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AVERROES' "EPISTLE ON DIVINE KNOWLEDGE" AS A DIALECTICAL WORK BETWEEN FORBIDDEN INTERPRETATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL TRAINING

YEHUDA HALPER

Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv

Email: yehuda.halper@biu.ac.il

Abstract. Averroes' "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" presents four different dialogues on two textual levels. These dialogues, the syllogistic structure of the arguments in them, and their use of contradictories indicate that the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" is structured nearly entirely in accordance with the descriptions of dialectic we find in Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's *Topica*. Accordingly, Averroes' solution to the question of how God can have universal knowledge of particular things is a dialectical account of the distinction between Divine and human knowledge. Moreover, at a crucial point in the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" Averroes refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* B, which he considers to a dialectical exposition of questions on metaphysics. This reference suggests that Averroes sees the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" as a kind of dialectical inquiry aimed at answering questions that arise at the outset of studying metaphysics. So, while it is possible to view the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" as a dialectical interpretation of Quran 67:14, its primary purpose is to introduce its readers to metaphysical speculation. Thus it does not violate Averroes' legal prohibition given in the *Decisive Treatise* against declaring dialectical interpretations in books available to the general public.

Résumé. L'«Épître sur le savoir divin» d'Averroès présente quatre dialogues différents sur deux niveaux textuels. Ces dialogues, leur structure syllogistique ainsi que l'emploi des contradictions indiquent que l'«Épître» est structurée presque entièrement en accord avec les descriptions de la dialectique se trouvant dans les commentaires d'Averroès aux *Topiques* d'Aristote. Ainsi, la solution d'Averroès à la question de savoir comment Dieu peut avoir une connaissance universelle des particuliers passe par un compte rendu dialectique de la distinction entre le savoir divin et celui des humains. De surcroît, à un point crucial de l'«Épître» Averroès se réfère à *Métaphysique* B d'Aristote, qu'il considère être une exposition dialectique des questions sur la métaphysique. Cette référence suggère que l'«Épître sur le savoir divin» est, selon Averroès, une sorte d'enquête dialectique visant à répondre aux questions qui se présentent dès qu'on aborde l'étude de la métaphysique. Il en ressort que si on peut voir en l'«Épître» une interprétation dialectique de Coran LXVII, 14, son but primaire est d'introduire ses lecteurs à la spéculation métaphysique. Ainsi, il n'y a pas d'infraction de la prohibition légale d'Averroès, dans le *Discours décisif*, sur l'usage des interprétations dialectiques dans les œuvres ouvertes au public général.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes decrees that interpretations (*al-taʿwīlāt*), of the Law, “ought not to be declared to the multitude (*al-ġamhūr*) nor established in rhetorical or dialectical books.”¹ Shortly thereafter, Averroes goes so far as to associate declaring “interpretations to those not adept in them” with heresy (*al-kufr*) on the grounds that it leads to damnation (*halāk*) in this world and the next.² Indeed, so against public dialectic is Averroes that the ideal state Averroes describes in his *Commentary* on Plato’s *Republic* is one without public dialectic or dialecticians.³ Still, Averroes himself employs dialectical methods not only in scientific works intended for an audience adept in such argumentation, but also in more general works such as *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* and even in the *Decisive Treatise* itself. Dialectic is also present throughout Averroes’ “Epistle on Divine Knowledge,”⁴ and

¹ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles Butterworth (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), p. 26, para. 45. On the legal form of the *Decisive Treatise* as a *fatwā*, see Daniel Heller-Roazen “Philosophy before the Law: Averroes’s *Decisive Treatise*,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32 (2006), p. 412–442.

² Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, p. 27, para. 47.

³ Yehuda Halper, “Expelling Dialectics from the Ideal State: Making the World Safe for Philosophy in Averroes’ *Commentary* on Plato’s *Republic*,” in Alexander Orwin (ed.), *Plato’s Republic in the Islamic Context: New Perspectives on Averroes’ Commentary* (University of Rochester Press, 2022), p. 69–86.

⁴ The first editor of this work, Marcus Joseph Müller, gave this treatise the Arabic title, *Damīma*, “Appendix” in *Philosophie und Theologie von Averroes* (Munich, 1859). The scribe of the manuscript used by Müller referred to the text as “The question which Abū al-Walīd (may God be pleased with him) mentioned in the *Decisive Treatise*” (preserved as a subtitle in Müller’s edition, p. 128: المسئلة التي ذكرها أبو الوليد في فصل المقال رضي الله عنه). Muhsin Mahdi notes that this “is not a formal title and does not form part of the work as written or dictated by Averroes; it is a scribe’s explanation.” Moreover, Mahdi notes that this work is specifically addressed to “one of his companions,” and argues that this companion is in fact the Almohad Caliph Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf. Accordingly, he says, that this treatise “was not meant to have a title: it is an epistle dedicatory.” See Muhsin Mahdi, “Averroes on Divine Law and Human Wisdom,” in Joseph Cropsey (ed.), *Ancients and Moderns: Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy in Honor of Leo Strauss*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 114–131, esp. 117–118. Charles Butterworth takes up Mahdi’s suggestion and gives the work the title “Epistle Dedicatory” in his edition and translation, Averroes, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*. The two Hebrew translations of this work, one by Ṭodros Ṭodrosi of Arles and the other anonymous, give their own titles to the work. Ṭodros’ title appears as “Treatise on Eternal Knowledge” (מאמר במדע הקדמון) in two manuscripts, and מדעת בקדום ... מאמר in another manuscript). The anonymous translation, which survives in only one manuscript gives as a title “Epistle on the

indeed, Averroes ends the short work by quoting Quran 67:14 (أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ), which can be translated "Does he (God) not know, he who created, since he is perspicacious and informed?"⁵ In either case, Averroes suggests that the entire "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" and its question about God's knowledge of generated things is in a sense an interpretation of this verse. The "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," then, is a dialectical interpretation of the Quran and as such would seem to be explicitly prohibited from being written down and presented to the multitude according to Averroes' *Decisive Treatise*. Does Averroes' "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" go against the legal ruling Averroes laid down in the *Decisive Treatise*?

It is, of course, possible to answer this question using Averroes' own justification for discussing the connection between wisdom and Law and interpretation, viz. that such issues and questions have gained a status of being widely held among people (*šuhra* ... *‘inda al-nās*).⁶ This, indeed, would explain Averroes' use of dialectical arguments in the *Decisive Treatise*, and perhaps in the *Exposition* and *Incoherence* as well. Yet, while these works use some dialectical arguments, they are not thoroughly *dialectical* in the way of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," which we shall see is structured nearly entirely according to the descriptions of dialectic we find in Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's *Topica*. That is, the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" is fundamentally dialectical in a way we do not see in Averroes' other writings and so we may ask why he wrote in this way here and why, moreover, writing such a thoroughly dialectical work is permitted?

Before answering this question, we shall examine the dialectical character of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" in light of Averroes' own descriptions of dialectic in his *Short* and *Middle Commentaries* on Aristo-

Meaning of the Doubt attendant on the Eternal's Knowledge (May He be Exalted)" (אנרה ... בענין הספק הקורה בידעת הקדמון ית). See Silvia Di Donato, "La tradizione ebraica dell'opuscolo di Averroè sulla scienza divina," in Irene Kajon, Luise Valente, and Francesca Gorgoni (ed.), *Philosophical Translations in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. In Memory of Mauro Zonta* (Rome: Aracne, 2022), p. 161 and 164, and the discussion on p. 149–150. Both Hebrew translations use the term "Eternal" to mean Divine. In a course I attended on Averroes' *Decisive Treatise* at the University of Chicago taught by Joel Kraemer and Ralph Lerner in 2003, Prof. Kraemer suggested using the title, "Treatise on Divine Knowledge," relying, as I recall, on Todos' title. Here I have adopted the title, "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," in an attempt to combine these approaches.

⁵ The verse could also be read to mean, "Does he not know his creatures?..."

⁶ Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, p. 23, para. 37.

tle's *Topica*. Even though the *Middle Commentary* was probably written after the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" it is Averroes' most detailed work on dialectic and probably presents his views best, even if they were in less developed form at the time he wrote the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge." Then we shall follow Averroes' comparison of solving the difficulty of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" to untying a knot to its source in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* B and examine what Averroes has to say about dialectic in his *Middle Commentary* there. This will allow us to suggest an explanation of the role of dialectic in Averroes' "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" that is consistent with Averroes' philosophical project.

2. DIALECTIC IN THE "EPISTLE ON DIVINE KNOWLEDGE"

One cannot escape the dialogical structure of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," which presents four different dialogues on two textual levels. First, there is an apparent frame dialogue between the author, viz. Averroes, and an unnamed interlocutor, whom some have supposed to be the Caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf.⁷ Nested within that frame, are three other short dialogues. One between a first person plural "us" and someone known as "the adversary" (*al-ḥaṣm*), another between the first-person plural "us" and the *mutakallimūn* (para. 5),⁸ and the third between "us" and al-Ġazālī (para. 6–7). Each of these dialogues is between two people and each includes a questioner and a respondent. So, even though the term *al-ḥaṣm* is more frequently used in the context of rhetoric, it is clear that there is no audience here and the adversarial contexts of dialogues 2 and 3 are dialectical, rather than rhetorical.⁹ Moreover, all four

⁷ This is suggested by Muhsin Mahdi in "Averroes on Divine Law and Human Wisdom," p. 118–119. This suggestion is repeated by Charles Butterworth in *Decisive Treatise*, p. xl-xli.

⁸ In fact, para. 5 is careful to use the passive voice and the sense that one of the interlocutors is "us" is supplied from context, including from the fact that the "us" عندنا shows up again at the opening of paragraph 7, despite the use of the passive in para. 6.

⁹ *Glossarium graeco-arabicum* lists *ḥaṣm* as a frequent translation of ἀντίδικος in the rhetoric and the verbal form, *ḥaṣama* as translating ἀμφοιβητέω in the rhetoric. Note that both Hebrew translations of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" render *ḥaṣm* by *ba'al rib* (though Ṭodros Ṭodrosi adds the definite article). See Silvia Di Donato, "La tradizione ebraica dell'opuscolo di Averroè sulla scienza divina," p. 141–169. While the Hebrew term, *ba'al rib*, is often used in the context of rhetoric, it also appears in Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles' Hebrew translation of Averroes' *Short Commentary* on Aristotle's *Topica*. See Averroes, *Short Commentary on Aristotle's Logical Organon: Topica*. Trans. Jacob ben Makhir Ibn Tibbon, revised by Samuel ben Judah of Marseilles, ed. Yehuda Halper (Mahadurot: Modular Hebrew Digitally Ren-

dialogues concern a single "doubt," *šakk*, about God's eternal knowledge of created, i. e., generating things.

All four of these dialogues, indeed, follow an argumentative structure that is discussed in Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle's *Topica*. Now, at *Topica* 104b1–3, defines a dialectical problem as follows:

Πρόβλημα δ' ἐστὶ διαλεκτικὸν θεώρημα τὸ συντεῖνον ἢ πρὸς αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν ἢ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν καὶ γνῶσιν ... περὶ οὗ ἢ οὐδετέρως δοξάζουσιν ἢ ἐναντίως [οἱ πολλοὶ τοῖς σοφοῖς ἢ] οἱ σοφοὶ τοῖς πολλοῖς ἢ ἐκότεροι αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοῖς.

A dialectical problem is an inquiry that leads either to choice and avoidance or to truth and cognizance ... About [this problem] either people's opinions go any way, or the opinions of the many are opposite those of the wise, or the opinions of the wise are opposite those of the many, or each (sc. wise and many) go opposite with themselves.

Al-Damašqī apparently translates Aristotle's "dialectical problem" (πρόβλημα διαλεκτικὸν) as *al-mas'ala al-mantiqiyya*, "logical questioning," though 'Abd al-Raḥman Badawī points to a note above the line that reads *al-maḥāwiriyya al-ḡadiliyya*, meaning something like "dialectical pivots."¹⁰ Neither reading is clearly relevant for our purposes. Yet, in his *Middle Commentary*, Averroes restates what is apparently the same passage as follows.

المطلوب الجدلي فهو ما لم يكن معلوما صدقه بنفسه بحسب لمشهور بل يلحقه شك ما في المشهور.

The object of dialectical inquiry is that whose truth is not known in itself according to what is widely-held, but that which is attended by *doubt* with respect to what is widely-held.¹¹

Averroes goes on to give examples related to choice, such as whether or under what circumstances wealth or poverty is to be preferred, and examples related to truth and knowledge, such as whether the world is eternal or created, both favorite examples of Aristotle's. Averroes also make special mention of doubts that occur to believers regarding what is widely-held in their religions. Averroes, then, takes "doubt," *šakk*, to be central to dialectic, even though it does not play so clearly prominent a role in Aristotle's text, even in Arabic translation.

dered Texts, 2022), <http://mahadurot.com/AVSC/topica/Content/Av%20SC%20Top/Paris%20956.htm>, 21:6.

¹⁰ See *Mantiq 'Aristū*, vol. 2, Aristotle's Posterior Analytics and Topics in Arabic, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥman Badawī (Cairo, Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1949), p. 485.

¹¹ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Topics*, ed. Charles Butterworth and Ahmad Abd al-Magid Haridi (Cairo, The American Research Center in Egypt, 1979), p. 44, para. 22 (my emphasis).

“Doubt” is clearly a framing subject of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge.” Indeed the word *šakk* appears 13 times in the short, eleven paragraph text. Moreover, the inquiry of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” is centered around this doubt. Indeed, the text seems to be divided fairly evenly into two parts: (1) The determination of the doubt (*taqrīr hāda al-šakk*, paragraphs 1–5) and (2) The solution to the doubt (*ḥall hāda al-šakk*, paragraphs 6–11). Even if we follow Charles Butterworth’s division of the text into three parts (in addition to what he sets as introductory and concluding paragraphs),¹² we take paragraphs 8–10 as “Consequences” to the solution of the doubt in paragraphs 6–7. That is to say, the treatise is clearly an inquiry into “that which is attended by doubt.”

The doubt in question, whether and how God knows created things, is moreover one about something “whose truth is not known in itself according to what is widely-held.” What makes something “widely-held” (*mašhūr*)? This concept is loosely connected to Aristotle’s notion of *ἐνδοξα* as developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Topica*. In the *Topica* Aristotle connects it to what all or some people believe, especially the wise.¹³ Averroes follows Aristotle in this in both his *Middle Commentary* (para. 21) and his *Short Commentary* (para. 13), while giving a more systematic breakdown into the kinds of wise people (scientists, experienced doctors, etc.) who might hold different opinions. This is significant because, as Averroes notes, if *all* believe something, there is no doubt and so, no need for dialectical methods. In the case of the doubt about God’s knowledge, we know that some who might be considered wise, viz. the *mutakallimūn*, have opinions about it which are patently wrong.¹⁴ Accordingly, the doubt about God’s knowledge of created things is not known in itself according to what is widely-held.

Moreover, according to Averroes in both the *Short* and *Middle Commentaries* on the *Topica*, the contradictory or opposite of something well-known is also well-known.¹⁵ That is to say, if the view of the *mutakallimūn* is well-known, then so is its contradictory. This is a further indication that this doubt is “according to what is widely-held.” Accordingly, it is clear that the discussion of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” in general is a dialectical inquiry, as Averroes understands

¹² That is, the division he employs in Averroes, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*.

¹³ Aristotle, *Topica* 100b21–23. Cf. *Ethica Nicomachea* 1145b5.

¹⁴ “Epistle on Divine Knowledge,” para. 5.

¹⁵ *Short Commentary* para. 13 and *Middle Commentary* para. 21.

it.

Averroes' dialectical approach can be felt further in the way he structures opposing arguments in the determination of the doubt, in a form that is readily translatable to syllogisms. In the *Prior Analytics* and elsewhere Aristotle generally introduces syllogistic premises with the Greek εἰ, meaning "if," and signals the conclusion with the particle ἄρα. These terms come into Arabic as *ʿin* and *lazima ʿanna* respectively. These terms appear with some frequency in Averroes' determination of the doubt, suggesting that he is putting the arguments in syllogistic form. This is further tied in with the art of dialectic, as Averroes says at the opening of his *Middle Commentary* on the *Topics*:

هذه الصناعة هي بالجملة الصناعة التي نقدر بها إذا كنا سائلين أن نعمل من مقدمات مشهورة قياسا على إبطال كل وضع يتضمن المجيب حفظه، وعلى حفظ كل وضع كلى يروم السائل إبطاله إذا كنا مجيبين.

This art is in general the art through which we are able, when we are questioners, to construct a syllogism out of well-known premises in order to refute any thesis which the respondent has committed himself to defend – or to defend any universal thesis which a questioner strives to refute, when we are respondents.¹⁶

That is, according to Averroes – and here is following al-Fārābī's reading of Aristotle's opening line of Aristotle's *Topics*¹⁷ – the dialectician should be able to argue both sides of a (universal) thesis using syllogisms built out of well-known premises.

This is, in fact, what we find in paragraph 3 of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge." Averroes presents two contradictory theses followed by arguments in the form of a syllogism. The theses are:

(T) Created things in God's knowledge *are* the same before they exist as they are after they exist.

(¬ T) Created things in God's knowledge *are not* the same before they exist as they are after they exist.

This formulation sounds somewhat awkward because it takes as its subject the created things as objects of God's knowledge. Averroes then

¹⁶ *Middle Commentary*, para. 1.

¹⁷ For al-Fārābī's text which quotes directly from the opening line of Aristotle's *Topica* in al-Damāšqī's translation, see Dominique Mallet, "La dialectique dans la philosophie d'Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī," PhD dissertation, Université Michel-de-Montaigne, 1992, vol. 2, p. 19–20. For an English translation of this opening line, see David DiPasquale, *Alfarabi's Book of Dialectic (Kitāb al-Jadal): On the Starting Point of Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 11–12. For the medieval anonymous Hebrew translation, see al-Fārābī, *The Art of Dialectic*, ed. Yehuda Halper and Gadi Weber (Mahadurot: Modular Hebrew Digitally Rendered Texts, 2022), <http://mahadurot.com/FarabiDialectic>.

takes the negative thesis ($\neg T$) as a premise (beginning with *ʿin*) and draws the conclusion (*lazima ʿanna*) that eternal knowledge changes (*mutaḡayyiran*) in response to creation. This argument assumes that a change in the object of God’s knowledge is a change in God’s eternal knowledge itself. This assumption is not controversial and so could be accepted as a universal well-known premise according to Averroes’ conditions for dialectic. Thus we can restate this argument as a syllogism:

The objects of God’s knowledge are subject to change (i. e., $\neg T$)

The objects of God’s knowledge are part of eternal knowledge

(Some) eternal knowledge is subject to change

The conclusion that (any) eternal knowledge is subject to change is, according to Averroes “absurd” (*mustahīl*).¹⁸ Accordingly, this syllogism is brought by Averroes to refute thesis $\neg T$.

When examining the contradictory thesis, T , viz. created things in God’s knowledge *are* the same before they exist as they are after they exist, Averroes constructs a literary dialogue with an unnamed adversary to interrogate the question of whether created things are in themselves the same after they are created or different. The adversary admits (*salima*) that they are not the same, and thereby is led to admit that the knowledge of created things changes when those things are created. This admission is equivalent to $\neg T$ and the adversary has thus been led into accepting both T and $\neg T$, i. e., into a contradiction.

From this Averroes concludes, “One of two things is obligatory; either eternal knowledge differs in itself, or generated things are not known to it” (para. 3). These two are not proper contradictories. Yet they do follow from another set of contradictories:

(S) God knows created things.

($\neg S$) God does not know created things.

If S , then we are faced with T or $\neg T$, which are either absurd or self-contradictory according to Averroes. Yet $\neg S$ is also “absurd” (*mustahīl*), according to Averroes, though he does not say why – and indeed is famously blamed for holding precisely this position.¹⁹ In any case, Aver-

¹⁸ *Glossarium graeco-arabicum* lists this word as a possible translation of ἄτοπος. Note that the parenthetical additions of “some” or “any” here are not in Averroes’ text, but are not inconsistent with his argument.

¹⁹ This controversy may be based somewhat on Averroes’ statement in his *Short Commentary* on Aristotle’s *Parva naturalia* that separate intellect know only universals, not particulars. See Averroes, *Compendia librorum Aristotelis qui Parva naturalia vocantur*, ed. H. Blumberg (Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America,

roes is clearly pursuing a dialectical approach, via thesis and its contradictory and arguing each on the basis of syllogism.

This approach continues in the dialogues Averroes creates with the *mutakallimūn* and with al-Ġazālī in paragraphs 5 and 6 respectively. The *mutakallimūn* hold thesis T, but deny that God's knowledge changes when the things change. Averroes points out to the imagined interlocutors that this is not consistent with what knowledge of something that changes is. Note that he does this, too, by setting up contradictory theses, viz.

(V) When things come into existence, a change *occurs*, viz. coming from nothing into existence.

(¬ V) When things come into existence, a change *does not* occur.

Those who hold ¬ V, he says, "are being contentious" (*kabirū*),²⁰ while V must imply that God knows the change in that which comes into existence, thereby raising the questions of T and ¬ T, what Averroes calls "the previous doubt." Again, we see a thesis and its contradictory with arguments to rule out the possibilities, i. e., dialectical argumentation.

The solution of this doubt begins with another mini-dialogue. This time with al-Ġazālī. This dialogue does not identify an answerer or a respondent. Moreover, Averroes focuses on al-Ġazālī's meaning, *ma'nanahu*, rather than on his actual statement (*qawl*). According to Averroes, al-Ġazālī claimed (*za'ama*) that knowledge and what is known are related (*anna al-'ilm wa-al-ma'alūm min al-muḍāfa*). "Just as one of two related things may change and the other related thing not change in itself, so it would seem to occur in the case of God's knowledge, may he be glorified). That is, they change in themselves but his knowledge ... does not change."²¹ Averroes refutes this view by appeal to the proper understanding of the category of relation. Averroes notes that the subject (*mawḍū'*) of the relation need not change along with a change in the object of the relation, but the relation (*al-'iḍāfa*) itself does actually

1972), p. 74–75. Averroes says in *Metaphysics* Λ that divine providence is applied to the species only, not to individuals. See Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba'd at-ṭabī'at*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut, Imprimerie Catholique, 1938–42), vol. 3, p. 1607 (C.38.r), cf. p. 1707–1708 (C.51.ii). See also Richard Taylor, "Averroes' Epistemology and its Critique by Aquinas," in R. E. Houser (ed.), *Medieval Masters: Essays in Memory of Msgr. E. A. Synan* (Houston, Tex., 1999), p. 147–177.

²⁰ Aristotle also frequently dismisses certain arguers as "contentious" (ἐριστικός) – see, e.g., *De sophisticis elenchis* 172a8–9, though it is not entirely clear that this is equivalent to the Arabic here. Still, *Glossarium graeco-arabicum* lists *al-mukābara* as a translation of ἐριστικόν in Themistius' *Commentary* on Aristotle's *De anima* (<https://glossga.bbaw.de/glossary.php?id=189716.html>).

²¹ Butterworth trans. modified.

change. Averroes' example is a column on Zayd's right at one point that is on his left at another, without Zayd moving. Zayd has not changed, even though the relation "to the right of Zayd" has changed to "to the left of Zayd."

Averroes does not here deny that knowledge is a relation.²² Indeed, when Averroes discusses relation (*al-ʿidāfa*) in some detail in the context of what he identifies as *topos* 27 in his *Middle Commentary* on the *Topics* (para. 165), he frequently uses knowledge (*al-ʿilm*) as an example. In this he follows Aristotle who also employed ἐπιστήμη as an example in the parallel passage in his *Topica*, at 125a. Averroes identifies a kind of relation that is determined by prepositions, such as *li*, and notes that sometimes things related in this way can convert such that when A is related to B, B is also related to A. An example of this, says Averroes in a section preserved only in the 14th c. Hebrew translation of Qalonimos ben Qalonimos, is knowledge and what is known.²³ Moreover, notes Averroes there in a section preserved in the Arabic, knowledge is an example of something that can be

said by a syllogism²⁴ of that which is known and of the soul that knows. Knowledge exists in the soul and in the things which are known and which are outside of the soul. If it should happen that an inquiry is into the soul, then the knowledge will necessarily exist in the thing which is known.

يفال بالقياس إلى المعلوم وإلى النفس العالمة والعلم يوجد في النفس وفي المعلوم وهو خارج النفس فإذا اتفق أن كان النظر في النفس كان العلم في المعلوم ضرورة.

Averroes thus implies that when the inquiry is not into one's own soul, knowledge exists in the things outside of soul that are known as

²² This is also noted in Jean-Baptiste Brenet, "Relation as key to God's knowledge of particulars in the *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* and the *Ḍamīma*: A cross-talk between Averroes, Al-Ġazālī and Avicenna," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, vol. 30 (2020), p. 1–26. Brenet gives a comprehensive account of al-Ġazālī's argument, its attack on Avicenna, and Averroes' response. For the claim that Averroes is actually misrepresenting or perhaps misunderstanding al-Ġazālī's argument here see Matteo Di Giovanni, "Philosophy Incarnate: Ibn Rushd's 'Almohadism' and the problem of God's Omniscience," in A. Bertolacci, A. Paravicini Bagliani, M. Bertagna (ed.), *La Filosofia Medievale tra antichità ed età moderna: Saggi in memoria di Francesco Del Punta* (Florence: Edizione del Galluzzo, 2017), p. 139–162, esp. 148–150.

²³ My student, Arye Rainer, is currently preparing an edition of Qalonimos ben Qalonimos of Arles' Hebrew translation of Averroes, *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Topica*.

²⁴ The Arabic term *qiyās* can mean both "analogy" and "syllogism." While "analogy" could be the intention here, I consistently translate this term "syllogism" under the understanding – which is generally adopted by all Muslim Aristotelians – that all arguments can be stated as syllogisms.

well as in the soul of the knower. This kind of knowledge is fundamentally distinct from the knowledge one gains when looking into one's own soul.²⁵

Al-Ġazālī's mistake was not only that he did not know how to argue properly about relation, it was also because he made "a syllogism between what is not seen and what is witnessed."²⁶ That is he made a syllogistic inference about God's knowledge based on his own, human knowledge. This syllogism meant that he combined the two kinds of knowledge that Averroes mentioned in his discussion of *topos* 27, knowledge by syllogism of things outside the soul and knowledge of what is in the soul. In fact, al-Ġazālī applied what he knew from his own soul's knowledge to a kind of Knowledge that is distinctly outside of his soul, viz. God's knowledge. Al-Ġazālī's big problem, then, was that he did not know how to make topical arguments of things in relation to one another. This may have been due to the fact that al-Ġazālī never had the opportunity to read Averroes' *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Topica*.

In responding to al-Ġazālī and in solving the initial doubt, Averroes employs an argumentation technique he recommends throughout his commentaries on the *Topica*: he takes the opposite, not of the proposition T, but of one of its terms, in this case God's knowledge.²⁷ Al-Ġazālī

²⁵ It is presumably the existing things that give rise to, or cause the knowledge of themselves in themselves and in the soul of the knower. Should an existing thing change, the knowledge would also change. When it comes to the soul's knowledge of soul, then there is no possibility of a par between the knowledge of the knower and the knowledge in the thing known. Indeed, since they are identical, the soul is the cause of the knowledge of the soul. That God knows himself would follow from the Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Λ; Averroes, Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba'd at-ṭabī'at*, vol. 3, p. 1692 (T.51.r). See also Averroes' comments on p. 1700–1701 (C.51.r-s). Cf. Steven Harvey, "Notes on Maimonides' Formulations of Principle K," *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 68 (2020), p. 233–244. See also Averroes, *Tahafot al-tahafot. L'incohérence de l'incohérence*, ed. Maurice Bouyges (Beirut, Dār al-Maṣriq, 3rd ed., 1992), p. 459, 22. Accordingly, he is the cause of his own knowledge. This may be at the heart of what Averroes has in mind in the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" when he distinguishes between generated knowledge which is caused by the existing things and eternal knowledge, i. e., divine knowledge, which is the cause of those things and which God knows through knowing himself (para. 7). This argument is highly conjectural. Note that Di Giovanni argues that God's knowledge of himself can *not* be productive of his own knowledge. According to him, the arguments in the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" and *Metaphysics* Λ are not consistent. "Philosophy Incarnate," p. 152–155.

²⁶ Butterworth trans. modified, p. 41. Butterworth translates the term *qiyās* here "analogy." Readers who consider that what is meant here is not a proper syllogism are invited to replace "syllogism" and "syllogistic inference" with "analogy" throughout this paragraph. Cf. n. 24 above.

and others had assumed that God's knowledge is like any other knowledge, but Averroes argues that it is in a different state (*al-hāl ... ḥilāf...*). The state of human knowledge is dependent on, or the cause of the existing things which it knows. Consequently it changes when they change. If God's knowledge is in a different state, then it is not dependent on the existing things which it knows. Averroes, however, goes beyond what one could infer from taking an opposite view and says that God's knowledge is the cause of the created things, or that the created things are dependent on God's knowledge. This fundamentally different kind of knowledge does not change even when the existing things change. This allows him to adopt proposition T, since created things in God's knowledge *are* unchanging, even if the created things in themselves are subject to change. Eternal knowledge is not affected by any changes in the created things, since it is prior to them in causation and independent of them. This effectively solves the doubt, in Averroes' view.

It should be clear by now that the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" is a thoroughly dialectical work, and follows the criteria for dialectic that Averroes himself finds in his commentaries on Aristotle's *Topica*. I have discussed in some detail the dialectical character of all of the internal dialogues. The frame dialogue, which is not adversarial, would seem to suggest that the dialectic between Averroes and the unnamed addressee is for the sake of practice and learning, as outlined at the opening of the *Middle Commentary* on the *Topica* and at the very end. Thus, e. g. in his comments on *Topica* VIII.4, Averroes refers to

those whose intention is training in this art and determining the thing sought which is spoken of with regard to the demonstrative science, not those whose intention is contention.²⁸

الذين غرضهم الارتياض بهذا الصناعة وتوطئة المطلوب الذي يتكلمون فيه نحو العلم البرهاني لا الذين غرضهم الغلبة.

Earlier, at the opening of Book VIII, Averroes notes, "the philosopher and the dialectical person share in the inquiry into discovering the *topos*."²⁹ If the *topos* here is something like Divine Knowledge as causal knowledge, then the entire "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" could be an exercise in coming to discover that. It is thus possible to see the work as a dialectical work aimed at coming to the basis of an argument about

²⁷ See especially *Middle Commentary*, p. 241–2, para. 355 and *Short Commentary* para. 21.

²⁸ See especially Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, p. 221, para. 330.

²⁹ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, p. 199, para. 302: والفيلسوف والجدلي يشتركان في الفحص إلى أن يتبين استنباط الموضوع.

Divine Knowledge with an eye to demonstrative sciences, i. e., as on the way to philosophy proper.

Also, at the very end of the *Middle Commentary* Averroes interprets Aristotle's statement, "One should not engage in dialectic with everyone, nor should one exercise with one who just happens to be there."³⁰ Averroes takes this to mean that one should avoid using dialectical arguments with the "dialectical person" (*al-insān al-ḡadalī*) whose intention is training (*al-ʿirtiyyāḍ*).³¹ This would seem to indicate that dialectical arguments ought to be taken up with those who are not dialectical people, but people training in dialectical arguments in order to gain proficiency in demonstrative science, i. e., with potential philosophers.

3. METAPHYSICS AND THE EPISTLE ON DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

In fact, Averroes hints at an even more specific intended readership for the dialectical arguments of the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" at the end of paragraph 2. There Averroes says, "For one who does not know the knot will not be able to untie it" (فإنه من لم يعرف الربط لم يقدر على الحل). This would appear to be a restatement of what Aristotle says at *Metaphysics* B, 995a29–30: "It is not possible to untie a knot about which you are ignorant" (λύειν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἀγνοοῦντας τὸν δεσμόν). Uṣṭāṭ's translation of *Metaphysics* B, which was the one Averroes used at least when composing the *Long Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*,³² renders this line as follows: ولا يقدر ان يحل من جهل الرباط.³³ The similarity between this line and the one at the end of Averroes' "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," para. 2, is quite clear. Indeed, the two are so similar that there is virtually no room for doubting that the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" is referring to *Metaphysics* B.

What does Averroes mean to convey by this reference? Well, to my mind, it is a rather clear signal to any reader familiar with *Metaphysics* B

³⁰ *Topica* 164b8–9: Οὐχ ἅπαντι δὲ διαλεκτέον, οὐδὲ πρὸς τὸν τυχόντα γυμναστέον. Damašqī's translation has "engage in dialectic" twice, once instead of "exercise." Moreover, in the first instance it refers to engaging in dialectic "about any thing" rather than "with anyone." "About any thing" is also a possible reading of the Greek. *Mantiq ʿAristū*, vol. 3, Aristotle's *Topics* and *Sophistic Refutations*, Porphyry's *Isagoge* in Arabic, ed. ʿAbd al-Rahman Badawī (Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya, 1952), p. 732.

³¹ Averroes, *Middle Commentary*, p. 248, para. 366.

³² See Amos Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-šifāʾ* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 12.

³³ Averroes, *Tafsīr mā baʿd aṭ-ṭabīʿat*, ed. Bouyges, vol. 1, p. 166.

that the inquiry presented in the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” is intended to correspond to the kind of inquiry Aristotle describes in *Metaphysics* B. Recall that *Metaphysics* B is the book in which Aristotle presents a series of ἀπορίαι which must be addressed before beginning the search for knowledge (ἐπιστήμη).

Now Averroes, in both the *Middle* and *Long Commentaries* on the *Metaphysics*, identifies the process of addressing these ἀπορίαι as dialectic. I bring here what he says in the *Middle Commentary*, since it is probably chronologically closer to the writing of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” (and the approach in the *Long Commentary* does not differ significantly for our purposes). Since the *Middle Commentary* is not extant in Arabic,³⁴ I bring it only in the 14th century Hebrew translation of Qalonimos ben Qalonimos of Arles. There we find the following:

We must first examine the deep questions that are mentioned in this science which we seek ... Indeed, this is necessary because the first thing those who want to grasp knowledge of things and their principles do is make a strong inquiry into the dialectical statements that are doubtful from among the deep questions in that genus.³⁵

אנו מוכרחים לחקור ראשונה בשאלות העמוקות אשר יזכרו בזאת החכמה המבוקשת הנה ... ואמנם היה זה מחוייב לפי שהתחלת פעל הרוצים להשיג ידיעת הדברים והתחלותם הוא חזק החקירה המאמרים הנצוחיים המספקים מהשאלות העמוקות אשר באותו הסוג...

The ἀπορίαι have apparently become deep questions. Indeed, it seems to me that the question-answer format of addressing these issues, as we find, for example, in *Metaphysics* B, played a large part in Averroes' association of these questions with dialectic. The doubt associated with the questions is, no doubt, another factor in Averroes' decision to connect the ἀπορίαι with dialectic.

Averroes continues,

For in as much as the doubter is unable to understand some of the deep

³⁴ Fragments of the Arabic text of the *Middle Commentary* of the *Metaphysics* have survived and been edited in *Averroes' Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, ed. Maroun Aouad, Silvia Di Vincenzo, and Hamid Fadelallah (Leiden, Brill, 2023). Unfortunately, the extant Arabic text does not include *Metaphysics* B.

³⁵ Averroes, *Il Commento medio di Averroè alla Metafisica di Aristotele nella tradizione ebraica: Edizione delle versioni ebraiche medievali di Zerahyah Hen e di Qalonimos ben Qalonimos con introduzione storica e filologica* (Averroes's *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the Hebrew Tradition. Edition of the Medieval Hebrew versions by Zerahyah Hen and Qalonimos ben Qalonimos, together with a historical and philological introduction), ed. Mauro Zonta (Pavia: Pavia University Press, 2011), vol. 2, t. 1, p. 9.

questions and he stands between opposite alternatives, he is like someone caught in a bind.³⁶

כי אשר ימצא המספק מלאות ההבנה בשאלות העמוקות ועמדו בין המקבילים הוא דומה למה שימצא הנלכד בקשר...

The bind, or knot, is thus associated with two chief components of dialectic, doubt and the stance between two opposite propositions. The doubter who is caught in this bind is accordingly in the predicament of dialectic, as Averroes understands it.

Averroes goes on:

One who is in doubt about something cannot resolve his doubt with something from within the genus of statements which necessarily led him into the bind on that matter, i. e., the dialectical statements, but rather with another genus of statements, i. e., demonstrative statements.³⁷

המסופק בדבר אי אפשר שיתיר ספקו בדבר הוא מסוג המאמרים אשר חייבו הקשר באותו הענין והם המאמרים הנצוחיים, אבל מסוג אחר והם המאמרים המופתיים.

Clearly, the resolution of the doubts raised through questioning and dialectic is through demonstration, rather than through dialectic. In other words, true solutions to metaphysical questions are through demonstrations, not through dialectic.

Nevertheless, Averroes gives us the following syllogism accounting for why dialectic is useful at the beginning stages of studying metaphysics.

If grasping the truth about these deep questions is resolving the bind that occurs to the understanding with inquiry about them and if this resolving occurs after the bind, it necessarily follows that before inquiring into them, you should first inquire into the statements that are similar in understanding to the bind. These are the dialectical statements. This is one reason it is necessary to precede deep questions with a dialectical inquiry.³⁸

ואם היתה השגת האמת באלו השאלות העמוקות אמנם היא התרת הקשר אשר יקרה להבנה עם החקירה מהם וההתרה אמנם תהיה אחר הקשר הנה יחוייב שתקדם על החקירה מהם במאמרים אשר הם בהבנה דומה לקשר והם המאמרים הנצוחיים הנה זה אחד ממה שיחוייב להקדים החקירה הנצוחית מהדרושים העמוקים.

This syllogism is clearly intended to show that although demonstrations are preferable, we ought to begin with dialectical statements before proceeding to demonstrations. Yet, what kind of syllogism is this? Clearly it is of the first figure: If a is b and b is c, then a is c. As such it is

³⁶ Averroes, *Commento medio*, ed. Mauro Zonta, vol. 2, t. 1, p. 9.

³⁷ Averroes, *Commento medio*, ed. Mauro Zonta, vol. 2, t. 1, p. 9.

³⁸ Averroes, *Commento medio*, ed. Mauro Zonta, vol. 2, t. 1, p. 9.

valid. Yet examination of the first premise, *viz.* that grasping the truth about these deep questions is resolving the bind, makes clear that this is not a demonstrative premise. Indeed, the notion that resolving questions is grasping the truth does not completely conform to what Averroes had just said in the *previous* sentence, *viz.* that demonstration is the proper way to the truth. While demonstration could be in answer to questions, it need not be. Rather it would seem to be the case that what Averroes has in mind here is dialectic, especially in light of the conclusion. That dialectical resolution of doubt is grasping the truth is at best a dialectical premise, accepted by dialecticians, but not by those of the demonstrative class. That is, this syllogism is a *dialectical* syllogism.

Why does Averroes employ a dialectical syllogism to argue for the importance of dialectic? Let me suggest a dialectical answer. Either the reader recognizes it as a dialectical syllogism or not. If he recognizes it as dialectical and is familiar with demonstrations, then he does not need to work too much on the questions and answers in *Metaphysics B*, but can skim them over or skip them and then move on to demonstrations. If not, then he must learn them and thoroughly familiarize himself with the kinds of syllogisms before he can move on to do demonstration proper. This kind of dialectical syllogism, then, performs a didactic function; it works with and encourages students who have not thoroughly understood the content of the *Posterior Analytics* tradition, while also indicating to those who do understand the syllogism that this is a dialectical, not demonstrative argument.³⁹

4. CONCLUSION

In the first part of this paper, I argued that the arguments Averroes employs in the work that came to be known as the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” are dialectical and can be understood according to the description of dialectical arguments in Aristotle’s *Topica*, as interpreted by Averroes in his *Middle Commentary* on the *Topica*. In the second part of the paper, I argued that Averroes uses a literary allusion to associate the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” with *Metaphysics B*, and the arguments of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” with the kind of dialectical

³⁹ An anonymous reader suggests that Averroes employed a dialectical syllogism here because demonstration about God’s knowledge is not possible and dialectic is the best that can be achieved. This may be the case, but Averroes is far from arguing in the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” either that demonstration about this issue is not possible or that the argument he gives here is the best that can be achieved.

arguments we find there. Now it is also clear that the subject of the *Epistle*, God's knowledge of created things, is metaphysical, and indeed discussed by Averroes in his *Middle* and *Long Commentaries* on *Metaphysics* Λ. Averroes's discussion in those places is quite well-known and it is clear that his solution to the problem of God's knowledge of particulars is roughly the same in all places: God and God's knowledge are one and the cause of those particulars, and so his knowledge is of a different kind.⁴⁰ Whatever Averroes' approach to *Metaphysics* Λ, it is clear that his approach to the question in the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" is dialectical. It is dialectical, I suggest, in the way that Averroes sees *Metaphysics* B as dialectical, viz. it is of an introductory kind, meant to be supplanted by demonstrations at a later point.

This use of dialectic is exactly parallel to the use of dialectic in education we find in Averroes' *Commentary* on Plato's *Republic*. As I have argued elsewhere, while Averroes generally removes dialectic and dialectical arguments from his version of the ideal city described in the *Republic*, dialectics is incorporated into the education of the guardians, i. e., of the potential philosophers.⁴¹ This is due to its educational value, a point which Averroes also emphasizes at the beginning of the *Middle Commentary* on the *Topica*. I believe it is clear that the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge" too plays a didactic role. It is a short dialectical solution to a problem that is treated at greater length and with better preparation in the commentaries on *Metaphysics* Λ. As Averroes notes at the

⁴⁰ Averroes, *Commento medio*, ed. Mauro Zonta, vol. 2, t. 2, p. 273 and Averroes, *Tafsīr mā ba'd at-ṭabī'at*, ed. Bouyges, p. 1607 (C.37.r) and p. 1707–08 (C.51.ii). See also Averroes, *Tahafut at-tahafut*, ed. Bouyges, p. 460–463; English translation in Averroes, *Tahafut al-tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence)*, trans. S. Van den Bergh (Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 279–291. Cf. Averroes, *Al-kašf 'an manāhiḡ al-adilla fī 'aqā'id al-milla*, ed. M. °Ā. Ġābirī (Beirut, Markaz dirāsāt al-wahda al-°arabiyya, 1998), p. 129–130. For the argument that Averroes holds roughly the same position in these various sources and the attribution of difficulties to the un-knowableness of Divine Knowledge, see Catarina Belo, "Averroes on God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 17 (2006), p. 177–199. For an English translation and a discussion of the second passage in Averroes' *Long Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*, see Richard Taylor, "Averroes: God and the Noble Lie," in *Laudemus viros gloriosus. Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer, CSB*, ed. R. E. Hauser (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 38–29, esp. p. 45–48. Taylor argues, however, "God does not know the world since His activity is fully and totally self-contained" (p. 47). This would seem to place all arguments that God's knowledge entails knowledge of the existing things, including the "Epistle on Divine Knowledge," as within what Taylor calls the "noble lie."

⁴¹ Averroes, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, ed. and trans. E. I. J. Rosenthal (Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 29. See n. 3 above.

beginning of paragraph 6, the proper discussion would be long (*ṭawīlan*) and so what he presents here is the point (*al-nuqṭa*) at which this will be resolved, i. e., not the full demonstration of the resolution. In this case, the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” is a work of didactic dialectic, meant for training potential philosophers.

Let me add as a kind of afterward that I do not think the Caliph Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf is the addressee of this letter, since he is not a potential philosopher. Averroes does not name the addressee of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge,” but only praises his good mind (*dīhn*) and noble nature (*ṭabʿ*) which he says are greater (*kaṭīran*) than those who have pursued these sciences. Averroes then continues to say that the addressee’s theoretical reflection (*naẓr*) has culminated in the doubt with which the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” is concerned. Averroes refers to the addressee in the second person plural in the *Epistle*, which can indicate formality and respect of the kind expected in a literary treatise. In the *Decisive Treatise*, Averroes refers to the addressee of the *Epistle* as “one of our friends,” and while the Arabic *ṣāhib* can also mean “lord” or “master” it is more frequent in its use as “friend” or “fellow traveler.”

Accordingly, I do not see enough here to justify the statement that “the formula of address gives the reader to understand that the one addressed is a prince in high political office, and strongly suggests that he is Averroes’ friend and patron the Almohade ruler Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf ... for whose benefit Averroes had embarked on his commentaries on Aristotle more than a decade earlier.”⁴² Rather, why not assume Averroes’ praise for the addressee to be a genuine compliment to his abilities? Why not assume the addressee to be a student of philosophy, who is sharp, intellectually gifted, and somewhat scientifically advanced? Perhaps, indeed, he has attained the level of the student of *Metaphysics* B, as Averroes’ literary allusion would suggest, and he has encountered

⁴² Mahdi, “Averroes on Divine Law and Human Wisdom,” p. 118–119. Sarah Stroumsa, *Andalus and Sefarad: On Philosophy and its History in Islamic Spain* (Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 134–144, calls into question the extent to which the commentaries were in fact commissioned by Abū Yaʿqūb Yūsuf, especially in light of the fact that Averroes was most likely already far into his commentary writing project before his legendary meeting with the Caliph. Di Giovanni argues that the argument of the “Epistle on Divine Knowledge” is intended to interpret the Almohad doctrine of the homonymy of knowledge between God and man in an Aristotelian manner that could encourage readers to pursue philosophy and metaphysics further. Still his view is that this work is directed toward general thinkers in Andalusia living under Almohad rule and perhaps even some immersed in theology. He does not mention the Caliph as the possible addressee. See Di Giovanni, “Philosophy Incarnate,” p. 156–162.

questions but is not adept enough at metaphysical demonstration to resolve them. This work would help such a person, without fully explaining all demonstrations, and at the same time steer the reader into further metaphysical speculation.

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