

Albert the Great, *Metaphysica* IV, 1, 5: From the *refutatio* to the *excusatio* of Avicenna's Theory of Unity

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The object of my contribution is a chapter from Albert the Great's Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*¹. It is the fifth chapter of the first treatise of the fourth book. As it is clear from the title, this chapter is a digression (*digressio*)².

At the beginning of his Commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*³, Albert explains what digressions are intended to be. Digressions are those chapters of his Aristotelian commentaries in which Albert does not analyze Aristotle's text, but either resolves a doubt or fills a doctrinal gap concerning a text previously commented.

In our case the digression, as it is clear from its introduction, addresses a doubt, namely the question whether 'being' and 'one' follow each other due to the fact that they signify one and the same thing and nature⁴. The text of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* concerned is *Metaphysics* IV, 2, 1003 b 23–24. In it Aristotle says that 'being' and 'one' are the same thing and one unique nature due to the fact that they follow each other. According to Albert, Avicenna gives birth to the doubt because of the objections he addresses to the Aristotelian doctrine⁵.

What makes this particular digression interesting is Albert's treatment of Avicenna's position. Albert first criticizes Avicenna and then apologizes for him. This happens because Albert, when criticizing Avicenna, follows Averroes, while, when apologizing for him, he draws upon his personal acquaintance with Avicenna's thought. The manner in which Albert reproduces Averroes' criticism of Avicenna renders possible the passage from the criticism to the apology.

In what follows, I will expose first Albert's digression (1); then I will examine the text of Averroes that contains the criticism of Avicenna (2);

¹ Alberti Magni *Metaphysica*, libri quinque priores, ed. B. Geyer, Münster 1960 (Ed. Col.), IV, 1, 5, 166, 67–167, 72.

² „*Et est digressio declarans ...*“, 166, 67–70.

³ Alberti Magni *Physica*, Pars I, libri 1–4, ed. P. Hoßfeld, Münster 1987 (Ed. Col.), I, 1, 1, 1, 27–30.

⁴ „*Dubitabit autem aliquis de inductis, an unum et ens consequuntur se ad invicem sicut unam et eandem rem et naturam significantia*“, *Metaphysica*, 166, 71–73.

⁵ „*Obicit enim contra hoc Avicenna dicens, quod ...*“, 166, 73–74.

Albert's treatment of this text (3) and the text of Avicenna that Albert has in mind at the moment of the apology for Avicenna (4); I will end with a short conclusion. In the examination of Averroes' and Avicenna's texts I compare the Latin translation with the Arabic original when necessary.

1. Albert's digression

The digression I examine can be divided in three parts. After the introduction⁶, in the first part, Albert reports seven arguments, attributed to Avicenna, intended to prove that 'being' and 'one' do not signify the same nature⁷; in the second part, to these arguments Albert opposes his personal opinion, according to which 'being' and 'one' do signify the same nature⁸. In the third part of the digression, Albert refutes the arguments attributed to Avicenna in the first part⁹. The digression ends with a short conclusion¹⁰.

In this digression, Albert expresses an ambivalent attitude toward the Avicennian theory of 'being' and 'one'. In the title and in the first part, the digression has a clear polemical tone. The title announces, in fact, the solution of some arguments which are defined as 'sophistical'¹¹. In the same way, at the beginning and at the end of the exposition of the arguments, Avicenna is introduced as an adversary of Aristotle on this topic¹².

Contrary to expectation, in the third part of the digression, when refuting the arguments attributed to Avicenna, Albert does not emphasize his error, but rather tries to show the similarity between Avicenna's doctrine and his own position. We can perceive this in the refutation of the second argument attributed to Avicenna; indeed the refutation ends with these words: „*Et hoc forte attendit Avicenna, cum dixit [sc. unum] esse denominativum*“¹³. At the end of the refutation of all the arguments attributed to Avicenna, then, we find another proposition which sounds as an apology for and a total rehabilitation of Avicenna's doctrine: „*Et sic patet omnium praeinductorum solutio. Et facile est per haec quae hic dicta sunt, excusare dicta Avicennae, quia pro certo, si quis subtiliter dicta sua respiciat, dicere intendit hoc quod hic dictum est*“¹⁴.

This ambivalent emphasis within the digression is strange. One is surprised both by the severity of Albert's criticism of Avicenna in the first part of the

digression and by the benevolence of Albert's defense of Avicenna in the third part of it. Indeed, if we compare the first part to the third one, we encounter a real change of Albert's attitude; from being polemical it becomes defensive.

This ambivalent emphasis finds its explanation in the sources of the digression. In the first part, the first four arguments that Albert attributes to Avicenna are, in fact, silently borrowed from Averroes. Albert himself constructs the next three arguments along the lines of the first four. Consequently, the first four arguments are the most important component of the first part of the digression. They come from the third text of Averroes' Great Commentary on book IV of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In it Averroes criticizes the Avicennian doctrine according to which 'being' and 'one' are distinct from and added to essence¹⁵. Now, if Averroes is often critical towards Avicenna, he is particularly so here. In the present case, Averroes' criticism of Avicenna is justified, because Avicenna's doctrine is indeed different from Aristotle's doctrine on this topic.

Albert preserves the polemical vigour of Averroes' text. This fact explains the critical tone of the first part of the digression. But Albert modifies the target of Averroes' polemic; this modification makes possible the apology for Avicenna in the third part of the digression. Averroes' criticism, in fact, is directed against a doctrine that Avicenna really supports; the Albertinian version of this criticism, instead, is directed against a doctrine that Avicenna himself seems to deny in the first chapter of the seventh treatise of his *Philosophia prima*.

2. The source of the criticism:

Averroes, Great Commentary on *Metaphysics*, IV, 3

The first four arguments attributed to Avicenna in Albert's digression are borrowed from the third text of Averroes' Great Commentary on book IV of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*¹⁶. This dependence is not noted neither in the critical edition of Albert's commentary nor, as far as I know, in the literature concerning Albert.

Within this text, Averroes exposes and criticizes the avicennian doctrine that establishes that 'being' and 'one' are distinct from and added to essence. This anti-Avicennian section of Averroes' text can be divided in five parts,

⁶ 166, 71–73 (cfr. supra, n. 4).

⁷ 166, 73–167, 17.

⁸ 167, 18–30.

⁹ 167, 30–68.

¹⁰ 167, 68–72.

¹¹ „*Et est digressio declarans solutionem rationum sophistarum inductarum ad hoc quod ens et unum non sint natura una et eadem*“, 166, 67–70.

¹² „*Obicit enim contra hoc Avicenna dicens, quod...*“, 166, 73–74; „*Haec et similia inducit Avicenna pro se, quando contradicit Aristoteli in supra inductis rationibus*“, 167, 15–16.

¹³ 167, 38–40.

¹⁴ 167, 65–68.

¹⁵ Averroes says that, according to Avicenna, being and one are 'accidents' of essence; but the Avicennian position is more complex (cf. A.-M. Goichon, *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sina*, Paris 1937), so I prefer this more neutral expression.

¹⁶ *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis. Octavum Volumen. Aristotelis Metaphysicorum libri XIII. Cum Averrois Cordubensis in eosdem Commentariis, Venetiis 1562*, rist. Frankfurt am Main 1962, IV, 3, 67 B-E.

which I designate respectively with the numbers <1>–<5>. In part <1> Averroes poses the general thesis of Avicenna¹⁷. The Latin translation of part <1> of Averroes' text must be compared with the Arabic text¹⁸ in order to be comprehended¹⁹. In part <2> Averroes indicates an argument, which, according to him, is the *ratio* of Avicenna's thesis; Averroes first expounds Avicenna's argument (<2.1>²⁰ and then dismisses it (<2.2>²¹). Parts <3>–<5> correspond to three arguments that, according to Averroes, are the theoretical causes of Avicenna's erroneous view of the distinction of one and essence²²; the exposition of the last of these arguments is followed by a criticism (<5.2>²³).

Parts <2.1>, <3>, <4> and <5.1> of Averroes' text correspond, in the same order, to the first four arguments (<1>–<4>) attributed to Avicenna by Albert²⁴. The tight correspondence between the parts of Averroes' text and the arguments attributed to Avicenna by Albert proves that Albert drew upon Averroes' text while writing the digression.

3. How Albert modifies Averroes' text

In using it as a source, however, Albert modifies Averroes' text in three ways. (i) First of all, he omits completely part <1> of Averroes' text. Albert does not reproduce parts <2.2> and <5.2> either; some elements of these two parts are used by Albert, but very freely, in the prosecution of the digression. (ii) Secondly, Albert develops the parts of Averroes' text that he uses. (iii) Third and most important, Albert's polemical target is different from Averroes' one. In fact, Averroes attacks the Avicennian doctrine according to which 'being' and 'one' do not signify essence, because they are distinct from and added to essence. Albert, on the other hand, attributes to Avicenna and attacks the doctrine according to which 'being' and 'one' are not and do not signify the same nature, because 'one' adds something real to 'being'. In other words, both Averroes and Albert say that Avicenna's error resides in a wrong distinction; but while, according to Averroes, the erroneous distinction is that of 'being' and 'one' with respect to essence, according to Albert the erroneous distinction is that of 'one' with respect to 'being'; and while Averroes attacks the avicennian doctrine of the relationship between 'being' and essence and 'one' and essence, Albert criticism of Avicenna concerns the reciprocal relationship between 'being' and 'one'.

The omissions and the developments that Averroes' text undergoes in Albert's presentation are intended to conform Averroes' text to this different target. Albert omits completely, in fact, part <1> of Averroes' text, where Averroes declares his polemical target. The Avicennian arguments that, in Averroes' text, support the view that 'one' is added to essence (parts <3>, <4> and <5.1>) become, in their Albertinian version (parts <2>, <3> and <4>), arguments supporting the view that 'one' is an addition to 'being'. Parts <2>, <3> and <4> of Albert's text end with a formula that is not present in Averroes and that reminds the additional character of 'one' with respect to 'being'²⁵.

This different target of the criticism of Avicenna in Averroes and Albert makes possible the apology for Avicenna by Albert in the third part of the digression. Concerning the relationship between 'being', 'one' and essence, in fact, Avicenna actually says that 'being' and 'one' are distinct from and added to essence, thus parting company with Aristotle, Averroes and Albert, who affirm that a thing is a 'being' and a 'one' by virtue of its essence. Concerning the reciprocal relationship between 'being' and 'one', on the con-

¹⁷ „Avicenna autem peccavit multum in hoc, quod existimavit, quod unum et ens significant dispositiones additas essentiae rei. Et mirum est de isto homine, quomodo erravit tali errore; et iste audivit Loquentes in nostra lege, cum quorum sermonibus admiscuit ipse suam scientiam Divinam; dixit enim quod dispositionum quaedam sunt intentionales, et quaedam animales sive essentiales; et dixit quod unum et ens reducuntur ad essentiam dispositam per illa, et non sunt dispositiones additae essentiae, sicut est dispositio in albo et nigro et uno“, 67 B–C.

¹⁸ Averroès, Tafsir ma ba'd at-Tabi'at. Texte arabe inédit établi par M. Bouyges, Premier volume, Beyrouth 1938, 313, 6–12.

¹⁹ The *loquentes in nostra lege* mentioned in the translation are a particular group of Islamic theologians, the Ash'arites; these theologians, not Avicenna himself, as appears from the translation, distinguish between two types of dispositions and include 'being' and 'one' among the essential dispositions; the final three examples are not *albo et nigro et uno*, but *albo et nigro et vivo*.

²⁰ „Et iste homo ratiocinatur ad suam opinionem, dicendo quod <2.1>, si unum et ens significant idem, tunc dicere ens est unum esset nugatio, quasi dicere unum est unum, aut ens est ens“, 67 C.

²¹ 67 C–D.

²² „Et fecerunt errare illum hominem res, quarum quaedam est <3>, quia innuit hoc nomen unum de genere nominum denominativorum, et ista nomina significant accidens, et substantiam. Et etiam <4>, quia existimavit, quod hoc nomen unum significat intentionem in re carente divisibilitate, et quod illa intentio est alia ab intentione, quae est natura illius rei. Et etiam <5.1>, quia existimavit, quod unum dictum de omnibus praedicamentis, est illud unum, quod est principium numerorum. Numerus autem est accidens. Unde opinatus fuit iste, quod hoc nomen unum significat accidens in entibus“, 67 D–E.

²³ 67 E.

²⁴ „Obicit enim contra hoc Avicenna dicens, quod <1> si unum et ens significant eandem naturam, tunc ista nomina, unum et ens, sunt synonyma, et est nugatio, quando unum alteri additur, cum dicitur ‚unum ens‘. <2> Amplius, cum dicitur ‚unum ens‘, haec duo nomina iunguntur (cod. P: non iunguntur) sibi per appositionem, sicut cum dicitur ‚animal homo‘, quia unum non determinat alterum. Videtur igitur, quod unum iungatur enti per denominationem et informationem; hoc enim videtur ex hoc quod numerum et suppositum trahit ab ente sicut denominans a denominato et adiectivum a substantivo. Omne autem denominativum formam quandam aliam ponit super denominatum. Unum ergo dicit aliquam formam enti additam, cum dicitur ‚unum ens‘. <3> Amplius, unum dicit indivisionem, quam non dicit ens, et cum dicitur ‚unum ens‘, indivisionem ponit unum super ens; addit igitur aliquid enti. <4> Amplius, unum principium est numeri. Sicut igitur punctus est naturae continui, licet non sit continuum, ita unum est naturae numeri,

licet non sit numerus; est igitur unum accidens. Cum igitur dicitur ‚unum ens‘, addit unum quoddam accidens super ens“, 166, 73–167, 1.

²⁵ „Unum ergo dicit aliquam formam enti additam, cum dicitur ‚unum ens‘“, 166, 86–87; „addit igitur [sc. unum] aliquid enti“, 166, 90; „Cum igitur dicitur ‚unum ens‘, addit unum quoddam accidens super ens“, 166, 93–167, 1.

trary, Avicenna does not say that ,one' adds something real to ,being'; in this respect he is in agreement with Aristotle, Averroes and Albert, who affirm that ,being' is not different from ,one' in reality, but only conceptually.

4. The text which motivates the apology: Avicenna, *Philosophia prima*, VII, 1

When Albert excuses Avicenna in the third part of the digression, he very probably has in mind the first chapter of the seventh treatise of Avicenna's *Philosophia prima*²⁶.

This chapter opens the part of Avicenna's *Philosophia prima* devoted to the study of ,one', its divisions and its properties, after the conclusion of the part of the work devoted to the study of ,being', its divisions and its properties.

The transitional character of this chapter is hidden in the Latin translation. The Latin translation of the opening proposition is, in fact, the following: „*Videtur autem, secundum hanc nostram intentionem, ut iam compleamus verbum de his quae propria sunt identitati secundum quod est identitas et de consequentibus eam*“²⁷. The Arabic text of this proposition²⁸, on the contrary, makes clear that the treatment of ,being' *qua* ,being' and of its properties has come to an end. The reason of the difference between the Arabic text and the Latin translation is the fact that in the Arabic text Avicenna does not employ the usual term for ,being' (mawgūd) but a less common term (huwiyya), which can be translated with ,identity', but which here has the meaning of ,being', as elsewhere in the *Philosophia prima*²⁹ and in other Avicennian works³⁰.

Due to its character as a transitional chapter from the treatment of ,being' to the treatment of ,one', the first chapter of the seventh treatise of Avicenna's *Philosophia prima* begins by showing the reciprocal relationship between ,being' and ,one'. Avicenna's conception of this relationship is not very different from the conception advanced by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV, 2, and adopted by Averroes and Albert in their commentaries on *Metaphysics*. Avicenna says, in fact, that ,being' and ,one' are predicated of the same things according to two different respects³¹. The reason for the predicative equiva-

lence of ,being' and ,one', Avicenna continues, resides in the fact that every existing thing is one³². ,Being' and ,one', according to Avicenna, are different only because of the difference of their concepts³³.

As is evident from this brief summary, in the first chapter of the seventh treatise of the *Philosophia prima*, Avicenna denies that ,one' adds something real to ,being'. The only distinction that Avicenna contemplates between ,being' and ,one' is the conceptual distinction admitted also by Aristotle, Averroes and Albert. Consequently Albert is right in apologizing for Avicenna in the third part of the digression.

Conclusion

The Albertinian digression that I have examined can be considered a prime example of Albert's attitude towards Averroes and Avicenna in his *Commentary on Metaphysics*. Indeed, the analysis of the digression has shown a dependence on Averroes and Avicenna as sources and an attempt to harmonize the opinions of these two authors. This is true not only within the digression, but also throughout the commentary. In fact, Albert depends on Averroes and Avicenna throughout the commentary: Averroes is the most important source for the interpretation of Aristotle's *littera*, while Avicenna is the most important source for the doctrinal enrichment of Aristotle's text. Also in the overall commentary Albert harmonizes the Averroist contribution with the Avicennian one: the doctrinal enrichment is, in fact, for Albert a type of investigation not alternative, but complementary, to the exegesis of the text.

²⁶ Avicenna Latinus, *Liber de Philosophia prima sive Scientia divina*, V–X. Édition critique par S. Van Riet. Introduction par G. Verbeke, Louvain–Leiden 1980, VII, 1, 349, 7–13.

²⁷ 349, 7–9.

²⁸ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifā'*. *Al-Ilāhiyyāt* (2) (*La Métaphysique*), texte établi et édité par M. Y. Moussa, S. Dunya et S. Zayed, Le Caire 1960, 303, 5–6.

²⁹ VII, 2, 367, 72; Arabic text: 313, 6–7.

³⁰ Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Shifā'*, *al-Manṭiq*, *al-Madhāl* (*La logique*. I. *L'Isagoge*), texte établi et édité par M. el-Khodeiri, A. F. el-Ehwani et G. C. Anawati, Le Caire 1952, 13, 4–5.

³¹ „*Scias autem quod unum et ens iam parificantur in praedicatione sui de rebus, ita quod, de quocumque dixeris quod est ens uno respectu, illud potest esse unum alio respectu*“, 349, 9–12.

³² „*Nam quicquid est, unum est*“, 349, 12. The Arabic text of this proposition (303, 7–8) says literally that every thing has an existence which is one.

³³ „*et ideo fortasse putatur quia id quod intelligitur de utroque sit unum et idem, sed non est ita*“, 349, 12–13.