Averroes’ Natural Philosophy and its Reception in the Latin West

Edited by Paul J.J.M. Bakker

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Paul J.J.M. Bakker

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1. INTRODUCTION

Averroes’ legacy during the seventeenth century reflected the changing intellectual climate of that century yet was not entirely divorced from earlier disputes and movements. Despite the fact that he was no longer representative of the dominant forms of Aristotelianism, Averroes frequently became a point of reference in attacks on Aristotelianism during the seventeenth century. These attacks pointed at him out of a variety of motivations conditioned by developments within new natural philosophies and reformed theology.¹

Some thinkers found Averroes to be an emblem of a version of natural philosophy that was more concerned with terminology than nature. The Oratorian advocate of Cartesian philosophy Bernard Lamy, for example, believed that Aristotle’s thought had been contorted so that it was unrecognizable and unintelligible. The blame lay on Averroes. Thus in 1683 he wrote, ’Today we understand this Philosopher [Aristotle] in another manner. It is not at all his philosophy that reigns in the schools, it is that of the Arabs.’² Of these ’Arabs,’ according to Lamy, ’Averroes is the most weighty.’³ According to Lamy, ’the philosophy of the Arabs is merely a form of questioning that applies the prejudices of childhood to the terminology of Aristotle.’⁴

While his attribution of Averroism to French university teachings of the time might be doubted, his attacks on Aristotelianism were characteristic. A number of opponents of traditional university teachings attempted to profit from negative asso-

¹ Some of the material of this article is treated in an expanded form in C. Martin, Subverting Aristotle: Religion, History, and Philosophy in Early Modern Science, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2014.
³ Lamy, Entretiens, 236: ’Après eux étoient rangés les Commentateurs Arabes, entre lesquels Averroës est le plus considerable.’
⁴ Lamy, Entretiens, 255: ’Pour entendre la Philosophie des Arabes, il n’est question que d’appliquer aux termes d’Aristote, les préventions de l’Enfance.’
ciations of Averroes. Johannes De Raei, who combined Cartesian and Aristotelian natural philosophy, prefaced his *Clavis philosophiae naturalis* (1654) with a diatribe in which he concluded Averroes possessed ‘an incredible impiety and most dense ignorance of divine matters.’⁵ Other seventeenth-century scholars, such as Pierre Gassendi and Adrianus Heereboord, found Averroes, because of his adherence to what he considered a literal reading of Aristotle, to be a useful frame of reference in promoting the *libertas philosophandi* (liberty of philosophizing), a concept and trope that held that some universities and other conservative institutions excluded all alternatives to Aristotelianism and as a result eliminated freedom of thought and access to the truth.⁶

These seventeenth-century attacks that linked Aristotelianism to Averroes were in some sense artifacts of a bygone age. While Aristotelianism was still prominent in universities and Jesuit colleges in France, the Netherlands, Italy, and elsewhere, the accepted version of Aristotelianism was not closely aligned to Averroes. Jesuits, for example, carefully deemphasized his views, eliminating them from their lectures and commentaries. The 1591 and 1599 *Rationes studiorum*, which gave guidelines for Jesuit teachings, directed instructors to avoid praising Averroes in cases where he wrote something good. Each of his errors, to the contrary, should be used as a means to lessen his authority.⁷ Reliance on Averroes’ commentaries diminished even in Italian universities, his traditional stronghold, by the end of the sixteenth century.⁸ After being printed in Italy over ten times beginning in the 1470s, Averroes’ collected works were never published again after 1576.⁹

Averroes’ flagging influence is reflected in Theophile Raynaud’s judgment. In his 1653 work *De malis ac bonis libris*, the Jesuit wrote, ‘Now Averroes, having been

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tossed from a bridge, has left the schools."¹⁰ In his opinion, Machiavelli, Cardano, Pomponazzi, and proponents of magic had replaced the threat that Averroes once posed. Less than thirty years later, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz agreed with Raynaud and wrote in the perfect tense about ‘Averroists’ who ‘once’ believed in the theory of double truth, thereby suggesting that they no longer populated lecture halls.¹¹ Writing in the 1690s, Pierre Bayle supported these assessments. Noting that Ramon Llull had tried without success to have Averroes’ commentaries condemned in the fourteenth century, Bayle wrote that there was no longer a need to proscribe his works because, ‘his authority is non-existent, and no one wastes the time to read him.’¹² By the end of the seventeenth century, Averroes might have been irrelevant, yet he still remained etched in the collective imagination.

The real target of seventeenth-century attacks on Averroes was the Aristotelians that held sway in the universities, such as Francisco Suárez, Francisco Toletus, and the Coimbrans in Catholic universities and colleges, or Gisbertus Voetius in the Netherlands.¹³ The piety of their philosophical doctrines, often tied to Thomistic interpretations of Aristotle, however, could not be questioned directly, even if the innovators in natural philosophy were religiously motivated. Rather the rhetorical strategy for anti-Aristotelians included associating the bans of teaching other philosophies with the alleged slavishness and impiety of Averroes. Averroes, a Muslim, long known for unorthodox doctrine and seen by humanists as the epitome of barbarous, poorly translated language, of the improper use of philosophy, and of disregard for Christianity, was ideal for casting doubt on Aristotle’s own piety.

Attacks on Averroes during the late sixteenth century and seventeenth century, at least partially, shifted away from concerns about his psychology. In Italian universities after the middle of the sixteenth century, Averroes’ position on the intellective


soul was no longer philosophically attractive.¹⁴ René Descartes illustrates these diminishing concerns over the unicity thesis. In the preface to the *Meditations* (1641), Descartes cited the Fifth Lateran Council and its assertions about the primacy of the Church’s teachings of the soul as expressed at the Council of Vienne. Yet Descartes did not mention the passage that referred to the condemnation of the view that the soul is ‘unica in cunctis hominibus’ but only referred to the Council’s concerns with materialist and mortalist positions regarding the soul.¹⁵ While Descartes’ concerns with materialist psychology might have been defensive – reflecting the possibility that he might be accused of proposing a mortal soul but not a single passive intellect for all humans – they also show that the philosophical attraction of Averroes’ views on the soul had failed to register as a possible solution even though it had enticed many thinkers a century earlier.

The issue that emerged in seventeenth-century attacks on Averroes surrounded God’s providence in the sublunary realm. The issue of providence in natural philosophy grew in importance during the sixteenth century. The roots of this growing emphasis are found in Philipp Melanchthon’s reformulation of Aristotelian natural philosophy, which attempted to make the concept of providence a foundation for investigations into nature.¹⁶ Accordingly, for Lutheran natural philosophers providence played a significant role in explanations of a variety of natural phenomena,

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including the nature of living things, meteorological phenomena, and astronomy.¹⁷ Calvinist and Catholic theologians and philosophers soon followed similar paths. The revival of atomist philosophies also mandated a careful touch with the issue of providence, because Epicurus had long been associated with the denial of providence and hence impiety.¹⁸ Lutherans used his name as a synecdoche for this position.¹⁹ As a result, Pierre Gassendi was forced to demonstrate how his revival of Epicureanism could be reconciled with Christian conceptions of God’s power and care.²⁰ If atomism was to be revived, a new figure was needed as the symbol of a philosophy without providence. That figure was Averroes.

2. MEDIEVAL AND EARLY RENAISSANCE ORIGINS

Associating Averroes with a sublunary world not directly governed by God predates the seventeenth-century revival of Epicurean philosophy. Pirro Ligorio’s reaction to the 1570 earthquake in Ferrara perhaps helps illustrate the shifting weight placed on concerns over Averroes’ position on providence. At the time of the earthquake, Ligorio was an antiquarian employed at this time in the House of Este’s court. Dismissing papal accusations that the cause of the earthquake was divine punishment against the Ferrarese for accepting the Jews, whom Pius V had recently expelled from the Papal States, Ligorio contended there was another cause for these temblors. The divine punishment was not for protecting Jewish refugees, but rather aimed at ‘those who are so bold that … they deny God’s providence, having been deceived by Aristotle, Galen, Averroes, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and other Peripatetics.’²¹ Thus Averroes was a member of a group of thinkers who denied providence by dismissing the role of divine intervention in the sublunary world. According to


Ligorio’s scenario, that scholars followed Averroes’ view that there was no divine providence in the sublunary sphere angered God to such a degree that in order to demonstrate his control of natural particulars he destroyed Ferrara.

Ligorio’s view was not isolated. The complaint that Averroes or Aristotle denied providence has a long history, its origins nearly contemporaneous with the introduction of Averroes’ thought into the Latin West in the thirteenth century. Bonaventure traced the doctrine to Aristotle himself, arguing that Aristotle’s rejection of Plato’s Forms led to a denial of providence because it eliminated God’s ability to have knowledge of all things. Unnamed ‘Arabs’ compounded this error, by maintaining a ‘fatal necessity’ based on the argument that if there is no providence, then the substances moving the orb must be the cause of everything.²² In the Errors of the philosophers (ca. 1270), Giles of Rome listed among these errors Averroes’ position that ‘God does not have any providence over individuals,’²³ presumably in reference to comment 37 of book twelve of the long commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics. There, after explaining that the celestial bodies, having been moved by the unmoved mover, cause generation and corruption in the sublunary region, Averroes contended that:

This is the source of God’s providence for all existents. He knows them by species, since it is not possible to know them numerically. The view of those who think that God’s providence extends to every person is right in a sense and wrong in another. It is right insofar as nobody is in a condition peculiar to him, but (this condition) belongs to the class of this species. If this is so, it is correct to say that God takes care of individuals in this way; but providence for an individual, in which nobody else shares, is something that the divine bounty does not necessitate.²⁴

Here Averroes contended that God has some concern with individuals because all individuals obtain their disposition from their species, which are connected to God,
yet God does not directly communicate with sublunary individuals. This passage became the source for the widely held view that Averroes did not believe there was providence in the sublunary world.

Thomas Aquinas quoted this passage in his commentary on the first book of Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, where he discussed whether there is providence for everything. Thomas divided those who denied providence into two camps, those, like Democritus, who deny all providence, and those, namely Averroes, who admit providence with regard to species but deny that particulars are governed as such. Thomas was careful to distinguish between Averroes’ position and Aristotle’s, maintaining that despite Averroes’ attribution of this view to Aristotle, Aristotle did not in fact hold this position. Moreover, according to Thomas, Averroes’ position was not in accordance with Christian belief because it ‘removes God’s judgment from the works of humankind.’²⁵ Thus Thomas believed Averroes erred twice. He misinterpreted Aristotle and was incorrect about the nature of providence.

Thomas’ views informed Renaissance debates. During the middle of the fifteenth century, controversies over the relative merits of Aristotle and Plato erupted among Greek emigrants to Italy. Georgios Gemistos Plethon praised Plato and dismissed Aristotle, and more particularly Aristotelians ‘convinced by the claims of the Arab Averroes.’²⁶ Implicitly suggesting that Averroes’ interpretation was correct, Plethon pointed to one of Aristotle’s failings being his view that ‘God [is] the end not of the existence or essence of particular things but only of movement and change,’ in general.²⁷ George Trapezuntius countered and contended, following Thomas Aquinas, that Aristotle believed that God’s providence extended to sublunary individuals. Cardinal Bessarion, in turn, opposed Trapezuntius in his *In calumniatorem Platonis*, a work that responded, at times viciously, to Trapezuntius’ attack on Plethon. Bessarion’s defense of Plato took the position that Averroes correctly interpreted Aristotle’s view. Aristotle’s view, however, was incorrect and its impiety allegedly shows the difficulty of reconciling Aristotle with Christianity and the superiority of Plato over Aristotle.²⁸

What emerged from the Plato-Aristotle debates was a dual question. The first was philosophical or theological – whether God’s providence extends to particulars. The second was historical or interpretative. Did Averroes correctly interpret Aristotle? Did Aristotle hold that God’s providence was limited to the celestial realms? While there are exceptions, the schema that emerged was perhaps unlikely. The Platonists, Plethon and Bessarion, sided with Averroes over Thomas, believing that Aristotle did hold this position, while the Aristotelian Trapezuntius was dismissive of Averroes. This pattern continued, with some exceptions.

One such exception was the Platonist Marsilio Ficino, who attacked Averroes’ views about providence as well as his interpretation of Aristotle. Associating him with Epicurus, Ficino called Averroes impious because of his lack of awareness that Aristotle ‘claims that individual parts are led back to the good of the order which is in the whole as to their end.’¹²⁹ While it is unclear how this view undermines Averroes’ view of providence, it is evidence that Ficino believed Averroes misinterpreted Aristotle. Ficino, like many other humanists, made the interpretation of texts central to his attack on Averroes. Arguing that Averroes’ faults were due to textual and linguistic issues, from his reading books that had been ‘perverted rather than converted … into a barbarous tongue,’ Ficino wrote that the ‘words of Aristotle in Greek contradict Averroes.’³⁰ Averroes’ ignorance of Greek undermined his ability to interpret ancient texts and thus his authority.

Ficino found an ally in Pietro Pomponazzi for his view that Aristotle believed in providence in the sublunary realm. Despite Pomponazzi’s reputation for impiety, he concluded that the view that divine providence extends only to celestial bodies and intelligences is ‘false and incorrectly attributed to Aristotle.’³¹ This interpretation of Aristotle, according to Pomponazzi, derives from Calcidius.³² Calcidius’ interpretation of Aristotle, however, is not in agreement with Averroes, who ‘most openly puts forward a God that is concerned with inferior matters.’³³ Thus he


³³ Pomponazzi, *De fato* 165: ‘Apertissime ponit Deum sollicitari circa haec inferiorea ut suo modo convenit.’ Pomponazzi cited comments 18, 36, 41, 51, 52 of book xii of the long
disagreed with Ficino’s assessment of Averroes, and hence Thomas’, Bessarion’s, and Plethon’s, while agreeing with their views of providence.

3. LATE-RENAISSANCE THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND PHILOLOGY

Ficino’s and Pomponazzi’s views persuaded some, such as Lucillo Filalteo, who contended that while Aristotle admitted providence, the ‘Barbarous Averroes’ denied it out of impiety. Nevertheless investigations into the history of philosophy – and theology – continued during the sixteenth century. A revived interest in the Church Father’s views of Greek philosophy undermined attempts to reconcile Aristotle with certain Christian doctrines. In the 1550s, Guillaume Postel, a man himself accused of impiety by both Calvinists and Catholics, brought forth the teachings of Justin Martyr in an effort to discredit Aristotle’s followers, or in his words ‘in order to overturn the authority of Aristotle, where it is contrary either to divine authority or reason.’ According to Postel, his work (and Justin Martyr’s as well) was needed because since antiquity ‘cohorts of atheists’ have used Aristotle’s ambiguity to prove that there is no providence in particulars. One member of this group was Averroes, whom Postel described as ‘the greatest enemy of providence.’ Postel believed developers of scholastic doctrine, the school at Paris, and sacred authorities ‘strip these [divine] truths from Aristotle’ while ‘he himself lies completely neglected.’

commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as places where Averroes asserts providence extends to sublunary particulars.

³⁶ Postel, *Eversio*, 4’t.
³⁸ Postel, *Eversio*, 8’t: ‘Ipsa schola Parisiens i aut doctrina scholastica, tota (quatenus ecclesiae fuit in hac diem cognitum necessaria & intelligibilis) sacrorum authoritas innumeris rationibus in utramque partem discussa, spoliaret Aristotelem illius veritatis, qua in ipso
In his eyes, scholastics ignore the real historical Aristotle, distorting his writings and siding with Averroes.

Postel’s unorthodoxy made him unattractive for many. But his attempt to use the Church fathers to undermine the Catholic Church’s appropriation of Aristotle corresponded to others’ attacks on Averroes’ views of providence. For example, Jacopo Mazzoni, in his 1576 comparison of Plato and Aristotle, after arguing that Plato’s thought conformed to Catholicism based on the authority of Church fathers, concluded that Plato’s views on providence agree with Scripture, while Averroes’ belief that matter is uncreated leads to potential ambiguities on the subject.³⁹ In a similar vein Francesco De’ Vieri (1547–1590), a professor at Pisa, noted that Plato’s doctrines were well received by the ‘Greek Doctors’ of the Church.⁴⁰ Among Plato’s doctrines that De’ Vieri believed conformed to Christianity, but not to Aristotle’s thought, was that ‘God has providence over all things, in particular over man.’⁴¹ Related doctrines, allegedly both Platonic and Christian, included that God answers prayers, God uses angels to take care of humans, and God protects the weak and punishes the proud.⁴² While De’ Vieri believed that at times Plato and Aristotle agreed with each other and with true religion, other Platonists, such as Francesco Patrizi, were far more hostile to Aristotle and his followers.

In his habitually exhaustive manner, Patrizi cited a number of patristic sources, not just Justin Martyr, in his discussion of Aristotle’s doctrinal missteps in the 1591 Nova de universis philosophia. This work was an attempt, not unlike Bessarion’s or Plethon’s of the previous century, to show that Platonic philosophy corresponded better to Catholic theology than Aristotelian thought did. In the preface to the ‘future’ Pope Gregory xiv, he began with the rhetorical question: ‘Why are only those parts of Aristotle’s philosophy read, which are most injurious to God and the Church?’⁴³ Contending that for the last 400 years ‘scholastic theologians’ have used ‘Aristotelian impieties for the foundations of faith,’ he listed Dionysius the
Areopagite, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Arnobius, Lactantius, Cyril, Basil, Eusebius, Theodoretus, Augustine, and Ambrosius as proponents of Platonism and opponents of Aristotle.⁴⁴

One of the doctrines Patrizi found most problematic was the absence of providence in the sublunary realm. According to Patrizi, Origen wrote, ‘Aristotle was worse than Epicurus, because he was impious in divine providence.’⁴⁵ Clement of Alexandria complained that for Aristotle ‘providence extended only to the moon.’⁴⁶ Accordingly, Patrizi placed the Church fathers in agreement with Averroes’ interpretation that Aristotle limited providence, yet he disagreed with the Aristotelian position. Those in ‘the Parisian school,’ he wrote, ‘explained the universe, imitating Averroes’ commentaries,’ thereby mixing ‘the most sordid’ into the Catholic faith.⁴⁷ For Patrizi, the alternative was Plato’s thought, which he believed corresponded to Christian theology much better. Ecclesiastical authorities had other ideas, bringing Patrizi to the Inquisition, leading him to revise his writings.⁴⁸

While Patrizi was extreme in his Platonism, his views of Aristotle resonated with those of the most famous Aristotelians of the day. Although some have seen the disclaimers of Pietro Pomponazzi and Cesare Cremonini that they were not writing the truth but rather interpreting Aristotle as ruses to mask their own views, nevertheless, their adherence to Averroes’ position need not mark their impiety but rather what they saw as their fidelity to accurate textual interpretation. In the case of the question of sublunary providence, Bessarion’s view that Thomas was wrong to assert that Averroes misinterpreted Aristotle was shared not just by Patrizi and De’ Vieri, but by Aristotelians as well. Patrizi was friends with Cremonini, both had spent time in Ferrara, and Patrizi even dedicated his *Apologia contra*

⁴⁴ Patrizi, *Nova de universis philosophia*, sig. a 3: ‘Quadringentis vero ab hinc circiter annis, Scholasticis Theologi, in contrarium sunt annixi, Aristotelicis impietatibus, pro fidei fundamentis sunt usi.’


⁴⁶ Patrizi, *Nova de universis philosophia*, 49: ‘Clemens quoque Alexandrinus Origenis praecepto, Aristotelem, & Peripateticos incusat ... providentiamque usque ad lunam tantum porrigi.’


Their distant philosophical poles made them unlikely companions, even though their approaches to Aristotle are similar. Both wished to understand the true thought of Aristotle, rather than incorporate it into theology. Patrizi thought such reconciliation was impossible for Aristotle and listed 43 separate points where Aristotle disagreed with the Christian religion. Likewise Cremonini considered Aristotle’s philosophy to be separate from theology, and in a sense separate from the truth.

In his *Apologia dictorum Aristotelis de quinta caeli substantia* (1616), Cremonini described his method as suppositional. While admitting that his arguments might be repugnant to the Christian faith, they were proven from Aristotle’s principles. To illustrate his point, he wrote that it is possible to make a Democritean demonstration, explaining effects based on the principles of atoms and void. Such a demonstration, however, will be false, according to Cremonini. The same is true for Aristotle. Using Aristotelian principles it is possible to make demonstrations that are valid according to the initial suppositions, but not necessarily true. Cremonini wrote, ‘I do not say that he simply reached the truth, since he erred when he opines against the faith.’

For some, Cremonini’s approach suggests masked impiety or insincerity, but it need not. Bessarion and Patrizi have not received the same accusations for arguing Aristotle is incompatible with faith.

In any case, Cremonini applied this suppositional method to the question of providence. He wrote that Aristotle had ‘fallen into error, since it is stated by faith and by the decrees of holy theology that God’s providence is administered rightly and truly over all singulars.’ Yet Averroes was in a sense correct, not dogmatically, but as an interpreter of Aristotle. Averroes had rendered the doctrine according to ‘good Aristotelian sense,’ although scarcely according to the truth. Yet as an interpretation

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52 Cremonini, *Apologia*, 78: ‘Quinimo magnopere in errorem lapsus, ut constat ex fide, & ex decretis sacrae Theologiae, quibus omnia, & singula Dei providentia administrari recte & vere statuitur. & Averroes: ad bonum sensum nempe Aristotelicum reducendum proponimus, secundum veritatem minime, & secundum eam, quam profitetur, interpretis Aristotelici doctrinam.’
it makes good sense because Aristotle 'was ignorant of true religion' and its rewards, believing that philosophy itself was its own prize. Cremonini's approach was similar to that of his predecessors at Padua and Bologna. For example, Alessandro Achillini, a professor at Bologna, wrote in his *De distinctionibus* (1510) that Aristotle and Averroes did not believe that God was concerned with the properties of individuals that result from chance. According to Achillini, 'this error is quite far from the truth of faith; but in natural philosophy it does not appear to be an error.' During Cremonini's lifetime, Francesco Piccolomini (1520–1604), a professor of philosophy at Padua, argued that for Aristotle, providence derives from the necessity of nature and God's goodness stems from his being a mover of the world, rather than from an 'influence distinct from him.' Aristotle's view, however, is the result 'only of proceeding through the works of nature (*physica opera*), which is not in agreement with the exact truth, which our theologians explain most broadly.'

**4. EARLY MODERN POLEMICS**

Cremonini's and Piccolomini's assessment of Aristotle was shared by a number of writers, often by those who were unsympathetic to Aristotelianism. The promoter of a novel natural philosophy based on the actions of the qualities hot and cold, Bernardino Telesio (1509–1588), argued that Aristotle's philosophy was contrary to Scripture because of the absence of his acknowledging God's 'knowledge and administration of human affairs.' A 1585 treatise that promoted the chymical philosophy attributed to Richard Bostocke complained about Aristotle's 'heathenish

53 Cremonini, *Apologia*, 79: 'Aristoteles quidem, votum solvendum iudicavit, putans actionem studiosam sibi ipsi esse praemium, quippe. qui ut ignoravit verae religionis cultum, ita nescivit operibus ex vera religione esse alius praemium aeternum.'

54 A. Achillini, *Opera omnia*, Venezia: Hieronymus Scotus, 1568, 312: '& sic error Aristotelis a veritate fidei parum distat. sed in philosophia naturali non apparat error.'

55 F. Piccolomini, *Librorum ad scientiam de natura attinentium pars secunda*, Venezia: De Franciscis, 1600, 41: 'Quae Providentia sequitur eminентissimam Dei cognitionem, qua noscens Deus se ut bonum, vult omne, quod est bonum, & sua facultate movendo Coelum, motu totius effundit munera bona in universum orbem, idque facit per motum, non per influxum aliquem ab eo distinctum.'

56 Piccolomini, *Librorum ad scientiam de natura attinentium*, 41: 'Hanc itaque puto ego de Providentia fuisse opinionem Aristotelis, qui solum per Physica opera proградiens, exactam veritatem inspicere non valuit, quam cum latissime explicant nostri Theologi.'

Philosophie’ that ‘teacheth that God medleth not under the Moone.’⁵⁸ In his view, Aristotelian philosophy, following Averroes, ‘doth not admit any Metaphisicall principle in naturall things,’ which makes men forget God and become atheists.⁵⁹ Sebastian Basso, who wished to reform natural philosophy by basing it on Presocratic principles, wrote in 1621 that on the question of providence, sacred writings, all the doctors of the Church, and all the Presocratics were opposed to ‘the Averroists and Aristotle himself.’⁶⁰

Authors from both sides of the confessional divide who wrote on heresy and impiety addressed Averroes’ views on providence. Philippe de Mornay (Du Plessis) (1549–1623), a French protestant with Platonist leanings, wrote in his 1605 book De veritate religionis that Aristotle’s and Averroes’ emphasis on nature was impious.⁶¹ Melchior Cano, a Spanish Dominican, wrote in his De locis theologicis (1563) that the attention given to Aristotle and Averroes in Italy gave birth to the ‘pestiferous dogma’ about ‘divine improvidence around human affairs.’⁶² Having cited Cano and a number of Church fathers, Tommaso Campanella enumerated errors of Aristotle in his De gentilismo non retinendo (1636). The second error listed — after the eternity of the world — was that God does not provide for sublunary things.⁶³ Campanella also believed that Averroes understood Aristotle better than Albert the Great and Thomas did, because they tried to alter Aristotle in places where he was clearly against the Catholic faith.⁶⁴

These attacks that struck at Aristotle and Thomas’ interpretation of him were met by those who wished to maintain the Thomistic synthesis adopted by Jesuits after the Council of Trent. In a point by point refutation of Cano, the Jesuit Antonio

⁵⁸ R.B. [Richard Bostocke], Auncient Phisicke, London: Walley, 1585, sig. ****.
⁵⁹ Bostocke, Auncient Phisicke, 7.
⁶¹ Ph. de Mornay (Du Plessis), De veritate religionis Christianae, adversus atheos, Epicureos, ethnicos, Iudaeos, Mahumedistas, & caeteros infideles, Leiden: Andries Clouck, 1605, 378.
⁶² M. Cano, De locis theologicis libri xii, Salamanca: Mathias Gastius, 1563, 312: ‘Audiemus enim Italos esse quosdam, qui suis & Aristotelis & Averroi tantum temporis dant, quantum sacris litteris ii, qui maxime sacra doctrina delectantur; tantum vero fidei, quantum Apostolis & Evangelistis ii, qui maxime sunt in Christi doctrinam religiosi. Ex quo nata sunt in Italia pestifera illa dogmata de mortalitate animi, & divina circa res humanas improvidentia, si verum est, quod dicitur.’
⁶³ T. Campanella, De gentilismo non retinendo, Paris: Dubray, 1636, 22
⁶⁴ Campanella, De gentilismo, 7–8.
Possevino (1534–1611) cited book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1179a24–25) as evidence that Aristotle believed that Gods have some concern over human affairs.⁶⁵ Francisco Toletus (1532–1596) maintained that the Averroists had misinterpreted Aristotle on this question,⁶⁶ although his fellow Jesuit, Pedro da Fonseca (1528–1599) thought Aristotle’s explanations of providence were inadequate.⁶⁷ The Jesuit Antoine Sirmond (1591–1643) made the question of the immortality of the soul depend on the question of God’s providence, arguing that any God that provided over human affairs would necessarily also provide for the afterlife.⁶⁸ Jean de Silhion (1596–1667) held a similar view and maintained in his 1626 *Les deux vérités* that God’s goodness requires that the human soul be immortal.⁶⁹ Mersenne’s *Questions on Genesis* (1623) affirmed Thomas’ views on providence and linked Averroes’ view on providence not to Aristotle but to Cardano and impiety in general. Although a year later in his *La vérité des sciences* he wrote that *De mundo*, which he admitted to not knowing if Aristotle had truly written it, ’had almost prevented him from believing that Aristotle had denied that God’s providence extend to the smallest things.’⁷⁰

Lutherans also attacked Aristotelians who limited providence in an effort to promote a version of Aristotelianism that was in concord with Christianity. The Lutheran physician and polemicist Nikolaus Taurellus (1547–1606) wrote a diatribe against Andrea Cesalpino (1519–1603) in which he maintained that Cesalpino’s view that God was a speculative intelligence rather than an active one was obscure, barbarous, impious, in error, and uninformed by the meaning of the Greek text. For Taurellus, God’s concern over the quotidian was proved by Scripture; and, moreover

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was also Aristotle's opinion.⁷¹ Despite the fact that Cesalpino, a professor of botany and medicine as well as Clement vii’s personal physician, did not directly address Aristotle's view on providence, his view of the prime mover and his position that lower intelligences, or demons, acted in the sublunar regions rather than God himself, made him an emblem for impiety connected to Aristotle. The Dutch theologian Gerard Johannes Vossius (1577–1649) linked Cesalpino's view to Aristotle's, and the English theologian Samuel Parker (1640–1688) thought Cesalpino was an example of how Aristotelian principles could lead to impious philosophy.⁷²

Others defended Aristotle by countering the Platonists' polemics. In his 1645 De pietate Aristotelis, Fortunio Liceti (1577–1657), a professor at Padua, described Patrizi as an ‘enraged enemy’ of Aristotle. Liceti contended that correspondences between Aristotle's theology and the Old Testament could be uncovered through a reading of the De mundo, a work now generally considered spurious, and that by Liceti’s time had been rejected as inauthentic by Julius Caesar Scaliger and Daniel Heinsius.⁷³ In Liceti’s view De mundo shows that Thomas was correct in believing that Aristotle held that there is providence in human affairs (397b30–398a1). Moreover, according to Liceti, Aristotle came to this view because he had read Scripture.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, in a sense Averroes’ view prevailed. The historical acrobatics of Liceti convinced few, and leading philologists pointed out differences between Christianity and Aristotle's thought. For example, Guillaume Du Val's synopsis of the Metaphysics, which accompanied Isaac Causabon's and Giulio Pacius’ 1619 Greek edition of Aristotle's complete works, interpreted Aristotle as believing that God does not see human actions. Therefore Aristotle was impious because he ‘denied divine providence and justice.’⁷⁵ Du Val’s judgment, however, was not part of a

⁷² G.J. Vossius, De theologia gentili, et physiologia Christiana; sive De origine ac progressu idololatriae: deque naturae mirandis, quibus homo adductur ad deum, libri ix, Amsterdam: Joan Blaeu, 1668, 267; S. Parker, Disputationes de deo, et providentia divina, London: M. Clark, 1678, 67–68
⁷⁵ G. Du Val, Aristotelis operum ... accessit synopses analytiae universae doctrinae peripateticae, 2 vols, Paris: Typis Regii, 1619, 2: 122–123: ‘Hinc enim manifeste colligeretur,
program to undermine Aristotelianism or systematic theology. Elsewhere he urged his readers to ‘marvel at the theology of this pagan man [i.e., Aristotle]’ because of its similarities with Christian thought.⁷⁶ While there is some element of the desire to reconcile Christianity with ancient philosophy in Du Val’s synopsis, his conclusions depended on textual and philological evidence and not on readings of Thomas or Averroes, as is fitting for an aide to a Greek edition of Aristotle. Yet on this one point regarding providence, his interpretation of Aristotle’s Greek coincided with Averroes’ reading.

Promoters of new natural philosophies, agreeing with the philologists and Averroes, and ignoring Thomas’s interpretations, demonized Aristotle’s view on providence. Francis Bacon thought it was a sign of impiety that Aristotle’s nature becomes the final cause of his physics, leaving ‘no further need of God’ and an absence of divine providence in his explanations of the natural world.⁷⁷ Following Bacon’s line of thought, Samuel Parker wrote in 1678 that those who followed Aristotle ‘built their theology on the foundations of his impiety.’⁷⁸ Joseph Glanvill (1636–1680) combined these contentions in *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, printed in 1661. He contended that, ‘the Aristotelian Philosophy is in some things impious, and inconsistent with Divinity’ [his emphasis], writing that in the Peripatetic system, ‘God was idle.’⁷⁹ John Webster’s 1654 critique of universities noted that Aristotle wrote according to ‘Diabolical’ instinct and ‘denies in the twelfth of his Metaphysicks that God takes care of minute, and small things.’⁸⁰ The Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), despite preferring Aristotle to Democritus and Descartes, pointed out the superiority of Plato to Aristotle, writing, ‘we cannot deny that Aristotle hath been taxed by sundry of the ancients, Christians and others, for not so explicitly asserting these two things, the immortality of human souls and providence over men, as he ought to have done, and his master Plato did.’⁸¹

Deum non videre actiones nostras ... At haec asserere impium est, & divinam providentiam iustitiamque tollere.’

⁷⁸ Parker, *Disputationes*, iv–v: ‘Cum enim unum Aristotelem securi sint, ipsis Impietatis fundamentis Theologiam suam extruxerunt’ [his emphasis].
⁸⁰ J. Webster, *Academiciarum examen, or, the Examination of Academies*, London: Giles Calvert, 1654, 1–2.
Some living in Catholic countries also described Aristotle in similar negative terms. Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) expressed disbelief in the great weight that some thinkers placed in Aristotle’s views. The efforts made to determine what Aristotle thought about a question of faith is a sign of an ‘inversion of reason that certain men are shocked in philosophy we speak differently from Aristotle, but not troubled if we speak differently from the Gospel, the Fathers, and the Councils in theology.”

Claude Bérigard (1578–1663) in his *Circulus pisanus* (1643) described Aristotle as impious for his belief in the limited role of the prime mover below the celestial spheres. Leibniz wrote in comments on Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed* that the ‘providence of Aristotle is above the moon,’ and contrasted his beliefs with the Mu’tazilites, whom he found similar doctrinally to Christians.

Consolidating this idea was Pierre Bayle, who, having noted that Aristotle clashed with Christianity on the ‘points of the greatest consequence,’ described two such points: the eternity of the universe, and that providence did not ‘extend itself to sublunary beings.’ Averroes’ interpretation of Aristotle became not just accepted as an accurate textual reading, but also as a tool in polemics against Aristotelianism. By attributing to Aristotle an impious view of providence, the alternative philosophies, whether Cartesian or corpuscular, Mosaic or mechanical, could better present themselves as the true philosophy.

5. CONCLUSION

Attacking Averroistic, and thereby Aristotelian, views of providence was an opportunistic tactic for discrediting an established philosophical opponent. It was, however, more than just a tactic. Developing a natural philosophy that promoted acceptable theories of providence was central to many early modern innovators in natural philosophy. Descartes, for example, explicitly maintained that God’s providence...
extended to particular actions of humans.⁸⁶ Robert Boyle (1627–1691) argued that
the mechanical philosophy was not incompatible with the proposition “That God
governs the World he has made.”⁸⁷ For Boyle, this governing of the world extended
not just to human beings but also to ‘such Small and Abject Ones, as Flies, Ants
Fleas, &c.’⁸⁸ These views he contrasted to ‘many (especially Aristotelian) Deists’
[his emphasis], who do not even credit God with creating the universe.⁸⁹ Similarly,
Robert Hooke (1635–1703) used his microscope in an effort to give experiential
evidence for Boyle’s view that ‘the Wisdom and Providence of the All-wise Creator
is not less shewn in these small despicable creatures, Flies and Moths.’⁹⁰ For Hooke,
the microscope offered empirical evidence for God’s providence throughout the
sublunary world.

Finally, the culmination of the scientific revolution in the person of Isaac Newton
(1643–1727) saw not the promotion of deism but the endorsement of a version of
God at odds with Aristotelianism. Newton opposed scholastic philosophy, which he
believed had corrupted Christianity by combining Scripture with the metaphysics of
heathen philosophers, including Aristotle.⁹¹ In the words of Alexandre Koyré:

Newton’s God is not merely a ‘philosophical’ God, the impersonal and uninter-
ested First Cause of the Aristotelians ... He is – or, in any case Newton wants him
to be – the Biblical God, the effective Master and Ruler of the world created by
him.⁹²

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⁸⁶ C.P. Ragland, ‘Descartes on Divine Providence and Human Freedom,’ Archiv für
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⁹⁰ R. Hooke, Micrographia, or Some physiological descriptions of minute bodies made by
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⁹¹ I. Newton, Drafts on the History of the Church (section 5), MS Jerusalem, National
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⁹² A. Koyré, From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
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Thus Newton fashioned his system of the universe so that God’s rule extends equally everywhere. In the General Scholium that accompanied the second edition of the *Principia*, Newton described God ‘not as the world soul but as lord of all,’ who is omniscient and omnipresent. Newton held that God ‘rules all things, and he knows all things that happen,’ thereby rejecting the idea of ‘a god without dominion, providence, and final causes.’ Furthermore, the elimination of the division between celestial and sublunary regions in his physics entailed the incoherence of Averroes’ alleged position that God’s providence only extended to the planetary orbs. Just as the laws of nature are universal for Newton, God’s rule is uniform, affecting the terrestrial and celestial according to the same measure. Newton’s natural philosophy solved a number of outstanding problems in natural philosophy. Among them was the development of a system that was in accord with his vision of the divine that included God’s providence emanating to terrestrial individuals.

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