertaken with the support of the Almohad ruler Abū Ya’qūb Yūṣuf. Toward the end of his life, however, he fell into disfavor; in 1195 he was exiled from Cordoba by Al Manṣūr, the son of Ya’qūb Yūṣuf. Averroes died in Marrakech in 1198. The reasons for Averroes’ exile from Cordoba have not been established with certainty, but it is possible that it had partly to do with Averroes’ position on the relationship between religion and philosophy. This position is most plainly stated in his Decisive Treatise (Faṣl al Maqāl). In that work, Averroes argues that the methods of philosophy are uniquely suited to establish truth (Taylor 2000). The role of religion is to transmit that truth to the masses via narrative and metaphor. The Decisive Treatise was not translated into Latin, but it did circulate in the West in Hebrew translation (Harvey 2003). And the attitude expressed in it can be found in Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle, which were translated into Latin. These also convey the view that matters of truth are to be settled by philosophical means alone.

II. Translation into Latin

A first wave of translations of Averroes into Latin occurred in 12th century Toledo; a second began in the last decades of the 15th century and continued until the middle of the 16th century. The second wave of translations belonged to a period of intensification of teaching and learning, which was the result of several intersecting factors: the invention of printing, an influx
of scholars with knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, and increased numbers of universities and libraries. For the most part, the translated texts were short, middle and long commentaries on Aristotle’s writings on metaphysics, psychology, natural philosophy, logic, rhetoric and poetics (Burnett 1999; Hasse 2006). Generally speaking, the long commentaries had already been translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, while the short and middle commentaries were translated for the first time. Many of new or emended translations were commissioned for inclusion in encyclopedic editions of Aristotle-Averroes, which were comprised of the Aristotelian corpus, Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle and apparatus such as guides to differences between Aristotle and his Arabic interpreter. The 1552-1550 Giunta edition of Aristotle-Averroes is the best example of this sort of undertaking. Its prefatory materials help explain why works by Averroes were translated in the 16th century. They include the following homage to Averroes, written by publisher Thomas Giunta:

When Aristotle dealt with principles, methods, and general things in such a way that he left many things to be inspected and investigated more carefully by others, the Greeks made little (or rather no) effort in doing this. But the Arabs, not content with mere translations, thought that the whole subject matter – i.e. the things themselves which had to be dealt with – should be investigated by them more carefully and fully. In this Averroes especially can be praised. His most solid teaching is not so much drawn from, as squeezed out of, the water-springs of the Greeks. He shone out so much that he alone rightly has claimed the name of ‘Commentator’ for himself. And now it should be clear amongst everybody who has practised philosophy in recent centuries that those parts of philosophy which had been omitted by Aristotle, have been investigated more carefully by no other person, and no one has established them on more solid foundations (Giunta in Burnett 2013: 58).

Giunta introduces Averroes as part of an Arabic philosophical movement, which advanced Greek knowledge. He refers to Averroes by the nickname “the Commentator,” which was routinely used by Medieval Latin authors. The nickname indicated his stature as an interpreter of Aristotle, who was called “the Philosopher.” Giunta emphasizes that the nickname is deserved: publication of Averroes together with Aristotle was partly motivated by the belief that Averroes is an
authority on Aristotle, and that he more than others clarified matters, which Aristotle left obscure. Many of Giunta’s humanist contemporaries did not share these beliefs, however. Some appear to have endorsed Petrarch’s prejudice that no good can come from Arabia (Petrarch 1554: 880; Martin 2007: 13). Furthermore, humanists typically decried the interpretive methods of Averroes (along with those of Scholastic commentators). Averroes adopted an analytic method: he attempted to discern Aristotle’s meaning in a given text in light of principles endorsed by Aristotle in other texts, taking into consideration the interpretations of his Greek and Arabic philosophical predecessors. Humanists favored a philological approach: they applied their expert knowledge of Greek language, culture and history to philosophers and poets alike. They deplored the technical language of Averroes’ commentaries on aesthetic grounds and as impeding clarity. Giunta’s unstinting praise of Averroes is thought to be partly polemical: he means to assert Averroes’ merits against the criticisms of the humanists (Kraye 1996: 149). In the above passage, he specifically targets the humanist claim that Aristotle’s Greek commentators were superior to his Arab commentators and to Averroes in particular. It is worth noting, however, that humanist sympathizers were not universally opposed to Averroes: important exceptions include wealthy sponsors of translations of his work, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), count and philosopher; Domenico Grimani of Venice (1461-1523), cardinal and patriarch of Aquila and dedicated bibliophile; and Ercole Gonzaga (1505-1563) bishop of Mantua, who later became cardinal and presided over the Council of Trent (Hasse 2006: 77-8). These men also had ties to the University of Padua, whose faculty included several figures known for their interest in Averroes.

Additional reasons motivating translations of Averroes are found in the following summary of the works of Averroes included in the 1552-1550 Giunta edition:
All the commentaries of Averroes of Cordoba on these works that have come down to us, and other books of his on logic, philosophy and medicine, of which some too, having escaped the notice of the Latins, have recently been translated by Jacob Mantino; others have been translated by the same scholar in a clearer and more faithful way than ever before, and the rest have been most diligently corrected in almost innumerable places from the manuscripts and the best printed books of the most celebrated philosophers of this time of ours, each having been adorned with a large number of marginal notes (Burnett 2013: 55).

This passage indicates that some of the texts included in the edition were hitherto unknown to European scholars: they are said to have escaped notice in the Latin West. The availability of many of these texts was due to an influx of Jewish scholars into Italy, which was partly a result of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1497. Jewish scholars had available to them numerous Hebrew translations of Arabic philosophical and scientific works including several of Averroes’ short and middle commentaries on Aristotle (Burnett 1999: 193). Most new translations of Averroes were made from Hebrew by Jewish scholars, who were typically respected physicians or teachers of medicine living in Italy (Burnett 1999: 192-3). Specifically mentioned is Jacob Mantino (d. 1549), physician and later professor of medicine at Rome, who was amongst the most prolific of 16th-century translators of Averroes. Mantino is said to have contributed to the 1552-1550 Giunta edition both by making translations of hitherto unknown works, and by providing “clearer and more faithful” renditions of some known works. Furthermore, some existing translations were “corrected in almost innumerable places.” These points are consistent with widespread criticisms of Medieval Latin translations. One problem was their perceived barbarity, which was the result of the literal approach favored by Medieval translators, who were sometimes willing to violate rules of Latin grammar in order to conform to Arabic word order. Burnett explains that “[t]his was regarded as necessary both in order to preserve the ‘truth’ of the original text, and also for moral reasons: it was as a mark of presumptuousness to dare to alter anything in the original text; and a non-literal translation was thought to have become the composition of the translator, no longer that of the original author.”
(Burnett 1999: 188). The merits of literal translation were perhaps more apparent to Medieval translators, whose audiences were generally not readers of Greek or Arabic and thus could not compare translation and original. In 15th- and 16th-century Italy, knowledge of classical Greek, as well as Arabic, was less unusual, and translators valued clarity, smoothness and grammatically correct Latin over word-for-word fidelity to the original text.

III. Use of the term “Averroist”

In addition to being widely esteemed for his work as a commentator on Aristotle, Averroes was also linked to intellectual radicalism within the universities; this was true in the Middle Ages, as well as in the 15th and 16th centuries. The terms “Averroist” and “Averroism” have their roots in this aspect of Averroes’ reception in the Latin West. Diverse authors from the 13th–16th centuries use the term “Averroist,” most often in a disparaging way. The first to do so was probably Thomas Aquinas; he refers to “Averroists” who defend the unicity doctrine, a position he considers false in itself and false as an interpretation of Aristotle (Aquinas 1993: 37). In the 15th and 16th centuries, the Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the Scotist Antonio Trombetta (d. 1517), as well as the Thomist Thomas Cajetan (1469-1534) use the term as Aquinas does. Writing at the outset of the 14th century, Raymond Llull (1232-1315) uses the term “Averroist” to refer to philosophers who defend heterodox positions, some of which are not found in Averroes (Llull 1975; Hasse 2007b: 311). In a similar vein, Petrarch (1304-1374) describes Averroists as a “sect of men who practice philosophy after the modern fashion and think they are not efficient enough if they do not bark at Christ and His heavenly doctrine” (Petrarch 1948: 140; Kristeller 1952: 59-65).
On the basis of these and similar examples of the use of the term “Averroist,” historians of philosophy coined the term “Averroism” to refer to the activity of philosophers who follow Averroes either in defending a cluster of heretical positions or in championing the disciplinary independence of philosophy from theology (cf. Renan 1852; Hayoun and de Libera 1991; Ebbesen 1998; Hasse 2004, 2007). It is important to note that both ways of using the term associate Averroes with intellectual radicalism. While this association has some justification, it should be qualified in light of the following points. Opposition to Averroist professors, to certain of Averroes’ positions and to Averroes himself coexisted with widespread esteem for Averroes’ work as a commentator. Much of what Averroes wrote was not incompatible with religious doctrine. And authors critical of some of Averroes’ positions still considered his interpretations of Aristotle on diverse matters valuable and important; these include major theologians, such as Aquinas and Scotus in the 13th century and Cajetan and Suarez in the 16th century. Furthermore, 16th-century authors sometimes used the term “Averroist” to refer to those who upheld Averroes’ views on matters, which did not contravene faith (Martin 2007: 14-15). The neutral sense of “Averroist” is discussed in §VI; Radical Averroism is discussed in §IV-V.

IV. Radical Averroism at the University of Padua

Radical Averroism flourished in several centers from the 13th-16th centuries: at the University of Paris in the 13th century and again in the 14th century; at the University of Bologna in the 14th century and at the University of Padua in the 15th and 16th centuries (Maier 1949; Kuksewicz 1968). While each flourishing of Radical Averroism has its own causes and consequences, they share the common feature of emerging from arts faculties, where professors advanced a cluster of heterodox positions found in Averroes’ writings. In the 13th century, their
knowledge of Averroes was derived primarily from his long commentaries on Aristotle’s writings in psychology, metaphysics and natural philosophy. As we have seen, in the 15th and 16th centuries, a wider selection of Averroes’ writings was available; these included short and middle commentaries on Aristotle, as well as *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. Averroes wrote the latter treatise in response to Ghazālī’s scathing critique of Arabic Aristotelian philosophy, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In this work, he undertakes not only to rebut Ghazālī’s charges of inconsistency against Aristotelian accounts of creation, causality and the soul, but also to defend positions closer to Aristotle against innovative theories by Arabic Aristotelians such as Avicenna (980-1037) (Black: 2003). An edition and commentary of *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* was among the early publications of Paduan Averroist Agostino Nifo (1469-1538). Published in 1497, it marks the first appearance in print of a Latin translation of this text (Holland 2013).

The most prominent positions associated with Radical Averroism were the following: that in Aristotle’s view, and according to natural reason, there is numerically one material or possible intellect (the unicity doctrine); that happiness can be attained in this life; that the world is eternal; and that God does not know particulars. We can gain a basic understanding of these positions from Averroes himself. As Averroes sees it, the unicity doctrine is the most plausible interpretation of Aristotle’s claims about intellect in *On the Soul* III 4-5. There Aristotle states that thinking involves a productive factor (which “makes all things”) and a receptive factor (which “receives all things”). Among medieval authors, the productive factor is called “agent intellect” and the receptive factor is called “material” or “possible intellect.” Among Ancient Greek commentators on Aristotle, as well as Islamic Aristotelians, agent intellect was almost universally considered a substance separate from the human soul, whereas material or possible
intellect was considered a faculty of the human soul. Some philosophers, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, held the material intellect to be corporeal. Others, such as Avicenna, defended a dualist account on which the material or possible intellect is incorporeal. Both of these positions assign a material intellect to each human being. In his long commentary, Averroes argues that neither position accords with Aristotle’s claims about the material or intellect in *On the Soul*. Averroes’ position (like Alexander’s) denies that the individual human soul has any incorporeal part or power, which could survive the death of the body (Averroes 2009). It thus conflicts with the Christian account of personal immortality, as well the doctrine of reward and punishment after death. The latter point is related to the question of human happiness. Averroes argued that the ultimate happiness of a rational being must consist in perfect knowledge; if it is achieved at all, it is achieved through our scientific endeavors in this life. Averroes’ position on this issue conflicts with the Christian view that ultimate human happiness is found in heaven. Moreover, it conflicts with certain consequentialist accounts of moral motivation: absent the doctrine of personal immortality, right action cannot be motivated by the threat of punishment or the promise of reward in the afterlife.

While Averroes’ unicity doctrine and his account of human happiness stand in tension with Christian accounts of human nature and our ultimate end or purpose, his defense of the world’s eternity and his denial of God’s knowledge of particulars also diverge from the Christian conception of God. In his *Physics*, Aristotle appears to deny that the world had a beginning, and to defend a conception of God as a prime mover: God functions as the ultimate source of continuous, orderly motion by being a final cause, rather than as a creator *ex nihilo*. Averroes’ commentaries reflect this view; in addition, his arguments in the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* suggest that the doctrine of creation in time is philosophically indefensible. On the one hand, it
appears to conflict with divine immutability: how can an eternal, unchanging agent be the sufficient cause of a temporal effect (Averroes 2008: 1-8). On the other hand, if the universe is created at one time, rather than at another, then God must choose that it be created at one time, rather than at another. But prior to creation, nothing could distinguish one time from another, and so God could have no reason for choosing that the world be created at one time rather than another. This means that the doctrine of creation in time involves an arbitrary choice on God’s part, which violates the principle of sufficient reason (Averroes 2008: 21-23).

Averroes denies that God knows particulars for reasons having to do with Aristotle’s theory of knowledge. Aristotle advocates a division of cognitive labor according to which particulars are perceived through the senses and imagination, whereas universals are grasped by intellect. For example, we see and hear particular dogs through our external senses, and we can as it were picture them in our imaginations; whereas we know the canine essence through intellect. Since faculties of sensation and imagination require a body, they cannot be attributed to a wholly incorporeal being such as God. This line of argument suggests that while God cannot know particulars, he does know universals; but Averroes raises concerns about the latter view as well. In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, he argues that to attribute knowledge of universals to God is to attribute plurality to God. By “knowledge of universals” is meant knowledge of diverse species and genera; if God knows these, then there is plurality in his knowledge: “the most competent philosophers therefore do not call God’s knowledge of existents either universal or individual” (Averroes 2008: 280). Furthermore, knowledge of universals involves intellect’s being in potency and being the patient of an active cause, whereas the divine intellect “is pure act and a cause.” God’s knowledge is thus incomparable to ours: “for in so far as God does not think other things as being other than Himself His essence is not passive knowledge, and in so far as
He thinks them as being identical with His essence, His essence is active knowledge” (Averroes 2008: 280). In this passage, as well as in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Averroes defends a conception of God as thought thinking itself. On this account of God’s knowledge, he can neither know individual human beings, nor even the essence of humanity except insofar as such knowledge is contained in God’s knowledge of himself.

Taken together, these positions present an account of humanity, God and their relationship, which is deeply antagonistic to the Christian account. An individual human being is a material substance without an incorporeal soul through which she will survive bodily death. Her happiness is not to be found in a blissful afterlife: she can attain happiness here and now through intellectual development. Her God is not a providential creator, who is concerned about her welfare and who metes out just punishment and reward, but rather is an impersonal source of order. Averroes takes these points to reflect Aristotle’s writings, as well as to accord with the principles and methods of Aristotle’s philosophy. Furthermore, he holds them as true: for Averroes, correct interpretation of Aristotle, together with correct application of the principles and methods of his philosophy, yields truth. This is an important difference between Averroes himself and Radical Averroists in the Latin West: the latter did not assert heterodox positions as true; rather, they asserted them as correct interpretations of Aristotle and as conclusions established within the disciplinary parameters of philosophy. On the other hand, Radical Averroists did follow Averroes in advocating independence of philosophy from theology, arguing that the meaning of Aristotle’s texts should be sought without regard to its confluence with Christian belief. More generally, philosophers should investigate all manner of things by means of empirical evidence and reason without regard to faith. This commitment to the autonomy of philosophy challenged the view that philosophy is the handmaid of theology.
At the center of Radical Averroism in the 16th century was the University of Padua. The rise of Radical Averroism at Padua is explained by two main factors. Conditions at Italian universities, beginning in the 14th and early 15th centuries, nurtured the disciplinary independence of philosophy from theology. In contrast to northern institutions, the study of medicine (not theology) was predominant within these universities, and the study of natural philosophy was predominant within their departments of philosophy. The independence of philosophy was also encouraged by the curriculum of study, which included little to no theology (Grendler 2002: 282). At the University of Padua, this situation changed at least partly as a consequence of the activity of Averroists. The last quarter of the 15th century saw the establishment of three new professorships at Padua: one in Scotist metaphysics (to complement a post in Thomist metaphysics established mid-century), as well as two positions in theology, one of which was held by a Dominican Thomist and the other by a Franciscan Scotist (Grendler 2002: 286-7). In a letter requesting a salary increase for the Scotist theologian, Bishop Pietro Barozzi (1443-1507) remarked that his Scotist teaching “is like a medicine for the errors on the eternity of the world, on the unity of the intellect, on nothing coming from nothing, and so forth, which abound among the philosophers” (Barozzi in Grendler 2002: 288).

While conditions at Italian universities facilitated the development of Radical Averroism at Padua, particular arts masters were the more proximate causes of its flowering. Many of those called “Paduan Averroists” were related as teacher to student (Hasse 2007b: 323). For example, both Agostino Nifo and Pietro Pomponazzi were students of Nicoletto Vernia, who was a student of Gaetano da Thiene (1387–1465), who was a student of Paul of Venice (1369/72-1429). A member of the Augustinian order, Paul of Venice studied at Padua and Oxford, taught at Padua and Siena and lectured in Bologna. While his works on natural philosophy were widely read, his
most important contributions to the history of philosophy were influential expositions of
terminist logic. Paul was an important originator of a Paduan approach to philosophy in which
Averroes is given prominence in the classroom and in which positions inspired by Averroes’
commentaries and other writings are endorsed not as true, but rather as correct according to
Aristotle and correct according to the principles of natural philosophy. This is the position Paul
takes with respect to the unicity doctrine in his *Summary of Natural Philosophy*. While in his
commentaries on Aristotle’s *On the Soul* and *Metaphysics*, he argues that the doctrine is to be
rejected on the basis of the broader principles of metaphysics, and he endorses a Thomistic
position on which the material or possible intellect is multiplied in accordance with the number
of human beings and is the substantial form of the body (Conti 1992).

Paul’s approach to philosophy continues to flourish at Padua in the 15th and 16th
centuries. In his edition and commentary on Averroes’ *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, the
young Agostino Nifo refers to Averroes as the “priest of Aristotle” and reports that he tells his
students “that Averroes is Aristotle transposed, for when a man considers the foundations of
Averroes and will have gathered them together perfectly with the words of Aristotle, he will find
disagreements only in an imaginative way” (Nifo in Mahoney 1970: 453-4). Nifo attributes to
Averroes and Aristotle the heterodox positions mentioned above; although the *Incoherence* is not
a commentary on Aristotle, Nifo appears to take the views Averroes expresses in it to reflect
Aristotle’s own views. But he also mentions that Christians need not accept Averroes’
conclusions, since they need not accept their principles. Mahoney notes that his attitude in the
commentary on the *Incoherence* toward conflict between religion and philosophy resembles that
of John of Jandun (Mahoney 1970: 454). According to Jandun, certain truths of Christianity,
such as personal immortality, cannot be established in philosophy because its method
“emphasizes the evidence of the senses,” but they can be established in theology, which “emphasizes the authority of the saints, sacred scripture and faith” (South 2003: 373). Like Jandun, Nifo attempts in his commentary on the Incoherence to reconcile conflict between Averroes and Christian doctrine on the ground that while philosophy is limited in its access to truth due to its reliance on empirical claims, Christians are not so limited: through prophecy, they have access to truths that transcend the senses.

Even though Radical Averroist arts masters did not assert heretical positions as true, their views were still considered threatening. For they emphasized the tension between Christianity and Aristotle, whom many held in high regard, and they insisted that when we leave faith out of our deliberations, and rely solely on experience and reason, we will draw conclusions opposed to Christian doctrine. Their views were therefore seen to promote unbelief. Radical Averroism at Padua was twice the target of formal sanction by Church authorities around the turn of the 16th century. Their prohibitions focused on Averroes’ unicity doctrine.

V. Debate and controversy over the unicity doctrine

It is important to note that Radical Averroism – whether in the 13th or the 16th century – did not involve strict doctrinal unity. Given the focus of research, we can best survey diverse opinions amongst 16th-century Radical Averroists with respect to the unicity doctrine. This issue has been the focus of scholarly attention partly because it was the focus of censure by Church authorities. By examining debates about the unicity doctrine amongst philosophers at Padua, as well as opposition to it from religious quarters, we can gain a better understanding of the distinctive features of Radical Averroism in the 16th century and its importance for the history of philosophy.
Averroes struggled over many years to interpret Aristotle’s puzzling remarks about intellect in *On the Soul* III 4-5 (Taylor 2004). The unicity doctrine is his mature solution to various difficulties posed by those remarks. The following passage plays a crucial role in Averroes’ argument for the unicity doctrine:

Since everything is a possible object of thought, intellect in order, as Anaxagoras says, to dominate, that is to know, must be pure from all admixture; for the co-presence of what is alien to its nature is a hindrance and a block: it follows that it can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity. Thus that in the soul which is called intellect (by intellect I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges) is, before it thinks, not actually any real thing. For this reason it cannot reasonably be regarded as blended with the body: if so, it would acquire some quality, e.g., warmth or cold, or even have an organ like the sensitive faculty: as it is, it has none. It was a good idea to call the soul ‘the place of forms’, though this description holds only of the intellective soul, and even this is the forms only potentially, not actually (Aristotle 1984, trans. modified: 429a 18-27).

In this passage, Aristotle is concerned with intellect in its receptive role, which his Greek, Arabic and Latin commentators call “material” or “possible” intellect. Averroes interprets the passage to offer two main premises in support of the conclusion that the material intellect is “neither a body nor a form in a body:” (1) the material intellect can receive all material forms, and (2) what can receive φ cannot itself be φ (Averroes 2009: 302). The first premise reflects Aristotle’s claim that “everything is a possible object of thought.” Averroes takes this to mean that every type of thing in the world – every species of plant, animal and so on – is a potential object of thought. Particular plants and animals are substances composed of two principles, (a) material form and (b) matter. Material form is the principle by which a material substance is a member of a species. If every type of thing in the world is a potential object of thought, then intellect must be able to receive every type of material form. He thus interprets Aristotle’s claim that everything is a possible object of thought to mean that material intellect can receive all material forms.

The second premise in support of the conclusion that the material intellect is incorporeal – what can receive φ cannot itself be φ – reflects Aristotle’s claim that if intellect had a nature of
its own, that nature would impede it in performing its cognitive function. Averroes interprets this point in light of Aristotle’s suggestion that intellect’s receptive role involves it undergoing a sort of change. Before the change, the material intellect is devoid of \( \varphi \). The change terminates in material intellect’s reception of \( \varphi \). If the material intellect were a body or a form in a body, then it would not be devoid of all material forms. In that case, it would not be able to receive all material forms: for what can receive \( \varphi \) cannot itself be \( \varphi \).

Averroes concludes that considerations related to material intellect’s cognitive role “moved Aristotle to set forth this nature, which is other than the nature of matter, other than the nature of form, and other than the nature of the composite” (Averroes 2009: 305). He then remarks that this same consideration brought several commentators, including Theophrastus and Themistius, to hold that the material intellect is neither generable nor corruptible: “For everything which is generable and corruptible is a determinate particular; but it has already been demonstrated that [the material intellect] is not a determinate particular nor a body nor a form in a body” (Averroes 2009: 305). If the material intellect is not generable or corruptible, then \( \textit{a fortiori} \) it is not generated when any individual human being is generated nor is it corrupted when any individual human being dies. This shows that the material intellect is not multiplied in accordance with the number of human beings. Averroes’ argument for the unicity doctrine opposes both the materialism of Alexander of Aphrodisias and the dualism of Avicenna. Against Alexander, Averroes contends that material intellect must be incorporeal in order to perform its cognitive function. Against Avicenna, he contends that the incorporeity of material intellect entails that it cannot be generated: for whatever is generated is generated from matter. In that case, material intellect cannot be generated when a human being is generated and so cannot be multiplied in accordance with the number of human beings. Among the most important
implications of Averroes’ conclusion is that according to Aristotle, the individual human soul has no incorporeal part or power. Material intellect is not a part or power of the individual human soul but rather a separate, unique substance, which aids human thinking: it serves as the “place” of the intelligible forms, which we employ whenever our thinking involves universals (Black 1999). Material intellect is not the seat of individual consciousness, as Avicenna held; according to Averroes, the brain-based faculty of imagination plays that role (Black 1993: 369).

Averroes’ account of the material or possible intellect was very successful at Padua, where a long line of arts masters upheld his conclusion that Aristotle means to assert its incorporeity and numerical unity. One important exception to this tradition was Gaetano da Thiene, student of Paul of Venice and teacher of Nicoletta Vernia. Gaetano held a disjunctive view according to which Aristotle must mean either that the possible intellect is individual or that it is immortal (Kessler 1988: 491). If he holds it to be immortal, then it is not generable or corruptible and so cannot be individual, i.e., it cannot be multiplied in accordance with the number of human beings. This position seems to find support in Aristotle’s discussion of the material or possible intellect in On the Soul III 4. On the other hand, if Aristotle holds the possible intellect to be individual, he must also hold that it is generated when the human being is generated; but if the possible intellect is generable then it must also be corporeal and corruptible. This position derives support from the idea that Aristotle considers intellect as a part or power of the soul, together with his general claim that the soul is the form of the body; in that case, the human soul, like other types of form, is generated when the composite is generated. Gaetano also suggests a way to unify these opposed positions: the intellective soul could be both individual and immortal were it created by God when a human body is generated by procreation. As we
have seen, Averroes’ Islamic philosophical predecessor, Avicenna, developed such a position. Similar views were also endorsed by Scholastic philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas.

Nicoletta Vernia’s support for the unicity doctrine is partly framed as a response to Gaetano: he rejects his teacher’s account of an intellective soul both individual and immortal as contrary to principles of natural philosophy, which does not allow for creation _ex nihilo_. Vernia is thought to be the chief target of the first formal sanction of Radical Averroism at Padua: Bishop Barozzi’s 1489 *Edict against disputants on the unity of the intellect* (Grendler 2002: 287; Ragnisco 1891: 8-9). The decree, which was addressed to professors of philosophy at the University of Padua and their students, forbade public disputations on Averroes’ unicity doctrine. In his decree, Bishop Barozzi draws an analogy between state regulation of poison and state regulation of the unicity doctrine. Poison is dangerous – it can kill the body – but it is also beneficial: it can be used to cure the body. The state does not ban poison but rather regulates it; for example, it makes it a crime to leave poison openly on the table, even if no one dies as a result. The unicity doctrine is as dangerous to the soul as poison is to the body: the doctrine entails the denial of personal immortality, and thus the denial of reward and punishment in the afterlife; it may therefore encourage people to believe that they will not be punished for wrongdoing. Due to its danger to souls, the doctrine must be regulated. The analogy suggests that the unicity doctrine is useful in some way, but that this value must be weighed against its potential to promote unbelief and wrongdoing. In keeping with the analogy, the decree did not ban the teaching of the unicity doctrine or other heretical positions as correct interpretations of Aristotle, but rather public disputation of such positions (Grendler 2002: 285).

In the years following Bishop Barozzi’s decree, Vernia disavowed the unicity doctrine. He emphasized that he had never held the doctrine as true but only as correct according to
Aristotle. And he abandoned the latter position in favor of the view that the intellective soul is the form of the body, and that it is created when the body is generated by natural processes (Hasse 2004: 136). One of Vernia’s students, Agostino Nifo, underwent a similar transformation.

In his edition and commentary on Averroes’ *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, as well as in an early commentary on Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, Nifo endorses Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle’s account of intellect (though, as mentioned above, he denies the truth of this position). But by the time of writing his *On the Intellect* in 1503, he not only maintains that Averroes misinterprets Aristotle, but also argues that the individuality and immortality of the possible intellect is demonstrable (Mahoney 1970: 453-4). His arguments rely on Medieval Latin interpretations of Aristotle’s position on the immortality of the soul, especially those of John Duns Scotus (in *Opus Oxoniense*, IV, dist. 43, q. 2). Scotus held that Aristotle’s position on immortality could not be determined because he makes conflicting statements about it; in support of this view, he identified passages from Aristotle, which speak to both sides of the issue.

Against Scotus, Nifo deems some of those passages sufficient proof that Aristotle endorsed immortality. An important passage is Aristotle’s claim at *Generation of Animals* II 3 736b 27-28 that intellect enters the body from outside and is divine. In this way intellect – the principle of understanding – is said to differ from the nutritive and sensitive principles, which cannot exist without a body, and so cannot enter from outside. Nifo maintains that in this passage, Aristotle means to say that the generation of a human being differs from that of other animals in that the human intellective soul is created when a human body is generated by procreation. In effect, the mature positions of both Vernia and Nifo, adopted after Barozzi’s decree, attribute to Aristotle himself a position defended by Avicenna and Aquinas, and endorsed by at least one of their Paduan philosophical predecessors, Gaetano da Thiene.
The role of Bishop Barozzi’s decree in Vernia’s and Nifo’s reversals of opinion on the unicity doctrine is unclear. It seems likely that the decree encouraged them to develop views more in accord with Christianity. On the other hand, both authors give philosophical reasons for their reversals; in addition, Nifo claims that reading Aristotle in his own language was a factor (Hasse 2004: 136; Mahoney 1970: 459). The general effectiveness of Bishop Barozzi’s decree is also unclear: for Radical Averroism persisted at Padua despite the decree, attracting censure from higher Church authorities some twenty years later in the form of a 1513 bull produced by the Fifth Lateran council. The bull condemned those who held the intellectual soul to be mortal, or maintained its numerical unity. (The former position was associated with Alexander of Aphrodisias). The council approved the bull, but there were two dissenters, one of who was the eminent Dominican Thomas Cajetan; the dissenters maintained that “philosophy should not be bound by theological positions” (Grendler 2002: 289). The bull directed teachers of philosophy as follows:

[W]hen they explain or address to their audience the principles or conclusions of philosophers, where these are known to deviate from the true faith – as in the assertion of the soul’s mortality or of there being only one soul or of the eternity of the world and other topics of this kind – they are obliged to devote their every effort to clarify for their listeners the truth of the Christian religion, to teach it by convincing arguments, so far as this is possible, and to apply themselves to the full extent of their energies to refuting and disposing of the philosophers’ opposing arguments (Grendler 2002: 289-90).

The bull attempts to circumvent the philosophers’ tendency to present positions contrary to faith as true according to the methods of philosophy; it requires them to go further: they should also attempt to establish by argument the truth of Christian doctrine.

Vernia’s successor in the chair of philosophy at Padua was another of his students, Pietro Pomponazzi (Pine: 1986). Like his teacher Vernia and his fellow student Nifo, Pomponazzi also changed his mind about the merits of the unicity doctrine. At first convinced that Averroes
offered the correct interpretation of Aristotle, Pomponazzi came to hold the unicity doctrine false as an interpretation of Aristotle, and false according to natural reason. But Pomponazzi’s change of mind did not tend in the direction encouraged by the Lateran decree. He came instead to endorse a materialist interpretation of Aristotle akin to that of Alexander of Aphrodisias, which he defends against Averroes and against Thomas Aquinas in *On the Immortality of the Soul*, published in 1516.

Pomponazzi summarizes the unicity doctrine, which he attributes both to Averroes and to the Ancient Greek commentator Themistius, as the view that “the intellective soul is distinct in its existence (realiter) from the corruptible soul, but is one in number for all men, while the mortal soul is multiplied” (Pomponazzi 1948: 285). He also states that Averroes and Themistius hold this view on the basis of Aristotle’s demonstration (in *On the Soul* III 4) that the material or possible intellect “is unqualifiedly unmixed and immaterial, and in consequence eternal” (Pomponazzi 1948: 285). As a report on Averroes’ position, this passage is roughly correct on several points: as we have seen, Averroes considers Aristotle to argue that the material intellect must be incorporeal to perform its cognitive function, and to infer from this conclusion that it is not generable or corruptible. This means that it neither comes into nor goes out of existence; it is eternal. On the other hand, the report may err in attributing to Averroes the view that an individual human being has two souls, or, to use Pomponazzi’s terminology, the view that the human soul or form is twofold (ancipitis), comprised of the intellective soul, which is one for all and immortal, and the sensitive soul, which is multiplied in accordance with the number of human beings and mortal. John of Jandun held a similar view, considering Averroes to distinguish two types of bodily form. One type – a material form – is united in existence with the body; the sensitive soul is a form of the first type. The second type exists outside the body, but
operates in the body; the intellective soul is a form of the second type (Mahoney 1987: 274-5; Brenet: 2008). In his response to Pomponazzi, published in 1518, Agostino NiFo objects that the claim that Averroes considers the human soul or form as twofold errs by attributing to Averroes himself the position of his Medieval interpreter John of Jandun (Hasse 2007b: 327).

Pomponazzi’s attack on the unicity doctrine places great emphasis on a passage from On the Soul I 1, in which Aristotle asks whether all the affections of soul are affections of the composite of body and soul, or whether any is peculiar to the soul itself, and answers as follows: To determine this is indispensable but difficult. If we consider the majority of them, there seems to be no case in which the soul can act or be acted upon without involving the body; e.g. anger, courage, appetite, and sensation generally. Thinking seems the most probable exception; but if this too proves to be a form of imagination or to be impossible without imagination, it too requires a body as a condition of its existence (Aristotle 1984: 642; 403a 3-10).

Pomponazzi focuses on Aristotle’s final point in this passage: if thinking (a) is imagining or (b) requires imagination, then thought requires a body (since imagination is a corporeal power). Pomponazzi interprets the passage as identifying conditions for dependence. If thinking is imagining, then it depends on the body as upon a subject. In other words, if thinking is imagining, and since imagination is a corporeal power, then the subject of thought – that in which thought occurs – is a body; in that case, thinking depends on the body. On the other hand, if thinking requires imagination, then it depends on the body as upon an object. In other words, if thinking requires imagination, and since imagination is a corporeal power, then thinking depends on the body; the further claim that thinking depends on the body as upon an object involves the assumption that the role played by the imagination in thought is that of the object of thought; the images of sensible things drawn from experience are what we think about. On the basis of these conditions for dependence, Pomponazzi develops a disjunctive condition for inseparability: he states, “it is enough for inseparability alternatively to be in an organ as in a subject or to depend
upon it as upon an object” (Pomponazzi 1948: 291). In other words, if a corporeal organ is the subject of thought or provides an object on which thought depends, then thinking is inseparable from a corporeal organ. Pomponazzi reasons that if thinking is inseparable from a corporeal organ then the intellective soul is inseparable from the body. To these considerations, Pomponazzi adds Aristotle’s well-known point in *On the Soul* III 7 431a 15-17 that the soul never thinks without an image. He takes these points to show that Aristotle considers the intellective soul to be inseparable from the body. And he concludes that Aristotle cannot consistently hold the intellective soul to be truly immaterial and immortal. This line of reasoning is applied not only against Averroes, but also against Thomas Aquinas. Against Aquinas, the argument is perhaps more effective: since Aquinas does in fact argue that the intellective soul can exist without the body. Averroes argues that intellect is a substance separate from the body, but not that it can exist without the body.

While Pomponazzi’s rejection of Averroes position on the incorporeity and unity of intellect is significant, we should take care not to overstate their philosophical differences. Pomponazzi follows Averroes on many issues, some of which pertain to the debates about intellect and immortality; for example, Pomponazzi contends against Aquinas and against his some of his contemporaries at Padua, such as Nifo, that the claim that intellect is multiplied in accordance with the number of human beings, can be reconciled with Aristotle only if we understand the soul to be a material form (Pomponazzi 1948: 310-11). Furthermore, Pomponazzi’s rejection of Averroes’ unicity doctrine did not coincide with a wholesale rejection of Averroes or a reversal of opinion about the overall value of his commentaries: on the contrary, he continues to engage with Averroes in his later career; this was true also of Agostino Nifo. A more striking commonality between Pomponazzi and Averroes has not to do with doctrine, but
rather with method. In his introduction, Pomponazzi states that he treatise will address two questions about immortality put to him by a former student: “First, leaving aside revelation and miracles, and remaining entirely within natural limits, what do you yourself think in this matter? And, second, what do you judge was Aristotle’s opinion on the same question?” (Pomponazzi 1948: 281). In pursuing these questions, Pomponazzi follows the practice of several of his teachers at Padua, of Medieval Latin Averroists, and of Averroes himself: he declares the autonomy of philosophy from theology or religion. This practice shapes his discussion as a whole; his arguments – whether against the unicity doctrine, dualism or Thomism – proceed by appeal to Aristotle and to the evidence of reason and sense, without regard to scripture or consonance with religious doctrine. Pomponazzi thus follows the practice of several of his teachers at Padua and of Averroes himself: he declares the autonomy of philosophy from theology or religion. While taking this stance was courageous in light of the bull issued by the Lateran council just three years before, it should be noted that Pomponazzi had powerful friends, who could help protect him from disciplinary procedures.

Examination of debate and controversy over the unicity doctrine helps illustrate the character of Radical Averroism at Padua. Averroes’ leading influence in the arts faculty at Padua is shown by the fact that his unicity doctrine was the backdrop against which diverse positions were articulated, and was the youthful opinion of those who eventually developed opposing interpretations. Furthermore, Paduan Averroists are far from united. And their disputes concerned the correct understanding of both Aristotle and Averroes: they criticize one another for attributing to Averroes himself views developed by his Medieval interpreters. We saw just one example of this from Nifo, but there were many others. Indeed, Dag Hasse has argued that this concern for correct understanding of Averroes’ own view is distinctive of Paduan
Averroism. Radical Averroists in 14th century Bologna tended to follow John of Jandun, who was an important figure in the transference of Radical Averroism from Paris to Italy. By contrast, Paul of Venice initiates a Paduan tradition of questioning Jandun’s account of Averroes, and, more broadly, of debating the correct interpretation of Averroes (Hasse 2007b: 324).

Finally, examination of debate and controversy over the unicity doctrine illustrates a tradition amongst professors of philosophy at Padua of distinguishing the conclusions of natural philosophy, construed as conclusions based on reason and experience, from conclusions that rely on faith and revelation. This tradition is tied to a concern to distinguish Aristotle’s own view from Christianizing tendencies of Thomas Aquinas and other Scholastics. A dedication to the disciplinary independence of philosophy is widely considered the most significant feature of Averroism in 16th-century Padua. This feature is indeed important. On the other hand, scholars have sometimes overstated the contribution of Paduan Averroism to secularization (Kristeller 1968; Martin 2007). And emphasis on Radical Averroism has impeded a wider understanding of the role of Averroes and his followers in the period. Furthermore, the development of countervailing tendencies within Averroist circles at Padua must be acknowledged. These can be seen in Vernia’s and Nifo’s eventual rejection of the unicity doctrine. Both philosophers came to advocate the demonstrability of the individuality and immortality of the intellective soul. They thereby rejected the Radical Averroist view of the unicity doctrine as true according to natural reason. Their rejection of this strategy was probably not due solely to opposition from Church authorities: philosophical support for the demonstrability of the individuality and immortality of the intellective soul came from several different quarters in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Renaissance Platonists, such as Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), developed Platonist theologies compatible with Christianity and maintained against Averroes and Averroists that personal
immortality could be demonstrated by philosophical argument (Copenhaver 2009). Anti-Averroist arguments were also advanced by Dominican theologians, who also followed Thomas Aquinas both in rejecting Averroes’ interpretations of Aristotle and in maintaining the philosophical demonstrability of personal immortality. Even some Franciscan Scotists, such as Antonio Trombetta, departed from Duns Scotus by arguing that the soul’s immortality is demonstrable by reason (Grendler 2002: 286).

VI. Non-heterodox Averroism in logic, natural philosophy and metaphysics

Because the importance of Averroism has been linked to secularization, scholarship on Averroes and Averroism in the 16th-century has emphasized issues involving conflict between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian doctrine. This focus has eclipsed the role of Averroes and Averroists in the development of politically neutral theories in logic, natural philosophy and metaphysics (i.e., theories which were not seen as potential threats to faith). Evidence of this role includes use of the name “Averroist” in a neutral way, rather than as a pejorative term for those who advance heterodox views in the late 15th and 16th centuries (Martin 2007: 14-15). Jacob Zabarella, for example, attributes to Averroes and Averroists positions in logic, including a distinction between two types of logical operation, demonstration of accidents and demonstration of subjects (Martin 2007: 15). Evidence of Averroes’ influence in logic also includes the great many 16th-century translations of his commentaries on Aristotle’s logical works (Hasse 2007a: 115; 134-5).

Zabarella also attributes to Averroists positions in natural philosophy, including a theory of mixture derived from Averroes’ commentaries (Martin 2007: 15). The latter theory attempts to solve a problem posed by Aristotle’s account of the four types of elemental body – earth, air,
fire, and water – and their composition. If elemental bodies are left intact in a mixture, the result
is not homoeomerous – the same in all its parts – and thus is not truly a mixture. On the other
hand, if they are not left intact, then the result is not truly composed of them; furthermore, if they
are not left intact, then how is it that they reemerge as the mixture degrades? Discussions of this
issue set Averroes against Avicenna as follows. Avicenna thought that the forms of the elemental
bodies are left intact whilst their characteristics qualities – combinations of heat, cold, moisture
and dryness – alter in degree, while Averroes maintained that the forms of the elemental bodies
themselves admit of degree, and that mixture involved intension and remission of both forms and
qualities (Wood and Weisberg 2004). Numerous physicians and philosophers in the 15th and 16th
centuries revived the Averroist view, including Agostino Nifo (Martin 2007: 16).

One successful position in metaphysics attributed to Averroes and Averroists in the 16th
century had to do with spontaneous generation, i.e., with the question whether an animal of a
given species could be generated in the absence of parents of that species (Hasse 2007a: 125-
129). Here again Averroes’ position was opposed to that of Avicenna, and there were 16th-
century adherents of each of their views. Whilst Avicenna was said to argue that a superlunary
intelligence deemed the Giver of Forms or Agent Intellect could explain spontaneous generation
even in the case of human beings, Averroes was said to argue that spontaneous generation of
human beings was not possible, and that the movements of celestial bodies – the Sun and other
planets – explained the generation of certain living things in the absence of parents. This position
is found in Averroes’ *Long Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, where he eschews the
emanationist accounts of creation held by some of his Islamic Aristotelian predecessors.
According to Averroes, Avicenna’s Giver of Forms or Agent Intellect is an innovation contrary
to Aristotle.
Evidence of non-heterodox Averroism adds to our understanding of the role of Averroes and Averroism in 16th-century philosophy in several ways. It challenges historical narratives that suggest that Averroes’ importance in the 16th-century has solely to do with intellectual radicalism and the promotion of the disciplinary independence of philosophy from theology. It demonstrates that Averroes, and philosophers deemed Averroists by their contemporaries, made contributions to the development of non-heterodox theories in various branches of philosophy in the 16th century; these contributions merit further study. Finally, it shows that the positions of Averroes and Averroists are sometimes juxtaposed with those of Avicenna. This suggests that Averroes’ role in 16th century philosophy has to do not only with his status as an esteemed Commentator and his part as a champion of the disciplinary independence of philosophy from theology, but also with his standing as a major Islamic thinker. It is significant that some philosophers in the late 15th- and 16th-century had a very positive attitude toward Islamic learning. The marked increase in translations of Averroes’ work into Latin in this period occurred together with an increase in translations of works by Avicenna and other authors from the Classical period of Arabic or Islamic philosophy (9th-12th centuries). The longevity of this positive attitude toward Islamic learning on the part of some European thinkers, and the reasons for its demise, also merit further study, as does the doctrinal influence of Arabic or Islamic philosophy on 16th-century thought.

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