

## THE TEACHING OF THE TEXT

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Averroes. "The Teaching of the Text" and "The Speech about Rhetorical Arguments."  
*Averroës' Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle's "Topics," "Rhetoric," and  
"Poetics"* / edited and translated by Charles E. Butterworth. Albany: State  
University of New York Press, 1977.

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AVERROES'S *Short Commentaries on Aristotle's Topics, Rhetoric, and Poetics* are part of a larger work, the collection of *Short Commentaries on Aristotle's Organon*. Yet they differ from the other treatises of the collection in important respects. The other treatises explain the concepts leading up to the kind of reasoning which is based on apodeictic premises and results in apodeictic conclusions—the demonstrative syllogism—and explain how it is used. These three treatises, however, are concerned with arts which use mere similitudes of apodeictic premises and demonstrative reasoning. Moreover, while the other treatises are recommended because they teach how to reason correctly, these three treatises are presented as providing ways of imitating or abridging correct reasoning in order to influence other human beings in any number of situations, but especially with regard to political decisions and religious beliefs.

These three treatises even stand apart physically from the other treatises of the collection. Although neither the *Rhetoric* nor the *Poetics* was traditionally viewed as belonging to the *Organon*, Averroës included the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric* and the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* as the last two treatises in this collection of short commentaries on the *Organon*. He also reversed the positions of the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics* and the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's On Sophistical Refutations* with respect to their order in the traditional view of the *Organon*. As a result, the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics*, the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, and the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* are the last three treatises in the collection. So that the significance of this extensive reworking of the *Organon* not escape attention, Averroës offered another indication of the separate status of these treatises. As justification for having reversed the order of the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics* and the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's On Sophistical Refutations*, he limited the art of sophistry

to deception about demonstrative arguments. Entirely without parallel in Aristotle's work, that limitation served to explain why the treatise about sophistical arguments followed the treatise about demonstrative arguments in this collection. Averroës then linked the art of dialectic to the art of rhetoric by extolling its usefulness for bringing about persuasion and linked the art of poetics to the art of rhetoric on the grounds that it could persuade people by means of imaginative representations.<sup>46</sup> All of these observations suggest that while the larger collection does constitute a whole and must be studied as such in order to grasp the full teaching, it can also be divided into two major parts and that either one of these parts can be studied separately with profit.

The reason for studying these treatises, rather than those belonging to the other division, is to acquire an understanding of the relation between politics, religion, and philosophy in the thought of Averroës. Intelligent awareness of such topics is important because of the constant influence they exert over thought and action. Learned as well as unlearned human beings are continuously seeking better ways to live with one another as fellow citizens, as members of different nations, or simply as associates. Similarly, decisions about work, play, and family life are tied to opinions about one's place in the universe and about the kind of life proper to man. Whether those opinions are based upon precepts deriving from a particular revelation or are the result of some kind of independent thought, they play an important role in daily life and demand the careful attention of reflective individuals.

Averroës is an important source of instruction about these topics, because the problem of their relationship occupied so much of his practical and intellectual activity. Exceptionally well informed about the sources and interpretations of the revealed religion which dominated his own community, he applied its precepts to particular matters in his capacity as a supreme judge and speculated about broader aspects of the religion in the political realm whenever he acted as adviser to his Almohad sovereigns. He becomes especially important to us because he did not restrict himself to the notions prevalent in that community. To the contrary, he found rare philosophical insight in the thought of Aristotle—a member of a community not affected by revealed religion—and tried to persuade his learned fellow Muslims of Aristotle's merit by writing explanatory commentaries on Aristotle's thought. On a few occasions, he even directed

the argument to the larger public in order to defend philosophic activity against attacks by zealous advocates of religious orthodoxy and in order to explain the theoretical limitations of religious speculation, as well as the political significance of religion.<sup>47</sup>

Among all of his writings, the *Short Commentaries on Aristotle's Topics, Rhetoric, and Poetics* are the best sources for acquiring an understanding of the relation Averroës thought existed between politics, religion, and philosophy. In the first place, his thought about this problem was based on specific ideas about the logical character of different kinds of speech, their proximity to certain knowledge, and the investigative or practical purposes to which each might be put. While these ideas are presupposed in his other works, including his larger commentaries on the logical arts, they are explained in these treatises. Secondly, these treatises contain the fullest statement of the grounds for Averroës's abiding disagreement with those who considered themselves the defenders of the faith. In Averroës's view, these dialectical theologians and masters of religious tradition were responsible for confusing the common people by using extraordinarily complex arguments to speak about simple principles of faith and guilty of attacking philosophy under the pretext of saving the faith they had garbled. Awareness of the reasons for his disagreement with them is important, because it is the background against which he expressed his ideas concerning the relation between political life and religious belief, as well as between religious belief and philosophic investigation.

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However, the substantive teaching of these three treatises is not immediately evident. It is so intimately related to the technical exposition of the different logical arts that the treatises first appear to be purely technical. Even though it is at once obvious that the technical exposition was designed to correct prevalent misconceptions about each one of the arts, the deeper significance of that correction must be ferreted out. For example, another consequence of incorporating rhetoric and poetics into logic is that it allowed Averroës to stress the importance of each art for inquiry and instruction, as well as to allude to the way each art shared in the attributes of logic. He thus countered the prevailing tendency to restrict rhetoric and poetics to eloquence and to examine each solely in terms of style. Then, by reminding the reader that rhetorical proofs were quite far removed

from certainty and that imaginative representations were frequently based on the merest similitudes of the real thing, Averroës easily prodded him into thinking about the status of our knowledge with regard to the generally accepted political and religious uses of each art.<sup>48</sup> In this way he brought an apparently abstract, timeless discussion to bear on concrete, actual issues. The advantage of his procedure was that it never obliged him to quit the cloak of scientific detachment.

Nonetheless, to appreciate the cleverness of this procedure, its diaphanous quality must be recognized. Averroës tried to facilitate that recognition by the judicious use of subtle allusions. The first occurs at the very beginning of the larger treatise. There he justified his summary account of the logical arts on the grounds that it provided what was needed if one were to learn the essentials of the arts which had already been perfected in his time. This justification was closely related to the goal of the treatise: to enable the interested person to acquire the concepts by which these already perfected arts could be learned. Realization of that goal necessitated understanding how concept and assent were used in each one of the logical arts, these being identified as demonstration, dialectic, sophistry, rhetoric, and poetics.<sup>49</sup> Although it was never given, the obvious reason for such a goal had to be that knowledge of the essentials of those other, already perfected, arts was somehow important.

In the introduction, the only example of already perfected arts cited by Averroës was medicine. However, in the course of the exposition, he referred less explicitly to other arts—e.g., dialectical theology, traditional theology, and traditional jurisprudence. Even though he explicitly cited the art of medicine in the introduction, he made no attempt to correct it in the course of the larger exposition. Conversely, in the course of the larger exposition he did try to correct those other arts which he had not previously cited in an explicit manner. From this perspective, it appears that the ultimate goal of the treatise was to enable the reader to become competent in logic and especially competent in assessing the different ranks of the classes of concept and assent used in the already perfected arts, not so much in order to learn the essentials of those arts as in order to learn how to evaluate them critically. The identification of that ultimate goal cannot, therefore, be separated from the identification of the already perfected arts. Once both identifications are made, the practical, reformative character of the logical exposition becomes evident.

Another particularly significant hint that these abstract summaries of the logical arts contain a broader teaching occurs at the very end of the whole collection. There, Averroës did not hesitate to place the different logical arts in a definite hierarchy. Whereas the particular skill to be acquired from poetics was explicitly judged to be nonessential for man's peculiar perfection, the proper understanding of logic—that is, knowledge of the ranks of the classes of concept and assent—was explicitly judged to be propaedeutic to the attainment of ultimate human perfection. Ultimate human perfection, moreover, was clearly stated to depend on man's acquiring true theory. The reason for that distinction derives from a prior judgment about the superiority of theoretical knowledge to practical action, and the implication of the distinction is that the things the art of poetics allows one to make and do are inferior to the things the larger art of logic allows one to understand.<sup>50</sup> What is striking about the distinction is that Averroës eschewed the easy subordination of poetics to the larger art of logic on the basis of part to whole, treating them instead as though in competition for supreme recognition. That is, in fact, faithful to the claims of the poetical art's protagonists, and Averroës bore witness to those claims before subordinating poetics to logic in such a definitive manner.

That Averroës concluded the treatise by insisting upon the essential hierarchy is significant because of its easily discernible implications. In the first place, it suggests that the art of logic as a whole is not relative, but is guided by reference to a definite standard. Secondly, it shows that the different logical arts do not have equal claims to priority and that their claims are to be judged in terms of their facilitating the attainment of ultimate human perfection. The basic idea is that if man's perfection consists in theoretical understanding, then his actions or practice should be ordered so as to allow the best development of his theoretical nature. Logic is important because the characteristics of theoretical knowledge are explained in it, and theoretical knowledge is differentiated from other kinds of knowledge. Moreover, it is the only art which shows how to acquire theoretical knowledge.

It was necessary for Averroës to state the merits of logic so clearly, because its use was condemned by some people with extensive influence. Usually, those who argued against logic criticized its foreign origin or claimed that other arts could provide theoretical knowledge in a more direct manner. The general tone of the larger treatise does away with the first kind of argument: logic is treated as an art which

belongs to the Islamic world as much as to any other world. Those arts alluded to in the beginning statement of the purpose of logic, the arts whose critical evaluation logic will facilitate, are among the ones thought to have greater merit than logic for attaining theoretical knowledge. It is for this reason that their critical evaluation is of such importance.

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Although prepared by the earlier investigation, the critical evaluation is carried out in these three treatises by means of a very selective presentation of each logical art. Thus, in setting forth his account of dialectic, rhetoric, and poetics, Averroës stressed the technical aspects relating to the first two arts. A very extensive explanation of the way arguments are made in each art, of the way they are employed, and of the value of those arguments took the place of an explicit discussion about how these arts might actually be used, that is, to what substantive use they might be put. As a result, essential features of both arts were neglected. For example, in the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics*, there is an account of the quality of dialectical premises, of the extent of belief dialectical argument provides, and of the proximity of dialectic to demonstration, but there is no mention whatever of its possible use for inquiring into the theoretical arts or into the same subjects as metaphysics—uses clearly indicated in other commentaries.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, in the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, the standard uses to which rhetoric may be put—deliberation, defense and accusation, praise and blame—are passed over in silence until the very end of the treatise; even then, they are mentioned only incidentally. The *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* is presented in a different manner, however. Very little is said about the technical parts of the poetical art, and relatively much is said about the uses to which it may be put. To perceive the details of this selectiveness more clearly and to grasp its significance, it is necessary to look at the summary of each art.

When speaking about the art of dialectic, Averroës emphasized that it should not be confused with demonstration despite the appearance of certainty which its arguments provide. The crucial difference between the two arts is that dialectical premises may be false, whereas demonstrative premises are always certain and true. Consequently, not truth—as with demonstration—but renown is the basic consideration in

choosing a dialectical premise. The premises used in dialectical syllogisms differ from those used in demonstrative syllogisms for yet another reason: although universal predicates, they do not encompass all of the universal predicates used in demonstration. Nor are the premises of dialectical syllogisms all that prevent it from being identical to demonstration: in addition, the induction used in dialectic has a very limited use in demonstration. Finally, dialectic differs from demonstration because the classes of syllogism to which it has access are far more numerous than those open to the art of demonstration.<sup>52</sup> Obviously, one should not confuse the art of dialectic with that of demonstration. Still, the whole presentation appears very arid, and one cannot help but wonder why Averroës would have been content to insist upon all these technical considerations in order to make such a minor point.

The answer is relatively simple: the tedious technical discussion is a screen for a more important substantive argument. The long discussion of induction, for example, prepared the grounds for Averroës's criticism of the dialectical theologians. This becomes apparent once the particular induction repeatedly cited by Averroës is carefully considered: it is the one used to prove that all bodies are created because most of those to be seen around us are created. The conclusion of that induction was itself the major premise for the familiar syllogism about the world being created because it is a body. Although he never explicitly refuted either argument, Averroës showed that the use of inductions to arrive at premises of syllogisms was highly questionable logical practice. At the most, inductions could be helpful for affirming something that was already generally acknowledged, but never for discovering what was unknown. His teaching therefore restricted induction to a very limited role in dialectical argument. The implication was that those who used induction extensively and placed no restrictions on its use—as the dialectical theologians did, for example—really knew nothing about the art they claimed to practice.

The best way of indicating this appreciation of their worth was to destroy the grounds of their arguments and to establish the correct basis of the art. That is why Averroës tried to identify the kind of assent dialectic provides, show what the true dialectical argument is and how it is constructed, explain the limits of the premises used in those syllogisms, and relate the art of dialectic to other arts according to the quality of its arguments. Above all, that tactic allowed him to

avoid mentioning the dialectical theologians by name, a move that was masterfully subtle: rather than attack them openly here, he pretended to ignore them as though this were not the place to speak of them. The effect of his silence, then, was to suggest that they should not really be associated with the art of dialectic. Even though it was possible to say that they practiced an art in their theological disputations, it was clear that the art was not dialectic.

This interpretation admittedly places extensive emphasis on Averroës's silence about the dialectical theologians. Yet no other explanation can account for the strange character of this treatise, especially as compared to the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric*. If a discussion about the dialectical theologians were to occur in any treatise, it is reasonable that it occur in a treatise about dialectic—the art they claimed to practice. However, Averroës relegated that discussion to his treatise on rhetoric. Even so, he did not completely exclude consideration of the dialectical theologians from this treatise for he made obvious allusions to their favorite arguments. It seems necessary, therefore, to ask about the relationship between the teaching of the treatise and the unexpectedly neglected dialectical theologians. As has already been suggested, the whole movement of the treatise toward a strict interpretation of dialectic then becomes especially significant. In addition, by insisting more upon the limitations than upon the varied uses of dialectic and more upon what it was not appropriate for than what it was appropriate for, Averroës was able to indicate his disagreements with the dialectical theologians.

For example, according to this treatise the art of dialectic would be entirely unsuited for investigation. Averroës remained silent about its investigative possibilities here. He also emphasized the technical differences between dialectic and demonstration, as though he wanted to suggest that dialectic does not have the same force or logical necessity as demonstration. Above all, he explicitly denied that training in dialectic could have any relevance for pursuit of the demonstrative arts, a denial which was simply contrary to Aristotle's view.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, Averroës wanted to show that dialectic ought not to be used to investigate the same subjects the art of demonstration is used to investigate. However, because of the numerous references to the investigative possibilities of dialectic in Averroës's other writings, this presentation must be considered partial or restrictive. The fuller teaching is that dialectic may be used to investigate any subject investigated by the

art of demonstration, but that the degree of certainty to be expected of dialectical investigation is inferior to what might be expected of demonstrative investigation.

By presenting this partial or restrictive teaching about dialectic, Averroës enabled the reader to call the whole activity of the dialectical theologians into question. If the art of dialectic cannot be used for most kinds of theoretical investigation, then it cannot support the complicated theological disputes characteristic of dialectical theology. Those disputes presuppose a detailed and deep metaphysical inquiry for which dialectic—as presented here—would be inadequate. Consequently, either the dialectical theologians reached their conclusions by means of another art and then presented them in dialectical terms or they attributed too much certainty to their dialectical arguments. Whatever the explanation, their use of dialectic was erroneous.

Averroës could have made the same point without presenting dialectic in this partial or restrictive manner. In the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, for example, he used dialectical arguments to counter al-Ghazālī's attacks against philosophy. The subject matter was such that he thus used dialectic to investigate weighty philosophical and theological issues. Yet he never lost sight of the limitations of the art and frequently apologized for the general character of his arguments, explaining that they were based on premises which presupposed a fuller examination of each issue.<sup>54</sup> Although it suggested the problematic character of his own replies to al-Ghazālī, this admission of the limitations of dialectical argument raised a graver problem with regard to al-Ghazālī's original criticisms: on what deeper investigation were they based? The advantage of the partial or restrictive teaching about dialectic in the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics*, then, is that this problem was raised quickly and decisively.

Averroës attempted to restrict his presentation of the art of dialectic in another way. At the very end of the treatise, when enumerating the reasons which prompted Aristotle to write about the art, he described dialectic as an art limited to contentious argument between questioner and answerer and even suggested that Aristotle's major purpose in writing about dialectic was to provide each contender with the tools that would help defeat the opponent. The explanation was that once Aristotle had noted that most well-known premises—the basic elements of dialectical argument—are in opposition and may thus be used to prove or disprove the same proposition, he then

recognized how useful the art of dialectic was for training in contentious speech. Again, even though Averroës obviously recognized the need to indicate the partial character of his presentation and thus admitted that dialectic had uses other than contentious argument, he immediately reinforced his partial interpretation by dismissing those other uses as irrelevant for the purposes of this treatise and did so without even listing them. As presented here, the contentious art of dialectic is more like the art of fencing: it is good for contending with someone else, but it should be directed by another art.

This partial or restrictive insistence on the contentious character of the art served two purposes. First of all, it drew attention to the question of the audience whom the dialectical theologians usually addressed. If dialectic is really suited for contentious argument between men of equal capacity, it can have little effect when it is employed by the learned to communicate with the usually uneducated mass of people. It appears that the dialectical theologians were trying to use dialectic for the wrong purpose; the art of rhetoric is much better suited for instructing the general public. Secondly, this partial account of the art provides a very accurate idea of the original duty of the dialectical theologians: contending with each other or with the misdirected in defense of the faith.<sup>55</sup> They seem to have neglected their original duty, which was more consonant with the art of dialectic, to attempt activities for which dialectic is very poorly suited.

These thoughts, prompted by an attentive reading of the treatise, show that in order to uncover Averroës's teaching it is as important to ask about what is implied as to ask about what is said. Because the omissions are as significant as the declarations, the only way to explain the whole treatise adequately is to ask about what is missing. A simple account of the technical description of dialectic would not be sufficient, because that description is at such variance with Averroës's other explanations of the art. Moreover, an account of the technical characteristics of dialectic would neglect the allusions to a broader issue. The interpretation set forth here not only explains all the parts of the treatise, it also provides a means of relating this treatise to the other treatises as part of one teaching.

The striking difference between the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics* and the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric* is the emphasis on the dialectical theologians in the latter. Abū al-Ma'ālī and al-Ghazālī are named a number of times, and there are passing references to the

dialectical theologians as a group. In addition, several arguments of Abū al-Ma'ālī and al-Ghazālī are cited in order to illustrate different features of rhetorical discourse.<sup>56</sup> However, very few of the references are favorable. In almost every instance, Averroës cited the argument of the dialectical theologians as a negative example and then went on to suggest the correct rhetorical argument.<sup>57</sup>

It was appropriate to criticize the arguments used by the dialectical theologians according to the standards for rhetorical discourse because the dialectical theologians were so ignorant about the technical characteristics of dialectic that they sought to use it when they should have used rhetoric. Rhetoric is the proper art for instructing the general public or addressing it about any matter. That is why Averroës referred to it as "this art of public speaking" in the opening lines of the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric* and arranged the discussion of rhetoric in the treatise according to the persuasiveness of different subjects. For the same reason, when he set down instructions for constructing rhetorical arguments he emphasized what would have greatest persuasive effect on the audience.<sup>58</sup> In fact, the whole treatise is organized so as to show why rhetoric is more suited for public discourse than dialectic. The basic reason is one that was alluded to in the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Topics*: rhetoric permits the speaker to pass over difficult matters or even to be deceptive regarding them, whereas such practices cannot be admitted in dialectical argument.<sup>59</sup>

One reason the dialectical theologians might have been so confused about the technical characteristics of dialectic that they would try to use it when rhetoric would have been a better tool is that, superficially, the two arts are quite similar. They both have the same general purpose of bringing about assent. They are also similar in that each art is dependent on a kind of common opinion known as supposition. Averroës did not hesitate to point out these similarities nor to direct the reader's attention to them by talking about rhetorical arguments as though they were special examples of dialectical arguments. The enthymeme was said to correspond to the syllogism and the example to the induction. He even analyzed the forms of the enthymeme according to the categories normally used to discuss dialectical syllogisms and, in the discussion of the material aspects of the enthymeme, implied that parallels with the syllogism could be drawn.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, the similarities between dialectic and rhetoric are only superficial. When the two arts are more closely considered, it becomes readily apparent that they are not identical. For example, even though both arts are used to bring about assent, syllogisms and inductions are used to accomplish this task in dialectic while *persuasive things* are used in rhetoric—that is, even though enthymemes and examples are used, persuasive devices having nothing to do with syllogistic argument may just as easily be used. Then again, while both arts are dependent upon supposition, the particular type of supposition used in rhetoric is of a lower order than that used in dialectic. A corollary of that difference is that rhetorical arguments induce people to belief for reasons which usually do not withstand deeper scrutiny and thus occupy a lower rank with regard to certainty than dialectical arguments.<sup>61</sup> Even the emphasis on the dialectical syllogism served to distinguish the two arts. By constantly drawing attention to the dialectical syllogism, Averroës was able to contrast it with the rhetorical argument *par excellence*, the enthymeme, and to show in what ways they differed.<sup>62</sup>

The superficial parallelism that Averroës drew between the two arts served a dual purpose. In the first place, his explanations that the differences between the two arts were greater than their similarities permitted him to show why rhetoric was better suited for the purposes of dialectical theology than the art of dialectic. At one point, using rhetoric to explain rhetoric, Averroës could even call upon the famous al-Ghazālī for testimony that people with different intellectual capacities needed to be addressed in different ways.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, neither al-Ghazālī nor the other dialectical theologians had thought about applying such a principle to their own popular writings. As has been previously noted, however, Averroës had thought about it; most of his criticism of the dialectical theologians and their arguments was directed to that issue. It was in order to show why these arguments could not be used to persuade people, not in order to harm religion, that he pointed out the weaknesses of their theological arguments.

The use of the superficial parallelism also permitted Averroës to make an important substantive argument. When discussing the different uses of enthymemes and examples, as well as their similarities to the dialectical syllogisms and inductions, Averroës twice referred to Abū al-Ma'ālī in order to show how an inadequate grasp of rhetoric led to deeper errors about important theoretical subjects.<sup>64</sup> Because

he did not understand how to use a disjunctive conditional syllogism, Abū al-Ma'ālī mistakenly believed that he had refuted the idea that the world might have come into being through the uniting of various elements. This mistaken belief not only meant that he failed to refute that idea, it was also a reason for him to abandon further inquiry into the problem. His erroneous belief that it was possible to acquire universal certainty by means of the example led to even more alarming consequences: according to Averroës, to attribute such power to the example would reduce scientific investigation to child's play and render any kind of instruction useless. Thus, in addition to confusing the usually uneducated mass of people by addressing them with complicated arguments, the dialectical theologians led themselves into error by failing to comprehend the deeper significance of their own arguments. Another reason for showing the inadequacies in their arguments, then, was to show why those arguments needed to be examined more carefully and why the possibility for deeper philosophical inquiry needed to be kept open. In both instances, the arguments of the dialectical theologians were refuted in order to suggest how they could be improved.

However, the dialectical theologians were not the only ones to have insufficient knowledge about the characteristics of the logical arts. While they used something like rhetorical arguments without being fully aware of what they were doing, practitioners of other arts used different kinds of rhetorical devices without having an adequate understanding of the limitations of such devices. The last third of the treatise on rhetoric is devoted to a discussion of the persuasive things external to the art of rhetoric, things which are explicitly assigned a lower rank of logical value and rhetorical merit than the enthymeme or example.<sup>65</sup> Central to that discussion was a consideration of how the arguments proper to the traditionalist schools of theology and jurisprudence—testimony, recorded traditions, consensus, and challenging—might be used. The traditionalist theologians and jurists had failed to understand the rhetorical origins of these devices and consequently relied upon them too heavily. As a result, conflict and strife arose concerning things allegedly proven by these devices. To remedy that situation Averroës tried to show the precise limitations of these devices and to clarify their very restricted persuasive qualities.<sup>66</sup>

He identified testimony as being a report about something or a series of reports—i.e., a tradition—about something and said that testimony

However, in presenting this view of the art, Averroës restricted rhetoric in an important respect. Until the very end of the treatise, rhetoric was discussed in a context that made it seem to have use only for the popular discussion of religion or for instruction. Every effort was made to show the similarities and differences between dialectic and rhetoric. It is only in the penultimate paragraph, just before turning to a consideration of poetics, that the political uses of rhetoric are mentioned. The earlier portions of the treatise concentrated on the technical aspects of the art and stressed its superficial similarities with dialectic. The end of the treatise stresses the uses to which rhetoric can be put, and these uses turn out to be very similar to those of the art of poetics.

For the purposes of this collection of commentaries, then, rhetoric can be said to occupy a middle ground between the art of dialectic and the art of poetics. It is similar to dialectic in that its arguments can be discussed and analyzed in terms of their formal characteristics; it is similar to poetics in that it has great usefulness for political matters. By neglecting the political uses of rhetoric and concentrating on the ways rhetoric could be used in the popular discussion of religion or for instruction, Averroës was able to set forth his criticisms of dialectical theology. Since he could not remain completely silent about the political uses of rhetoric, he did the next best thing and acknowledged those uses briefly at the very end of the treatise when discussing the reasons which prompted Aristotle to study the art of rhetoric. Such a tactic allowed him to avoid explicit endorsement of Aristotle's views while suggesting at least tacit agreement with them. More importantly, that reference to Aristotle's views was sufficient to remind the thoughtful reader of what had been omitted from the preceding discussion and thus to underline the corrective teaching about the dialectical theologians.

Emphasis on the political usefulness of poetics is the dominant theme of Averroës's *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics*. He began the treatise with a statement about the political uses to which the art of poetics might be put and later explained how recognition of these uses had prompted Aristotle to write about poetics. While the acknowledgement of Aristotle's recognition of the political uses of rhetoric was perfunctory in the *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, the acknowledgement of his recognition of the political uses of poetics is given more attention in this treatise. Here, the acknowledgement is preceded by Averroës's own recognition of those uses, and it is complemented by the art being

recommended to our attention because of its suitability for political uses.<sup>74</sup> Essentially this treatise differs from the other two treatises in that the technical aspects of poetics are almost passed over in this treatise in order to stress the political uses of the art. In each of the other two treatises, the practical uses of dialectic or of rhetoric were almost passed over in order that the technical aspects of either of those arts might be stressed. An example of the way technical explanations are almost passed over in this treatise is the absence of a discussion about the amount of assent provided by the speeches used in poetics. In fact, the word "assent" (*tasdiq*) does not even occur in the treatise. Such indifference to the technical aspects of the art is counterbalanced only by explicit admissions about the potentially deceptive quality of poetics and by attempts to explain those admissions.<sup>75</sup>

Poetics is potentially deceptive because of the character of the speeches used in the art. The poet may strive to make these speeches rhythmical in order to move the souls of the listeners as he desires, but he gives no consideration to ordering these speeches in order to bring them closer to truth or to certainty. To the contrary, poetic speeches are explicitly said to be usually of little value for seizing the essence of anything.<sup>76</sup> The reason is that although they are meant to give an imaginative representation of something, the resulting imaginative representation is not designed to portray the object as it really is. Consequently, a literal interpretation of poetic speeches will quite probably lead to error. However, listeners can just as readily be deceived by poetic speeches if they make a mistake about the way in which the imaginative representation is couched: even though the listeners may know better than to take the speech literally, they could fall into error by taking the speech as a metaphor when it is really a simile or vice versa.<sup>77</sup>

Still, all of these errors can be traced to simple confusion on the part of the listeners about the meaning of the particular poetic speeches. Closer attention to the rules of the art and to the speeches themselves would help to avoid these kinds of errors. In these cases the error can be corrected by using another kind of speech to describe the thing in question. When the sea is spoken of as being "the sweat of the earth brought together in its bladder," for example, it is readily apparent that a simple physical explanation of seawater and of the topography of the earth would dispel any tendency to literal belief in this poetic image.<sup>78</sup> However, there are things which cannot be

conceived of at all or which are extremely difficult to form a concept about except by the kinds of allusions given in imaginative representations. Unfortunately, poetic speeches about these kinds of things lead to error even more frequently.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, to the extent that it is impossible or extremely difficult to explain such things by any other kind of speech, there is little chance of removing the error once it occurs. Averroës gave only one example of these kinds of things: a being which is neither in the world nor outside of it, that is, God.<sup>80</sup> Admittedly, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of God by means of anything other than imaginative representations. Nor can it be denied that confusion, if not error, about God is widespread.

These things which are difficult or impossible to conceive of seem to differ in additional ways from the other things which are also represented by poetic speeches but are easily conceived of. Although Averroës nowhere admitted as much, clearly it is only with regard to the former kinds of things that the practical uses of poetics come into play. These uses include moving the souls of the listeners to predilection for something or to flight from it, moving them to believe or disbelieve in something, and moving them to do or not do certain kinds of actions. The art of poetics may also be used simply to move the souls of the listeners to awe or to wonder because of the delightfulness of the imaginative representation.<sup>81</sup> While the souls of the listeners may be moved to predilection for God or to a desire to flee from Him because of the poetic speech presented to them, it is unlikely that a poetic speech about the sea would have such an effect. A poetic speech about natural phenomena would arouse such emotions only to the extent that the listeners were moved to contemplate the cause of such pleasing or terrifying things, but that too would be linked closely to the notion of God. The contrast becomes starker upon considering the usefulness of poetic speeches for inducing belief or disbelief in something. Similarly, imaginative representations about natural phenomena are not designed to move the listeners to action. At the most, poetic speeches about natural phenomena arouse feelings of awe or wonder in the souls of the listeners; such speeches instruct the listeners about the beauty or the awesomeness of the surrounding world.

When these explanations about the potential for deceptiveness in poetic speeches—especially those speeches about things which it is impossible or extremely difficult to conceive of except by poetic

speeches—are carefully considered and compared to the emphasis on the practical uses of poetics, a new significance of the treatise comes into focus. In addition to its political uses, poetics would seem to have patent religious uses. The reasoning behind this conclusion is that *influencing* the opinions or beliefs and the actions of others is as much a concern of religion as it is of politics. This is especially true of the kind of religion which strives to provide for the welfare of a community of believers, that is, of a religion like Islam.<sup>82</sup> Another way of stating this would be to say that politics is seen to be more than secular. By introducing the idea of speaking about God and showing how it is related to the practical uses of poetics, Averroës has suggested that political concerns are necessarily related to religious concerns.

Although it becomes most apparent in this treatise, that relationship is not introduced for the first time here. The argument of the other two treatises presupposed the interplay between religion and politics. In the treatises on dialectic and rhetoric, a major effort was made to correct the evils wreaked by the dialectical theologians and to establish principles which would prevent those evils from recurring. While the evils in question derived primarily from the realm of religious opinion or belief, they clearly had consequences in the political realm. The treatise on poetics differs from those two treatises because the interplay between religion and politics is made more apparent and because there is a very explicit emphasis on how the art can influence actions. There is, then, a movement or a shift in emphasis in these treatises, a movement from concern solely about opinions or beliefs to concern about both belief and actions. That movement is symbolic of the movement from a narrow concern with religion and politics to a more inclusive concern with both. Insofar as the treatise on poetics represents the culmination of that movement, it stands apart from the other two treatises.

A sign of the different status of the treatise on poetics is the absence of any reference to the dialectical theologians or to the problems they caused. The emphasis here is massively on what the art is for, not on ways that it might be corrected. That does not mean, however, that this treatise occupies a higher rank than the other two treatises. Indeed, the art of poetics as presented here is hardly free from major difficulties. The primary difficulty is the apparent inevitability of deception in the poetic speeches that deal with concepts like God. Implicitly, the argument is that such deceptiveness is part of poetic

speeches qua poetic speeches, as though the art of poetics had no internal standards. Averroës brought the problem into sharper perspective by suggesting that speeches about such subjects, insofar as they were deceptive, were more characteristic of sophistry than of poetics.<sup>83</sup>

Although he did not explain what he meant by drawing the parallel with reference to these speeches, he made a similar observation about poetics in the subsequent paragraph. He noted that poetics was classed among the syllogistic arts even though the syllogism is used in it only to make poetic speeches deceptively resemble speeches of other arts.<sup>84</sup> The implication is that poetics can be used for willful deception. When the poet pretends to have proofs about what he says without really having them, poetics strongly resembles sophistry. In that instance his use of syllogistic arguments would not be in accord with the logical rules for their use, but would be deceptively structured in order to receive greater credibility than they might otherwise receive.

Such a possibility arises because, with poetics as with rhetoric, there is no internal control to keep it from being used for deceptive purposes.<sup>85</sup> With dialectic and demonstration, however, the rules of syllogistic reasoning must be followed. Any purposely deceptive use of the arguments belonging to those arts is external to the art. Because poetics is not structured in that way and can therefore be used as sophistry would be, the deceptiveness of its speeches—especially those concerning things which cannot be conceived of at all or only conceived of with difficulty by other speeches—seems inevitable. By linking poetics and sophistry on this issue, Averroës suggested that he drew the same conclusion.

Yet that conclusion is not without exception. The inevitability of deception about this kind of poetic speech depends on a very basic limitation in the explanation, a limitation Averroës need not have imposed. Confusion about the subjects treated by this kind of poetic speech could be removed by metaphysical investigation. However, Averroës remained silent about that possibility. Through his silence he presented as restrictive a teaching about poetics as he did about dialectic.

In part, this restrictive teaching about poetics allowed him to criticize the way the art was being used. That he was not more explicit in his criticism can be understood by reflecting about the generally accepted view among Muslims that the Qur'ān is the best example of

poetic excellence in Arabic. Without becoming involved in that controversy, he nevertheless managed to make certain suggestions about Qur'ānic exegesis. His belief about the potential deceptiveness of poetic speeches carried the implication that it was necessary to keep imaginative representations simple and as direct as possible. In this respect, the treatise on poetics, like the treatise on dialectic and rhetoric, contributes to a solution of the fundamental practical issue. By emphasizing the dangers of poetic speech and its politico-religious uses, this treatise subtly urges great care upon those who would use such speech to communicate with most people and especially upon those who might seek to interpret such speech to the people. However such advice is never given; to the extent that it is a consequence of the argument, it is only an implicit consequence. The treatise on poetics remains at a certain level of abstraction at all times.

The restrictive teaching about poetics also allowed Averroës to put the general argument of these three treatises into the proper perspective. Because the potential deceptiveness of poetic speeches brought the art into close relationship with sophistry, Averroës insisted at the very end of the treatise that perfect skill in poetics was foreign to ultimate human perfection.<sup>86</sup> He explained this judgment in his summary of the whole collection of short commentaries by noting that ultimate human perfection depended on correct theoretical knowledge.<sup>87</sup> It was clear from the preceding exposition that poetics could not furnish such knowledge. It is equally clear from the presentation of dialectic and rhetoric that they could not furnish such knowledge either. For the attainment of ultimate human perfection or correct theoretical knowledge, another art was needed—an art based on a full mastery of logic.

Such a judgment was not meant to suggest that these arts were without value. In the first place, it is reasonable that a similar conclusion be drawn at the end of a collection of short commentaries on logic. After all, the study of logic is a preliminary for the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. Even the general order of this collection suggests the primary importance attached to theoretical knowledge. The first few treatises prepared the reader for the study of demonstration, and it was presented as the pinnacle of logical thinking. Thus the first few treatises were steps up to demonstration. From that peak, the treatises on the logical arts concerned with opinion represented a kind of descent: they were based on varying degrees of opinion, while

demonstration was based on certainty; they were used to discuss particulars while demonstration was used to discuss universals. It is also possible to discern a descending order among these treatises concerned with opinion, a movement from opinion bordering on certainty to representations bordering on error. Of the three arts, dialectic most resembles demonstration and poetics is least similar to it. By placing these treatises after the discussion about demonstration, Averroës also indicated that one can understand how to work with opinions only after adequately learning how to acquire certain knowledge.

However, Averroës never insisted here that practical life had to be guided by theoretical knowledge. To the contrary, the basic and explicit argument of these treatises is that opinion usually suffices for decent human life. The virtues, for example, are presented as moral habits based on what is generally accepted, not on what is certain.<sup>88</sup> In a similar manner, the restrictive presentation of each of these three treatises served to delineate an area of action in which popular opinion is sufficient. Thus, while his silence about the theoretical uses of dialectic indicated that dialectic should not be used for philosophical pursuits, he argued for the art being used with confidence in other domains.

The goal was to show why the arts based on opinion were best suited for certain functions but also why they had to be limited in their application to those functions. In most practical situations, time restrictions and the intellectual shortcomings of other people make it difficult to attain demonstrative certainty. All that is necessary is that theoretical knowledge not be endangered by opinions used in the practical situations. Averroës attacked the dialectical theologians because they had become confused about the pursuit of theoretical knowledge and had set forth opinions which were harmful to further theoretical investigation. At the same time he attempted to indicate how common opinion should be viewed and what its limitations were. It might be said that he rehabilitated common opinion. He did so by making a strong defense of its practical merits, by proving that those who were most scornful of common opinion were actually most dependent upon it for their own reasoning, and by showing how it might be used in public speech. In that way he was able to indicate the need for eliminating the confusing and complicated speech usually used for public discourse. Similarly, his identification of the limits

and different ranks of common opinion served to restrain those who would hastily conclude that all inquiry was relative and perhaps cause greater political harm. Moreover, by insisting that the standard against which common opinion was to be judged was its approximation to certain knowledge, Averroës kept alive the possibility of coming very close to the ideal of ultimate human perfection. His rehabilitation of common opinion in no way lowered the goal of practical life.

However, the larger problem behind all of this is that of the relationship between politics, religion, and philosophy. As these treatises have been examined, it became clear that religious belief was shaped and molded by each of the different arts. It also became evident that religious belief was prior to political action and influenced political action. Moreover, to the extent that these arts depend on correct theoretical knowledge, the way religious belief is shaped and molded depends on correct theoretical knowledge. Differently stated, sound belief depends on sound investigation. While there is a large area in which belief is sound on its own principles, that independence should not be mistaken for opposition to theoretical investigation. The mark of good belief is that it not destroy the possibility of further theoretical inquiry; the mark of good theoretical inquiry is that it protect sound belief and further its acceptance by those unable to pursue theoretical knowledge.