The Avicennian Tradition in the Making: A Correspondence on the Role of Expressions and Meanings in Logic in Context

Silvia Di Vincenzo

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The Avicennian Tradition in the Making: A Correspondence on the Role of Expressions and Meanings in Logic in Context

Silvia Di Vincenzo*

Abstract
The definition of the relation between expressions (*alfāẓ*) and meanings (*maʿānī*) has played a pivotal role in determining the subject matter of logic all along the so-called "classical period" of Arabic philosophy. This paper focuses on Avicenna's (d. 427H/1037) view on this fundamental topic taking into account his hitherto neglected correspondence with an anonymous disciple (*Mubāḥaṯāt* 579-585 in Bīdārfar's edition). The aim is to frame this correspondence in its original context by analyzing both its direct and indirect tradition. The correspondence, which appears to be quoted in Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's (d. 606H/1210) *Šarḥ al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*, may be one of the earliest – not to say the earliest – signs of an exegetical activity surrounding Avicenna's *Išārāt* and *Šifāʾ* still in its embryonic stage.

Introduction

The mutual relation between expressions (*alfāẓ*) and meanings (*maʿānī*) has played a pivotal role in the definition of the subject matter of logic during the so-called "classical period" of Arabic philosophy (ca. 800-1200 CE). The issue is a fundamental one, as determining the subject matter of logic is a necessary step preliminary to the definition of its epistemological status. Moreover, the debate on the subject matter of logic reflects the gradual transition from the Aristotelian conception of logic as an instrument of the other philosophical sciences to a new conception of logic as both an instrument and a philosophical discipline in its own right.

This paper will focus on Avicenna's (d. 427H/1037) view on the relation between expressions and meanings in logic. The topic, which has been extensively treated in scholarly literature,[1]

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* I had the opportunity to present a preliminary version of this paper at the International Conference "Aristotelian Logic in Medieval Cultures: Hebrew, Arabic, and Latin" jointly hosted by the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies (Jerusalem) and Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan) in 2019. My most sincere gratitude goes to the organizers and all the participants for their invaluable questions and remarks. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees for their insightful comments on a draft of this paper.

[1] On the relation between expressions and meanings in connection to the debate between Arab logicians and grammarians, see M. Mahdī, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam", in G.E. von Grunebaum (ed.), *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1970, pp. 51-83; G. Endress, "The Debate Between Arabic Grammar and Greek Logic in Classical Islamic Thought", *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* 1 (1977), pp. 320-3; *339-51; A. Elamrani-Jamal, "Grammaire et logique d'après le philosophe arabe chrétien Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī (280-364 H/893-974)", *Arabica* 29 (1982), pp. 1-15; A. Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne et grammaire arabe : étude et documents*, Vrin, Paris 1983, pp. 148-63. On the relation between expressions and meanings in a more general perspective, see W. Heinrichs, "*Lafẓ* and *maʿnā*" in J. Scott Meisami – P. Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, Routledge, London - New York 1998, pp. 461-2; T. Street, "Arabic and Islamic Philosophy of Language and Logic", in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia*

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will be addressed here from a different perspective by examining the correspondence between Avicenna and his direct disciples. The starting point of this survey will be a question asked to Avicenna by an anonymous contemporary scholar or student about a passage from the opening work of the Logic section of the *Šifāʾ*, the *Kitāb al-Madḫal*.[2] This text – which has not yet received the due share of attention – will also offer new insights into the earliest phases of the circulation and study of two of Avicenna's major philosophical *summae*, namely the *Kitāb al-Šifāʾ* and the *Kitāb al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*.

1. The earliest stages of the Avicennian tradition: The school tradition of Avicenna's Šifāʾ *and* Išārāt

For reasons that are yet to be ascertained, the production of textual commentaries on Avicenna's *Šifāʾ* – contrary to that of his last major *summa*, the *Kitāb al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt* – had a relatively late start in the 16th century CE. Prior to this, only three partial commentaries on the *Šifāʾ* are attested for the five centuries between the 11th and the 16th c. CE, namely two on the section on logic by Ibn Zayla (d. 439H/1048) and the *ʿallāma* al-Ḥillī (d. 726H/1325),[3] and one on the section on metaphysics by Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606H/1210).[4] These considerations should not lead to affirm that Avicenna's *Šifāʾ* was not studied before the 16th c. CE; on the contrary, evidence suggests that the study of this work of Avicenna has massively supported the exegesis of his *Išārāt* over the centuries.[5] Moreover, even if textual commentaries in the most proper sense are poorly attested, the *Šifāʾ* has been, since the earliest stages of its transmission, the object of a lively production of other kinds of exegetical materials, such as paraphrases and marginal annotations (*ḥāšiyyāt*). This textual material, which witnesses the existence of a flourishing teaching and exegetical activity surrounding

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of Philosophy, Stanford, The Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University 2008 (substantive revision in 2013: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-language/); P. Adamson – A. Key, "Philosophy of Language in the Medieval Arabic Tradition", in M. Cameron and R.J. Stainton (eds.), *Linguistic Content: New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford U.P., Oxford 2015, pp. 74-99; A. Key, *Language between God and the Poets*: *Maʿnā in the Eleventh Century*, Univ. of California Press, Oakland, California, 2018; T. Street, "The Reception of Pointers 1.6 in Thirteenth-Century Logic: On the Expression's Signification of Meaning", in N. Germann – M. Najafi (eds.), *Philosophy and Language in the Islamic World*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin 2021 (Philosophy in the Islamic World in Context, 2), pp. 101-28.

[2] Whenever this work is quoted in the present article, references are made to both the Cairo edition (*Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*, *Al-Manṭiq*, *Al-Madḫal*, ed. Ǧ.Š. Qanawatī – M. Al-Ḫuḍayrī – A.F. Al-Ahwānī – I. B. Madkūr, Al-Maṭbaʿa al-amīriyya, Cairo 1952) and my edition (Avicenna, *The Healing, Logic: Isagoge*. A New Edition, English Translation and Commentary of the *Kitāb al-Madḫal* of Avicenna's *Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*, ed. S. Di Vincenzo, De Gruyter, Berlin 2021 [Scientia Graeco-Arabica, 31]). The page and line numbers refer to the Cairo edition, while the paragraph numbers (e.g. §1) after the slash refer to my edition.

[3] See R. Wisnovsky, "Avicenna's Islamic reception", in P. Adamson (ed.), *Interpreting Avicenna*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 2013, pp. 190-213 (p. 194) and R. Wisnovsky, "On the emergence of Maragha Avicennism", *Oriens* 46 (2018), pp. 263-331. A commentary on the *Šifāʾ* by Ibn Zayla is also attested by al-Nayrīzī: see R. Pourjavady, *Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran: Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Nayrīzī and his writings*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2011, p. 113.

[4] To my knowledge, the only source attesting a commentary by Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the *Ilāhiyyāt* is Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfī bi-l-Wafayāt*; see M. Ṣāliḥ al-Zarkān, *Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wa-Ārāʾuhu al-Kalāmīyah wa-al-Falsafīyah*, Dār al-Fikr li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Našr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, Beirut 1963 (p. 124), where it is quoted as a witness of a probably spurious work ascribed to al-Rāzī. The value of this attestation is quite uncertain, because al-Ṣafadī reports that Rukn al-Dīn Ibn al-Qawīʿ (according to the reading printed by al-Zarkān; Ibn al-Qawabʿ according to the reading of the two editions of the work) believed having seen, in the library of his father, a *Šarḥ Ilāhiyyāt* al-*Šifāʾ* ascribed to al-Rāzī, hence his testimony is not a direct one.

[5] See Wisnovsky, "Avicenna's Islamic reception", pp. 203-5.

the work, is progressively emerging as the study of the manuscript tradition of the work proceeds.[6]

There is also evidence of the fact that the *Šifāʾ* was a much studied and discussed work within the intellectual circle that gravitated around Avicenna – which from now on I will also call 'school', albeit without referring to a rigidly institutionalized educational system. The work that is known by the title *Mubāḥaṯāt* ("Discussions")[7] is a posthumous collection of heterogeneous materials, such as notes, letters and questions produced within Avicenna's school, that witnesses the existence of a lively interaction between the members of Avicenna's circle and Avicenna himself.[8] As will be argued in the following section, this work represents a crucial source for reconstructing the earliest stages of the circulation and reception of the *Šifāʾ*.

2. Avicenna's correspondence on the role of expressions in logic

2.1 Doctrinal background

The *Mubāḥaṯāt* is the earliest indirect source quoting the text of several sections of Avicenna's *Šifāʾ*. The main core of the collection of letters and treatises that comes under this title might be Avicenna's correspondence with two of his first-generation disciples and colleagues, namely Bahmanyār Ibn Marzubān and Ibn Zayla.[9]

It is generally acknowledged that Ibn Zayla had a particular interest in logic; this claim is usually based on Reisman's identification of some questions in the complex of the *Mubāḥaṯāt* concerning the section of *Burhān* of the *Šifāʾ*, which may be ascribed to his correspondence with Avicenna.[10] In addition to this, he apparently had an interest in the classification of sciences, as can be inferred from: (i) a reply to him from Avicenna concerning a passage of the classification of the sciences in *Madḫal* I.2[11] (commonly referred to as "Letter to Ibn Zayla"); and (ii) a question concerning the scope of inquiry of the discipline of logic,[12] which consists of paragraphs 579-585 in Bīdārfar's edition of the *Mubāḥaṯāt*, pp. 193-4.[13] Leaving aside the first of the two questions ascribed to Ibn Zayla, I will focus on the second (ii), which has not yet been duly examined.

The fragment of this correspondence that can be read in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579-585 appears to focus on a classic passage from the *Madḫal* that deals with the relation between *lafẓ* and *maʿnā*, that is, chap. I.4 on the subject matter of logic, pp. 22.13-23.4/§3.1. The definition of the subject matter of logic had been a relevant object of reflection for logicians writing in Arabic, as it involved

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[6] The analysis of manuscripts has already revealed the existence of a group of marginalia ascribed to Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī; see S. Di Vincenzo, "Early Exegetical Practice on Avicenna's *Šifāʾ*: Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Marginalia to Logic" *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 28.1 (2018), pp. 31-66.

[7] Quotations of the work in this paper are from: *Mubāḥaṯāt*, ed. M. Bīdārfar, Intišārāt-e Bīdār, Qum 1371/1992.

[8] On the intricate manuscript tradition of this work, see D.C. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition: the transmission, contents, and structure of Ibn Sīnā's al-Mubāḥaṯāt (The Discussions)*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2002.

[9] On Bahmanyār, see Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), pp. 185-192 and A. Al-Rahim, *The Creation of Philosophical Tradition: Biography and the Reception of Avicenna's Philosophy from the Eleventh to the Fourteenth Century A.D.*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 49-54. On Ibn Zayla and his main fields of interest, see A. Al-Rahim, "Avicenna's Immediate Disciples: Their Lives and Works", in Y.T. Langermann (ed.), *Avicenna and his Legacy: A Golden Age of Science and Philosophy*, Brepols, Turnhout 2009, pp. 1-25 (esp. 14-6); Al-Rahim, *The Creation of Philosophical Tradition*, pp. 55-7.

[10] Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), p. 289.

[11] The letter edited in Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), p. 284.

[12] Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), pp. 200-1 and pp. 246-7.

[13] See Al-Rahim, "Avicenna's Immediate Disciples: Their Lives and Works" (above, n. 9), p. 15.

defining the precise boundaries of the subject matter of logic with respect to that of grammar.[14] The possible overlap of the subjects of logic and grammar, both apparently dealing with expressions, was a rather undesired outcome in the attempt to found the epistemological status of logic as an autonomous discipline. Among the different strategies employed to distinguish the approaches of each of the two disciplines to expressions, one had great success within the school of Baġdād, where the predominant view was that logic deals with those expressions that signify universal items, whereas expressions *tout court* are the object of grammar.[15] This distinction led the Baġdād Peripatetics to identify the subject matter of logic with the expressions insofar as they signify meanings.

This is precisely the position critically addressed by Avicenna in *Madḫal* I.4. Avicenna's well-known answer to the problem consists in assuming meanings instead of expressions as the primary subject of logic. As also explicitly stated at the beginning of the *ʿIbāra* (T1), expressions are only studied in logic insofar as they signify meanings that, when composed with other meanings and arranged in a certain way, lead to the acquisition of new knowledge.

T1. Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *ʿIbāra* I.1, p. 5.13-17 Al-Ḫuḍayrī-Madkūr:[16]
Moreover, the inquiry into whichever expression is posited as signifying such meaning and whichever written [expression] (*kitāba*) is posited as signifying such meaning and such impression [in the soul] pertains to linguistics and grammar (*li-ṣināʿat al-luġawiyyīn wa-l-kuttāb*); the logician only talks about them by accident. Rather, what the logician must know, concerning the state of the expression, is its state in view of the signification of simple and composite meanings, in order to attain by that the state of the meanings themselves insofar as something that provides [us] with knowledge of the unknown is composed of them. This falls within the remit of logic (*ṣināʿat al-manṭiqiyyīn*).

In one of the most famous passages from the *Ilāhiyyāt* of the *Šifāʾ*, the subject matter of the discipline of logic is said to be given by the secondary intelligible meanings, which accrue

[14] Besides the renowned dispute between Abū Bišr Mattā and Abū Saʿīd al-Sīrāfī – on which see Mahdī, "Language and Logic in Classical Islam" (above, n. 1), pp. 55-83; Endress, "The Debate Between Arabic Grammar and Greek Logic in Classical Islamic Thought" (above, n. 1), p. 321; Elamrani-Jamal, *Logique aristotélicienne et grammaire arabe* (above, n. 1), pp. 148-63 –, see also the treatise *Fī l-farq bayna naḥw al-ʿArab wa-l-manṭiq* ascribed to al-Kindī's disciple Aḥmad Ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Saraḫsī and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī, *Maqāla fī tabyīn al-faṣl bayna ṣināʿatay al-manṭiq al-falsafī wa-l-naḥw al-ʿarabī*. Cf. Endress, "The Debate Between Arabic Grammar and Greek Logic in Classical Islamic Thought", p. 320; H.H. Biesterfeldt, "Al-Kindī's Schule von Bagdad nach Transoxanien", in U. Rudolph – R. Würsch (eds.), *Philosophie in der Islamischen Welt, Band I: 8.-10. Jahrhundert*, Schwabe Verlag, Basel 2012, p. 152; Elamrani-Jamal, "Grammaire et logique d'après le philosophe arabe chrétien Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī (280-364 H/893-974)" (above, n. 1), pp. 1-15.

[15] Besides Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī, *Maqāla fī tabyīn al-faṣl bayna ṣināʿatay al-manṭiq al-falsafī wa-l-naḥw al-ʿarabī* in G. Endress, "The Treatise of Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī 'On the Difference between Philosophical Logic and Arabic Grammar'", *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* 2 (1978), *181-92 (esp. pp. 182-1) and Ibn al-Ṭayyib, *Tafsīr Kitāb Īsāġūǧī li-Furfūriyūs*, ed. K. Gyekye, Dar el-Machreq, Beyrouth 1975, p. 68.17-19, cf. also Ibn al-Ṭayyib, *Tafsīr Kitāb al-Maqūlāt*, ed. C. Ferrari, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2006, p. 8.4-6, stating that the subject of logic are the simple expressions that signify the high genera (*al-alfāẓ al-basīṭa al-dālla ʿalā al-aǧnās al-ʿawāl*). A different strategy was employed in al-Fārābī, *Iḥṣāʾ al-ʿUlūm*. ed. A. ʿUṯmān, Maktaba al-Anglo al-Misriyya, Cairo 1968, p. 77.8-15, according to which grammarians occupy themselves with the expressions of the language of a specific community (*umma*), whereas logicians deal with expressions with respect to their universal aspects, shared by the different communities.

[16] All the quotations from the *ʿIbāra* are based on: *Kitāb al-Šifāʾ*, *Al-Manṭiq*, *Al-ʿIbāra*, ed. M. Al-Ḫuḍayrī and I.B. Madkūr, Dār al-kātib al-ʿarabī, Cairo 1970 (henceforth, for the sake of simplicity: Cairo ed.). The translations provided here are mine; a complete English translation of the work is offered in A. Bäck (tr.), Avicenna/Ibn Sīnā, *Al-ʿIbāra. Avicenna's Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione, Part One and Part Two*, Philosophia Verlag, München 2013.

to primary meanings.[17] Secondary intelligible meanings convey the relation in which primary meanings stand to each other. For instance, one meaning may be a genus for another which is a species for it, and so on; 'genus', 'species' and the like are secondary intelligible meanings that accrue to primary meanings, such as 'animal' and 'man'. Secondary intelligible meanings are studied in logic insofar as they help build sound reasonings and syllogistic proofs that allow one to attain knowledge of the unknown.

With respect to the traditional view, Avicenna operated a radical change maintaining, however, two traditional ideas as the keystones of his theory. The first is the substantial mutual correspondence between expressions and meanings stressed in *Madḫal* I.4.[18] This principle is better understood in light of Avicenna's description of the way in which a given expression conveys a meaning in the human soul. The process is described, in the Logic section of the *Šifāʾ*, in the following passage from *ʿIbāra* I.1 (T2):

> T2. Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *ʿIbāra* I.1, p. 4.8-10 Cairo ed.:
> The meaning of the signification of the expression (*al-lafẓ*) is that, whenever an audible name is inscribed (*irtasama*) in imagination (*al-ḫayāl*), a meaning is inscribed upon the soul (*irtasama fī-l-nafs maʿnā*). Then the soul learns that this audible [name] belongs to this concept so that, whenever sense perception (*al-ḥiss*) conveys it to the soul, the soul turns to its meaning.

When an expression is heard, it is inscribed in the retentive imagination or imagery (*al-ḫayāl*), the faculty responsible for processing and retaining what is perceived through the five external senses and received by the *sensus communis* or common sense (*al-ḥiss al-muštarak*).[19] Consequently, a meaning corresponding to that is also inscribed in the soul (*al-nafs*). It should be observed that, except for imagery (*al-ḫayāl*), Avicenna does not detail in this context the single faculties responsible for the different operations that he describes, which are generically ascribed here to the soul (*al-nafs*). The soul – presumably, the cogitative faculty (*al-mufakkira*)[20] – is then responsible for associating the expression with the meaning. This process works in such a way that, whenever the same expression is heard once again through sense perception, the same

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[17] See *Ilāhiyyāt* I.2, pp. 10.17-11.2, ed. S. Zāyid – G.C. Anawātī – M.Y. Mūsā – S. Dunyā, Al-hayʾa al-ʿāmma li-šuʾūn al-maṭābiʿ al-amīriyya, Cairo 1960, and A. Bertolacci, *The Reception of Aristotle's Metaphysics in Avicenna's Kitāb al-Šifāʾ. A Milestone of Western Metaphysical Thought*, Brill, Leiden - Boston 2006, pp. 272-3. On 'secondary meanings' and on the possible historical origin of this expression, that is already employed in the works of al-Fārābī, see A. I. Sabra, "Avicenna on the Subject Matter of Logic", *The Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1980), pp. 746-64 (esp. pp. 753-7).

[18] Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *Madḫal* I.4, p. 23.3-4/§3.1: "The discussion concerning the expressions corresponding to their meanings is like the discussion concerning their meanings."

[19] On the faculty of *ḫayāl* according to Avicenna, see A. Ivry, "Arabic and Islamic Psychology and Philosophy of Mind", in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 Edition), accessible online at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/arabic-islamic-mind/; D. Gutas, "Intellect without Limits: The Absence of Mysticism in Avicenna", in M.C. Pacheco – J.F. Meirinhos (eds.), *Intellect et imagination dans la philosophie médiévale/Intellect and Imagination in Medieval Philosophy/Intelecto e imaginação na filosofia medieval.* Actes du XI^{e} Congrès International de Philosophie Médiévale de la Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale (S.I.E.P.M.) Porto, du 26 au 31 août 2002, vol. I, Brepols, Turnhout 2006, pp. 351-72 (esp. 355-7); T. Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity: Framing Avicenna's Science of the Soul*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2021 (Scientia Graeco-Arabica, 28), p. 156.

[20] On which see D.L. Black, "Rational Imagination: Avicenna on the Cogitative Power", in L.X. Lopéz-Farjeat – J.A. Tellkamplack (eds.), *Philosophical Psychology in Arabic Thought and the Latin Aristotelianism of the 13th Century*, Vrin, Paris 2013, pp. 59-81.

corresponding meaning is conveyed to the soul. Once the association of one expression with its corresponding meaning is established, the content of the expression is permanently retained in the soul – to be precise, in memory (*al-ḥāfiẓa*)[21] –, independently of sense perception.[22]

The second keystone that Avicenna's theory borrows from the traditional view is the necessary character of expressions. According to Avicenna, expressions are necessary under two main respects: first, because they are indispensable in dialogue and interpersonal communication (*al-muḫāṭaba wa-l-muḥāwara*).[23] Second, because they are necessarily entailed in the process of discursive thought (*al-rawiyya*), in which the arrangement of meanings in mind necessarily entails that the corresponding expressions are imagined as well. To sum up, the necessity of expressions both for exterior and interior locution requires the logician to also deal with them, but not as a primary subject of his discipline. It remains to be ascertained precisely how, in Avicenna's opinion, the study of expressions relates to the study of concepts in logic.

2.2. Mubāḥaṯāt *579-585*

A similar question must have prompted an anonymous contemporary of Avicenna (possibly Ibn Zayla)[24] to ask for clarifications on Avicenna's apparently contradictory claim in *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1 that the study of expressions in logic is necessary, although it is not the subject matter of the discipline. *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 preserves what appears to be a recapitulation of the student's question, with a literal quotation from *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1:

> T3. *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579, p. 193.1-3 Bīdārfar:
> Question on his statement that necessity summons to the inquiry into the expressions, then on his statement: "the logician, insofar as he is a logician, is not primarily concerned with expressions",[25] and display that this is an evident contradiction.

Avicenna's reply to the question is preserved in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 580-585, pp. 193-194, in a rich passage that, to my knowledge, has not yet received its due share of attention. A translation of the salient parts of Avicenna's answer is provided below.

> T4. *Mubāḥaṯāt* 580-585, p. 193.4-194.19 Bīdārfar:
> [580] In theoretical and practical disciplines, there can be things that are dealt with primarily, so that, out of necessity, one is primarily concerned with them and only afterwards with that which falls outside the primary object (*al-qaṣd al-awwalī*). An example is the realization of a house, since it necessarily requires things that fall out of the main purpose, such as hiring a workman and acquiring the tools. The analogous in the sciences is that the purpose in the study of geometry are lines, surfaces

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[21] On which see Alpina, *Subject, Definition, Activity* (above, n. 19), p. 156.

[22] See Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *ʿIbāra* I.1, p. 1.8-9 Cairo ed.

[23] The same necessity of the expressions was already noticed in the school of Alexandria: cf. Eliae (David) *In Porphyrii Isagogen et in Aristotelis Categorias commentaria*, ed. A. Busse, Reimer, Berlin 1900 (*CAG* XVIII.1), p. 35.23-26, arguing that, were it not for the necessity of expressions when teaching, then logicians would not deal with expressions.

[24] For the identification of the anonymous questioner with Ibn Zayla, cf. Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), pp. 200-1 and 246-7.

[25] P. 193.2-3: *laysa li-l-manṭiqī min ḥayṯu huwa manṭiqī šuġl awwalī bi-l-alfāẓ*, quoting *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1: *wa-laysa li-l-manṭiqī min ḥayṯu huwa manṭiqī šuġl awwal bi-l-alfāẓ*.

> and the real intellectual figures; then, the necessity rises to figure it out[26] by lines that are not lines, straight lines that are not straight lines, circumferences that are not circumferences, so that [the mental content] is disproven. […] [584] It has been learnt that our statement: "we are called of necessity"[27] and so on does not contradict our statement: "but the primary concern (*al-šuġl al-awwalī*) [in logic] is not with it".[28] Indeed, there can be a secondary concern with it, or a partial concern, or it can be included [in the discipline] in a peculiar fashion, so that there is no proper secondary concern with it, nor any primary universal concern, nor a partial concern. Rather, it is something indispensable and whose consideration is indispensable in view of the primary purpose of all its parts (like the examples brought to you on the use of sensible figures and characters). So, it has been learnt that this is necessary and, yet, it is not the object of primary concern. The first [case] is like the study of the conics, for it is necessary to perfect the discipline of geometry, and geometry does not deal primarily with it, but with its genus – that is, measure – for in fact, this is its subject and those are species of its subjects. [585] My discourse in the book in which I wrote extensively[29] was only about the explanation of the primary subject matter (*al-mawḍūʿ al-awwalī*) of logic, and I clarified that it is not expressions. Indeed, the study of expressions is either [(a)] included in it out of necessity (like the necessity of drawing figures for sense perception), or [(b)] as a part of the subjects of the discipline, or [(c)] as a necessary concomitant (*lāzim*) of a part of the subjects of the discipline, or [(d)] as a necessary concomitant of the subject matter of the discipline. Whoever pondered the *Book of Demonstration* knows the differences among these [things] and knows that it is necessary to verify them and that necessity calls on us to know them, even if they are not the subject matter of the discipline.

Avicenna recurs here to the notions of 'primary concern' (*al-šuġl al-awwalī*), 'primary object' (*al-qaṣd al-awwalī*), and 'primary subject matter' (*al-mawḍūʿ al-awwalī*)[30] to distinguish between inquiries of different relevance within one discipline. This enables him to claim that, although necessary, the study of expressions is not the primary subject of logic.

Paragraphs 584-585 are particularly interesting, as they offer a detailed account of how the study of an object can fall within the remit of a discipline without being its primary subject (being, instead, an object with which the discipline deals secondarily). Although Avicenna does not specify in which of the ways enumerated above the study of expressions relates to logic, my suggestion is that it is type (a) in paragraph 585. For in fact, (b) – namely that the study of expressions is part of the subject matter of logic – can be excluded because expressions are not a species of secondary intelligible meanings;[31] (c) and (d) – namely, being a necessary concomitant of the subject matter of logic, or at least of part of it – may instead apply to notions like being

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[26] Reading (p. 193.9): *taḥyīl* (with MSS İstanbul, Nuruosmaniye Kütüphanesi, 4894, f. 103r, Köprülü 869, f. 254r and Princeton, *Yahuda* 308, f. 51r) instead of *taḥyīl*.

[27] P. 194.5: *al-ḍarūra dāʿiyya*; cf. *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.17/§3.1: *kānat al-ḍarūra tadʿū*.

[28] P. 194.5-6: *wa-lākin laysa al-šuġl al-awwalī bihi*. Cf. *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1: *wa-laysa li-l-manṭiqī min ḥayṯu huwa manṭiqī šuġl awwal bi-l-alfāẓ*.

[29] In all likelihood, this is a reference to the *Madḫal* of the *Šifāʾ*.

[30] On the notion of 'primary subject', its meaning and its Farabian origin, see H. Eichner, "Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā on 'Universal Science' and the System of Sciences: Evidence of the Arabic Tradition of the *Posterior Analytics*", *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 21 (2010), pp. 71-95 and A. Quartucci, "Avicenna's notion of *al-mawḍūʿ al-awwal* ('first subject') in *Ilāhiyyāt*, I, 1-2 and its Latin reception", *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 28 (2017), pp. 441-80 (esp. pp. 441-67).

[31] This is how the study of the conics relates to geometry, according to paragraph 584: the conics are part of the subject matter of geometry because the latter is their genus (i.e., measure).

a genus, being a species and so on as necessary concomitants of universality, as a passage from the *Taʿlīqāt* suggests.[32]

If this is the case, Avicenna would here be comparing the need to use expressions with the need to represent geometric figures and theorems graphically. Upon closer inspection, numerous points of analogy appear. First, both are imperfect means of conveying meanings: as for the graphical representation of geometrical figures, Avicenna argues for their inadequacy in paragraph 580; as for expressions, one may think of those expressions that can signify more than one meaning (homonymy).[33] Second, it can be argued that in both cases such imperfections may affect the soundness of the inquiry: in the case of geometry, an inadequate geometrical representation of a figure or a theorem may lead to erroneous conclusions, as well as, in the case of expressions, phenomena like homonymy can affect reasoning by inducing in error. It can thus be concluded that both the logician and the geometer would rather dispense with the use of expressions or graphic representations if they could, except that neither can do without them. As stated in *Madḫal* I.4, the object of interpersonal communication – and, more generally, of the study and exercise of logic – are meanings. Consequently, if it were possible to convey the meanings without the expressions, the expressions would not be subject to any consideration by the logician.[34]

According to a dense passage from Avicenna's *ʿIbāra*, verbal language, which makes use of expressions, has become the privileged means of communication due to practical reasons.

> T5. Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *ʿIbāra* I.1, p. 2.3-9 Cairo ed.:
> Since human nature needed to communicate (*al-muḥāwara*) due to its necessity to cooperate and to live in society, it was inspired to invent something by which it could attain that. No easier (*aḫaff*) way than acting (*fiʿlan*) was found, nor was it found any easier way than emitting voice (*bi-l-taṣwīt*). Voice, especially, does not remain fixed nor does it accumulate, so that, besides being easy, it also has the advantage that information exists by it, along with the advantage that it disappears, since there is no longer need to signify by it after the necessity for it ceases to exist, or one conceives its signification aside from that. Nature was thus inclined to use voice and was supported by the Creator with the tools of the segmentation and composition of letters *(taqṭīʿ al-ḥurūf wa-tarkībuhā maʿan*), in order to signify by them the impressions in the soul.

The segmentation (*taqṭīʿ*) and composition (*tarkīb*) of letters are defined as 'tools' supplied by God that enable man to employ expressions to signify the mental content effectively. The use of expressions to this end is merely coincidental; since, however, expressions are the vehicle of meanings, the human soul memorizes the latter along with the corresponding expressions.

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[32] A. Kalbarczyk, *Predication and Ontology*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2018 (Scientia Graeco-Arabica, 22), pp. 29-30 and Di Vincenzo's Introduction in Avicenna, *The Healing, Logic: Isagoge* (above, n. 2), pp. xxviii-xxx.

[33] This is Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's example in his *Šarḥ al-Išārāt* (in Ibn Sīnā, *Al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*, *Manṭiq*, ed. S. Dunyā, Dār al-Maʿārif, Cairo 1960, p. 181, n. 2). See also Adamson-Key, "Philosophy of Language in the Medieval Arabic Tradition" (above, n. 1), pp. 89-91.

[34] Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.14-17/§3.1: "Were it possible to learn logic by means of a simple thought in which meanings alone are considered, then this would be enough; were it possible for the interlocutor in a debate to bring forth what is in his soul by means of another device, he would not need any expression at all". On this passage, see also Key, *Language between God and the Poets* (above, n. 1), pp. 167-8.

Nevertheless, this is not the only possibility that the human soul has to retain meanings: as evidenced by T6 below, there exist ways to signify meanings without recurring to the expressions.

> T6. Ibn Sīnā, *Šifāʾ*, *Manṭiq*, *ʿIbāra* I.1, p. 4.11-14 Cairo ed.:
> As for writing (*al-kitāba*), it may be possible for it to signify the impressions [on the soul] without the mediation of expressions (*bi-lā tawassuṭ al-alfāẓ*), in such a way that for each impression in the soul a determinate writing is assigned – for instance, a writing for 'motion', another for 'rest', another for 'sky', another for 'earth', and so on for each thing. But if this were the case, man would strive to retain (*yaḥfiẓu*) the significations of what is in the soul by means of expressions (*alfāẓan*), while retaining them by means of images (*nuqūšan*).

Within a system of communication which employs expressions to convey meanings, as well as an alphabetic script to represent those expressions, the written expression signifies the verbal expression which, in turn, signifies the meaning. In this case, then, the written expression signifies a given meaning by mediation of the expression that it reproduces in written form. However, there is also the possibility that writing directly signifies a given meaning, without reproducing the expression associated with it in all its letters and syllables. This is the case, for instance, with ideographic writing. In this case, the process of memorizing meanings in the soul is different, as meanings are not associated with the corresponding expressions, but rather with images (*nuqūš*).

To sum up, Avicenna overturned the predominant traditional view, reducing the inquiry into expressions to an instrumental, albeit necessary, inquiry of the discipline. Since expressions are not the only possible way to express mental contents, the only universal element is the meaning, and logic should be primarily concerned with it. Clearly, shifting the focus from expressions to meanings allows Avicenna to theorize the subject matter of logic as a universal subject, which can be investigated in the most diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, regardless of the system in which the meanings are expressed or recorded in written form.

3. Avicenna's letter in context

3.1. The manuscript tradition

The author and exact context of the question recapitulated in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 are hard to figure out based solely on the testimony of the manuscript tradition of the *Mubāḥaṯāt*. Reisman had identified different recensions of the collection of heterogeneous texts that form the *Mubāḥaṯāt*, each transmitting different selections of questions and answers. *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579-585 is part of a core of texts – that Reisman named MVIc[35] – transmitted in both the so-called 'earlier intact recension' and the 'later recension' of the work identified by Reisman.

In more detail, in Reisman's 'earlier intact recension' the question is introduced by س (which stands for *suʾāl*, "question") and Avicenna's reply is introduced by ج (standing for *ǧawāb*, "answer"), as in MS Princeton, *Yahuda* 308 (see figure 1).[36]

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[35] See Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), p. 16.

[36] This manuscript is presumably the model from which at least five other manuscript witnesses of the earlier intact recension were copied: see Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), pp. 67-71. The manuscript is digitized and available online at http://pudl.princeton.edu/objects/b5644r59r (acccessed on May 30, 2021).

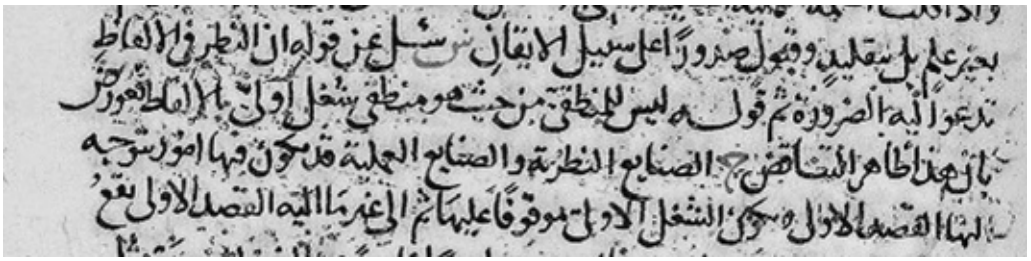

Fig. 1. MS Princeton, *Yahuda* 308, f. 51r (detail).

In Reisman's 'later recension' – represented here by MSS İstanbul, Köprülü Kütüphanesi, *Fazıl Ahmet Paşa* 869 (figure 2) and İstanbul, Nuruosmaniye Kütüphanesi 4894 (figure 3) – one finds the question introduced, once again, by س and the answer introduced by ج, along with an additional mark ط, which stands for *bi-ḫaṭṭihi*, "in his handwriting".

Fig. 2. MS İstanbul, Köprülü Kütüphanesi, *Fazıl Ahmet Paşa* 869, f. 254r (detail).

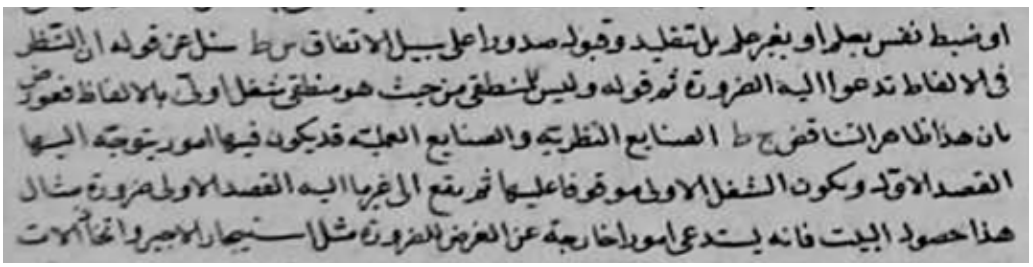

Fig. 3. MS İstanbul, Nuruosmaniye Kütüphanesi 4894, f. 103r (detail).

The manuscript witnesses of the later recension open with a scribal note that is meant to explain the conventional signs employed throughout the codices:

T7. Scribal note in the later recension:
The *sīns* in the margin are an abbreviation for *su'āl* [question], the *ǧīms* are an abbreviation for *ǧawāb* [response]. The letter *ṭā'* with *sīn* is an abbreviation for those questions whose originals were found on pieces of paper either in the hand of Bahmanyār or in the hand of Ibn Zayla. Similarly, *ṭā'* with *ǧīm* is an abbreviation for those responses found under [the questions] in the hand of al-Šayḫ al-Raʾīs Abū ʿAlī. In those cases that have no [abbreviation] the draft copy was not to be had, so they are lacking in any sign that the source was found in the hand of one of the two questioners mentioned – so too [in the cases of] the response in the hand of the one questioned.[37]

[37] Transcription of the Arabic text and translation in Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), p. 29.

We therefore learn from the manuscripts of the later recension that the question in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 (T3) must have been transcribed from a copy written by either Bahmanyār or Ibn Zayla, while the answer must have been derived from a copy written by Avicenna himself. Despite the note in T7, however, I will argue in the next paragraph that there is evidence that *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 may actually be a recapitulation of the question Avicenna was originally asked rather than a faithful transcription of the original text of the question.

3.2 A rediscovered correspondence on the Išārāt*?*

The question briefly recapitulated in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 (T3) suggests that Avicenna was asked about an inconsistency existing between two statements in *Madḫal* I.4, one claiming that necessity summons us to the study of expressions and the other claiming that the logician is not primarily concerned with the study of expressions. Avicenna himself, in a passage of his answer, warns the questioner against considering the two statements as contradictory (*Mubāḥaṯāt* 584, p. 194.5-6). Considering these elements, *Mubāḥaṯāt* 580-585 may legitimately appear to be the answer to a question specifically concerning *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1 and confined to the exegesis of that passage. It should be observed, however, that Avicenna refers to the *Šifāʾ* in his response once by "that book" (in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 583, p. 193.19: *ḏālika l-kitāb*) and once by "the book in which I wrote extensively" (*Mubāḥaṯāt* 585, p. 194.14-15: *al-kitāb alladī ḫaṭṭaytu fīhi maṣrūfan*). If the passage from the *Madḫal* is the only one in question in the correspondence, these references sound a bit odd, as they appear to refer to the *Šifāʾ* as a second work, other than the one that is taken into account.

I would suggest that *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 is actually an *a posteriori* recapitulation of the question that Avicenna was originally asked. Such a recapitulation may have been inferred from the content of Avicenna's answer (notably, *Mubāḥaṯāt* 584), being not, therefore, an accurate report of the original question. If so, *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579 may in fact be misleading in presenting *Madḫal* I.4 as the central node around which the epistolary exchange between Avicenna and the anonymous student develops.

In what follows, I will argue that a passage of Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Šarḥ al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*[38] may quote from this correspondence, thus providing us with new elements to reconstruct the actual context of Avicenna's answer.

When commenting on *Išārāt*, pp. 180.6-181.4[39] – where Avicenna claims that it is necessary, for the logician, to consider also the expressions, regardless of the language – Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reports that someone (*wāḥid*) wrote to Avicenna asking him about the contradiction between this statement in the *Išārāt* and what Avicenna claimed in another book (*fī sāʾir al-kutub*), concerning the fact that the logician is not primarily concerned with the study of expressions (almost literally quoting from *Madḫal* I.4). The question quoted by Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī directly addresses Avicenna in the second person singular *(innaka ḏakarta*, "you mentioned"); it is very likely to be a literal quotation of the anonymous disciple's question, of which there is no trace left in the *Mubāḥaṯāt*.

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[38] The text is quoted from: Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Šarḥ al-Išārāt*, ed. ʿA.R. Najafzāde, Anjuman-e āṯār va maʿāḥir-e farhangī, Tehran 2005.

[39] The passage is quoted from *Al-Išārāt wa-l-Tanbīhāt*, *Manṭiq*, ed. Dunyā (above, n. 33).

T8. Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's quote from the *Mubāḥaṯāt*

Mubāḥaṯāt 579-582, pp. 193-194 Bīdārfar	Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *ŠIṬ*, p. 22.2-7 Najafzāde
[٥٧٩]سئل عن قوله إن النظر في الألفاظ تدعو إليه الضرورة ثم قوله وليس للمنطقي من حيث هو منطقي شغل أولي بالألفاظ فعروض بأن هذا ظاهر التناقض.	وكتب إليه واحد فقال: « إنك ذكرت في سائر الكتب أن المنطقي من حيث هو منطقي ليس له شغل أولي بالألفاظ وذلك مناقض للكلام المذكور ههنا »
[٥٨٠]الصنائع النظرية والصنائع العملية قد يكون فيها أمور يتوجه إليها القصد الأول ويكون الشغل الأولي موقوفا عليها ثم يقع إلى غير ما إليه القصد الأولي ضرورة مثال هذا حصول البيت فإن يستدعي أموراً خارجة عن الغرض للضرورة مثل استئجار الأجير واتخاذ آلات [...]	فأجاب أنه يجوز أن يكون البحث عن الألفاظ واجبا على المنطقي لكن لا بالقصد الأول فإن الألفاظ إذا كانت جارية مجرى الأدوات والآلات كان الاشتغال بها واجبا ولكن لا يكون ذلك مقصودا بالقصد الأول.
[٥٨٢]وأما الإغفال فإذا شاء شافهته به وذلك لأنه ليس إذا كان شيئا ضروريا في صناعة وجب أن يكون كل ضرورة في الصناعة ذلك الشيء بل يجوز أن يكون المقصود في الصناعة معنى أعم من ذلك الشيء ومن غيره ويكون هو المقصود الأولي.	
[579] Question on his statement that necessity summons to the inquiry into the expressions, then on his statement: «The logician, insofar as he is a logician, is not primarily concerned with expressions», and display that this is an evident contradiction.	Someone wrote to him saying: «You mentioned in another book that the logician, insofar as he is a logician, is not primarily concerned with expressions,[40] but this is in contradiction with what is mentioned here».
[580] In theoretical and practical disciplines there can be things that are dealt with primarily, so that, out of necessity, one is primarily concerned with them and only afterwards with that which falls out of the primary object. An example is the realization of a house, since it necessarily requires things that fall out of the main purpose, such as hiring a workman and acquiring the tools […]	He answered that the inquiry into expressions can be necessary for the logician, but not primarily. Since the expressions are like instruments and tools, it is necessary to deal with them, but that is not the primary object [of the discipline].
[582] As to the negligence, I will talk about it, if one wishes. It consists in that, if something is necessary in a discipline, it is not also necessary that everything necessary in the discipline coincides with that thing; on the contrary, the object in a discipline can be a more general notion [including] that thing and something else, and [that notion] is the primary object [of the discipline].	

[40] See *Madḫal* I.4, p. 22.13-14/§3.1.

Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī reports Avicenna's answer in a very abridged form; nonetheless, the paraphrase of one of the core passages of Avicenna's answer, *Mubāḥaṯāt* 582, can be identified on the basis of a reference to the distinction between what is primarily an object of inquiry of a discipline (*maqṣūd bi-l-qaṣd al-awwal*) and what is not primarily so. The paraphrastic quotation also contains echoes of the beginning of the answer (*Mubāḥaṯāt* 580): it alludes to the comparison between the expressions and the tools (*ālāt*) that are necessary in order to build a house.

If Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī can be trusted to quote the anonymous disciple's question in the context of the exact passage of the *Išārāt* that was the actual starting point of the question, then we are faced with a hitherto unidentified letter on Avicenna's *Išārāt*, in which the text is examined in light of the parallel passages from the *Šifāʾ* (in this case, the *Madḫal*). The identification of this quotation in al-Rāzī's commentary also opens up an important question concerning how the textual materials collected in the *Mubāḥaṯāt* have circulated over the centuries. It appears that al-Rāzī must have had access to the original text of the question asked to Avicenna (and awkwardly summarized in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579) that is otherwise lost to us. This might mean that some texts circulated outside the almost canonical collection of letters and treatises which is handed down to us under the title of *Mubāḥaṯāt*. The answer to this challenging question, however, exceeds the limits of the present research.

4. Conclusions

If Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary on Avicenna's *Išārāt* does actually quote from the correspondence in *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579-585, these texts may provide a clue of the existence of a hitherto unknown correspondence on the *Išārāt*. The very existence of a correspondence between Avicenna and one of his direct disciples about passages of the *Išārāt* is a remarkable fact. Apparently, Avicenna did not allow anyone to study the *Išārāt* unless under his supervision; even the copy of the text had to be agreed upon with the author himself. The sole exception to this rule was made for Bahmanyār and Ibn Zayla, who presumably had studied the text with Avicenna before autonomously engaging with it.[41] The identification of *Mubāḥaṯāt* 579-585 with a letter on the *Išārāt* does not undermine the plausibility of Reisman's ascription of the text to the correspondence between Avicenna and Ibn Zayla; quite the opposite, it reinforces it, as Ibn Zayla was, in fact, one of the few disciples allowed to study the work independently.

The value of the correspondence that has been recontextualized in this paper can now be appreciated from a double perspective. From a doctrinal perspective, the text offers new insights into Avicenna's view on the use of expressions in logic. From a historical perspective, it represents one of the earliest – if not the earliest – evidence of the use of the *Šifāʾ* to illuminate the meaning of the most convoluted passages of the *Išārāt*. As this correspondence shows, this exegetical practice, which has been very successful in the ensuing centuries, has its roots in the circle of Avicenna's first-generation disciples.

[41] See Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition* (above, n. 8), p. 196; for Reisman's translation of the passage in which Avicenna sets these restrictive rules for the transmission of the *Išārāt*, see Reisman, *The Making of the Avicennan Tradition*, p. 206.