The Philosophical Poetics of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës
The Aristotelian reception

Salim Kemal
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This series studies the Middle East through the twin foci of its diverse cultures and civilisations. Comprising original monographs as well as scholarly surveys, it covers topics in the fields of Middle Eastern archaeology, architecture, folklore, history, language, law and philosophy. While there is a plurality of views, the series presents serious scholarship in a lucid and stimulating fashion.
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CHAPTER ONE

Philosophical Poetics

This book examines the studies of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and its related texts in which three Medieval philosophers – Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës – proposed a conception of poetic validity and its community of subjects.

This description of the contents of the book suggests a broad landscape, requiring a perspective that includes, among other things, consideration of the relation of the *Poetics* to other Aristotelian texts, the transmission of these works to the commentators’ context, and the motivations driving the commentators’ reception of the texts. The three philosophers ascribed a common philosophical purpose to a grouping of Aristotle’s works – in the *Organon* – that the originals did not clearly possess, and a full understanding of the commentaries must explain how the transmitted texts appeared in relation to this purpose. It is also necessary to account for variations in the commentators’ tradition. The latter ranges over centuries, from Alfarabi (870–950 A.D.) to Averroës (1126–1198), and includes both Avicenna (980–1037), whose work became increasingly independent within an Aristotelian framework, and Ghazali (1058–1111), who famously used philosophy against itself. It also covers a wide geographical and political range, moving from Alfarabi’s origins in what would now be Turkey, to Avicenna’s Persian context, from Ghazali’s life and work in Baghdad and Damascus, to Averroës’ location in Andalucia. Further, the perspective must also explain the literary critical tradition that received Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where a ‘grammatical’ method not only informed analyses of literary works but also contrasted with the Aristotelian commitment to logic. A philosophical study of even these few issues could easily extend beyond the compass of a work of the present size; and, in order to make the study more manageable, I shall orient this book as follows: taking beauty to denote poetic validity, and goodness to include a just relation between subjects in a community, this book will focus on issues central to the classical relation of beauty to truth and goodness.

Poetics, philosophy, and logic

Three points are worth making at the outset. First, this book is intended as a philosophical study of the relation of beauty to goodness and truth contained in
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definition. The writings of the commentators. Such a study makes for a particular history of aesthetics in the Middle East, in which the narrative follows the development of arguments motivated by philosophical concerns. These arguments are not of merely historical interest, and the book will not be much concerned with the general social, political, and cultural background of the work of the three philosophers. Instead, it will examine the sorts of philosophical premises they adopted and will seek to test the arguments they proposed.

Second, in their commentaries on Aristotle's Poetics the three Arab Aristotelian philosophers emphasised that their concern was with the logic of poetic meaning, its validity, rather than with the linguistic rules of any particular language. Aristotle himself is sparing in his use of 'syllogism' in the Poetics. And though he may not have appealed to logic in his own account of metaphor in this text, his commentators have used the resources of the Prior and Posterior Analytics to justify a 'poetic syllogism'. Alfarabi proposes that an important part of the philosopher's task is to set out the logical status of poetic statements. He begins by identifying features of poetry that are particular to specific cultures, explaining that some nations 'treat tunes with which they melodify poetry as part of poetry in the same way that they treat words: so that a statement without its tune loses its metre as it would if it lost some of its letters'. But these features are not central to poetry: he goes on to maintain that 'the most important [factors] ... in the constitution of poetry are imitation and the science of things with which imitation is effected; ...' And he is careful to explain that imitation is a complex matter of construction, not poesis, and not simply of reproducing the object: 'by imitation, statements of imitation create a distance of many degrees from the matter [being imitated]. In a similar vein, the imagining of the thing by those statements [of imitation] leads to the same distance'. This leads him to propose that to understand the nature and status of poetic statements we must set out their logical character: the 'creative imagining' that is necessary to the construction of poetic statements 'is like science in demonstration and speculation in logic and persuasion in rhetoric'. And later he classifies poetry as a syllogistic art. At the very least, the work of imagination is rational and disciplined, suggesting that it provides insight perhaps in the way science does, by leading according to the rules of logic from known premises to previously unknown conclusions – even if, in the case of poetry, our concern with logic incorporates an analysis of the role of feelings.

Avicenna and Averroës use almost identical expressions to characterise their concern with the logical status of poetic or figurative language. Avicenna says that 'poetry is imaginative speech, composed of utterances that are measured, commensurate and, in Arabic, rhymed. The meaning of being measured is that they have rhythmic quality, the meaning of being commensurate is that each utterance, which is rhythmical, has a temporal duration equal to that of the others; and the meaning of being rhymed is that the letters that terminate each utterance are the same. But in all these aspects of poetry, only one is of concern to the philosopher: the logician considers [poetry] only insofar as it is imaginative
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speech. Otherwise the measure is the [proper] concern of the musicologist (in terms of investigation and general practice) and the prosodist (in terms of scansion and according to the practice of each nation). The rhymist considers rhyme.9 Regardless of the concerns that other occupations may have with poetry, 'it is the [proper] concern of the logician to examine poetry with regard to its being imaginative' – only the meaningful kernel of poetry is the object of the logician's analysis and explanation.

Averroës makes a similar declaration. First he clarifies that 'the purpose of this discussion is to comment upon those universal rules in Aristotle's Poetics that are common to all or most nations'. He is not concerned with the rules of poetry particular to any one language or linguistic nation. Second, he writes that poetry incorporates the imaginative arts 'or those that effect imagination'. These are 'three: the art of melody, the art of meter, and the art of making [imaginative] statements'. Of these, he says, 'the latter is the logical art we shall investigate in this book'.10 The two features go together: distinguishing logic from language, he maintains not only that logic is syllogistic, but also that it concerns the rules of rational human thought and knowledge generally.11 The other rules are specific to particular languages. Consequently, he is able to examine universal rules because he considers the logic of poetic statements rather than a particular language and its poetic rules; and since he holds that 'this art is syllogistic',12 he can explain the logic of poetic language in terms of its syllogistic structure.13 In all three cases, then, the philosophers' concern is with the logic of imaginative statements, of the valid poetic and figurative use of language.

While this book hopes to clarify just how logic establishes meanings and validity in poetic discourse, at this stage a brief explanation of the issue may be useful. We can begin with our ordinary experience. Like Aristotle, the Arab Aristotelians ordered the soul according to its different faculties or powers. Sense responds to objects and events in the world, allowing them to imprint their shape, colour, solidity, and other qualities upon the mind.13 Next imagination retains and represents images of present and absent particulars which the senses originally brought to the mind. Reason then organises images, abstracts similarities and differences, and thereby yields our intellectual knowledge of the objects initially gained in sense experience.

The Aristotelians maintained that by ordering our experience, reason and intellect make the objects of our experience into intelligibles, so that the 'intelligible' is our rational knowledge of the objects in question.14 Our intellect analyses and breaks up the perceived object into its attributes or qualities, constituting the intelligible as a collection of attributes, all of which belong together in our grasp of the relevant object because they are abstracted from or articulate features of our initial sense experience of that object.

Although a great deal more may be said about this relation, for the present it is enough to note that the mind directly relates intelligibles and their objects, and they are similar in all human beings. The 'thoughts all men understand when expressed in their different languages are the same for them. The sense objects
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which those thoughts are thoughts of are also common to all. For whatever
individual thing an Indian may have a sensation of – if the same thing is
observed by an Arab, he will have the same perception of it as the Indian.16 No
conventions enter here since the reception of sense experience and its analysis
and ordering are entirely natural. The mind abstracts the attributes of objects,
classifying the latter together with others sharing that attribute or distinguishing
it from those which differ in the other attributes each possesses. In no case will
one mind have a structure or operation that differs at this level from others.

We can use intelligibles to make true or false statements by composing them
into propositions. Alfarabi, for example, distinguishes simple from composite
intelligibles, maintaining that we bring simple ones together to make more
complicated ones. Using intelligibles we may assert that a particular quality
belongs to an object or deny this claim, and can study the mode of such
composition of intelligibles and articulate its rules.17 That is, for Alfarabi
knowledge is a matter of making assertions about objects by composing relations
between intelligibles. Moreover these relations and assertions follow the rules of
logic.18 For example, we may relate (or compound) intelligibles according to
logical rules, asserting categorically that ‘The stag-goat is white’, or that ‘The
stag-goat is not white’ (regardless of whether the stag-goat actually exists), or
disjunctively that ‘The sheet is white or not white’, or conditionally that ‘If it is
dark blue, then it is not a man’, and so on. Since our grasp of intelligibles and
their abstraction from sense experience is a natural and direct relation, free of
convention and the ‘same for [subjects in] all nations’, the assertions or thoughts
we get by composing and relating these intelligibles, and the logical relations
which we use in composing these thoughts, will all also be the same ‘for all
nations’.

The Arab Aristotelians thought that figurative and poetic discourse was
similarly capable of a logical validity, analogous to thought about intelligibles.
When Gadai Dehlavi writes that the poet is ‘ensnared in the musky chain’ of a
lover’s ‘curly lock’, the metaphors Dehlavi uses suggest emotional entanglement
and physical intimacy. Even though the phrases may evoke some different images
in different readers, the images are likely to have some similar meanings at their
basis. This expectation is justified because the metaphors are meaningful and
coherent, which means that they are valid for all subjects. We would expect that
if readers do not share some central set of ideas in their grasp of these metaphors,
it is because they have misunderstood the phrases. We expect understanding
because we expect to think about and reason out the meanings of the metaphors;
and the Arab Aristotelians propose that meanings in poetic and figurative
discourse share features of their logical structure with assertions about
experience. Just as assertions are logically valid when they follow from premises
by sound arguments, similarly meanings in poetic, metaphorical, and figurative
use, all have syllogistic constructions – even if there are also numerous
differences we might identify by describing the syllogism structuring poetic and
figurative discourse as poetic and imaginative. And this book will seek to explain
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the possibility of 'poetic syllogism' by examining the writings of Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës.

The third point to make at the outset is this: while the philosophical study of poetic and other validity cannot entirely ignore the historical context into which the Poetics was received, we must recognise that this context itself promotes the logical nature of poetic meaning. One of the most important historical factors determining the Arabic philosophers' reception of the Greek texts is the context that later Greek commentators gave the Poetics.19 They organized the Stagirite's writings into a single book — The Organon — which they divided into eight parts, each of which coincided with an Aristotelian treatise.20 As this organisation was present in the Syriac translations which, in turn, were translated into Arabic, it became the context for the Arabic study of the Poetics.21 In this context, demonstrative arguments are of primary concern, providing the set of treatises with a hierarchy that begins with the Categories, On Interpretation, and the Analytics, and ends with the Topics, the Sophists (or On Sophistical Refutations), followed by the Rhetoric and the Poetics. The first books consider the fundamental nature of categorical concepts, the nature of assertions, of demonstrative arguments, and the workings of logical and cognitive necessity. Logic provides methodological rules for 'right thinking'. The last four books seem to be devoted to examining modes of thought which are progressively less capable of attaining truth; nonetheless, rhetorical statements must still produce understanding and conviction, and poetry must still be meaningful and may provide us with distinctive insights.22 In order to achieve these aims, and as a consequence of its appearance in this context of the Organon, the Poetics takes on a 'logical' colouring in Arabic writing that it did not clearly possess in the original.

Poetry may be a lesser cognitive tool in this context, because it is not as powerful as demonstration, but it has its own distinctive importance.23 Because it is a part of reasoning, commentators can ascribe it an inter-subjective validity based on a community of feeling between subjects. Thereby they give aesthetic responses an epistemological distinctiveness and autonomy which is very modern, proposing that poetry is subjective yet has other and more validity than an expression of personal preference.24 Far from devaluing verse, they think a study of its methodological principles reveals the 'elements which make up the composition of poetic art, its kinds and the artistic means of every kind, how it is made and what things make it better, more beautiful, and under what conditions it becomes persuasive and effective'.25

An important element, they argued, was that imaginative representations succeed where they result in subjective feelings of awe (wonder) or pleasure. This emphasis on the human subject, and the concern to validate this subjectivity, distinguishes the Arabic reception of Greek texts, for Arabic writers adapted the Greek original to their own tradition, where the subject was crucial to poetry and the linguistic arts.26 In part they stressed the Arabic tradition because they were unfamiliar with the Poetics in its Greek application; but a more substantial reason for this emphasis was that they sought explanations of the power and validity of
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Arabic poetry. That is, they took their philosophical issues from the Arabic tradition because they valued it over all others. They scrutinised this tradition by emphasising, for example, features of Aristotle’s work which explained the role of the subject. By so doing, they elaborated the Greek theory beyond its original cast.

This explanation of the context of the Poetics within the Organon and this focus on logical poetic validity have not always been accepted. And to develop further the present account of poetic validity, we may consider a reading of the Arabic reception of Aristotle’s works that has claimed authority. This alternative reading has not always seen the need for a logical poetical validity, preferring to understand poetry in terms of the relation between speech and politics. Pointing out some of its shortcomings may clarify what we may expect of a logical account of poetry.

Philosophy and Speech

Recently Charles Butterworth proposed the following account of the place of the Poetics and the nature of poetic validity.

Whether the tradition of including the Rhetoric and the Poetics along with the other books generally recognized as comprising Aristotle’s Organon is an innovation that originated among his Alexandrine commentators or merely their thoughtful drawing out of themes implicit in his logical teaching is no longer known. There is no doubt, however, that the medieval Arab philosophers adopted the tradition wholeheartedly, using it to guide their deeper reflections on the relationship between speech and politics. The general idea behind the inclusion of these books – some might call it the expansion of the traditional organon – is quite easy to explain insofar as it represents nothing more than a coherent, comprehensive interpretation of the order and goals of Aristotle’s logical teaching.

From the perspective of this inclusive or context theory, Aristotle’s logic consists of two main parts. The first – comprising the Categories, De Interpretatione, Prior Analytics, and Posterior Analytics – sets forth the basic elements of logical reasoning and culminates in an explanation of the finest and most scientifically trustworthy form of reasoning, namely, demonstration. Accordingly, the first book of the Organon, the Categories, is understood to set forth the meanings associated with the words we use to describe the things around us; stated differently, it differentiates substance from other entities and then explores the meanings of the nine different accidents that can be predicated of it. The next book, De Interpretatione, is viewed as showing how nouns, verbs, particles, and other parts of speech are to be combined into propositions having different significations. In these, as in all of his other works, Aristotle is understood to have given order to what people were doing rather than to have invented something new. Once
these basics were established, he could turn in the Prior Analytics to an explanation of the way to link propositions together so that from the positioning of two particular propositions (now termed premises or terms) a third (namely, a conclusion) must result – an explanation otherwise known as the theory of the syllogism. Then, in the fourth of these logical works, Posterior Analytics, Aristotle is understood to have examined in some detail the way the best kind of syllogistic reasoning – demonstration – functions.

But mindful of the fact that very little of human speech is demonstrative, he also tried to account for the kinds of reasoning used in other settings. These reflections are set forth in the works that constitute the second part of his logical teaching: it comprises the Topics, On Sophistical Refutations . . . Rhetoric, and Poetics. In the first of these works (the fifth in the expanded order), the kind of reasoning used between two individuals – usually described as a questioner and an answerer – is explained. Known as dialectical, this kind of discourse is based on premises grounded in generally accepted opinions. The next book in order, On Sophistical Refutations, consists of an enumeration and examination of fallacious modes of reasoning, and the Arab philosophers describe the premises used in sophistical reasoning as usually false.

Speech is not limited to discourse between two individuals, however. Indeed, by far the most interesting kind of speech is that addressed to larger audiences. It occurs when assemblies of citizens or the faithful are exhorted to particular courses of action, sovereigns or judges are urged to decide upon a person’s guilt or innocence with respect to a particular deed, or admirers and friends are reminded of the exceptional virtues of an outstanding statesman or teacher or of a person who has recently died. Aristotle’s Rhetoric contains an exhaustive study of the speech used in these various sorts of public settings, its goals, and its methods.

Speech may also be formulated in such a manner that it produces imitations of things we see around us – actions as well as artifacts – and presents them in a manner that moves us to desire and rush towards them or to flee and avoid them. In the Poetics, we find Aristotle’s reflections on the poetry known to him. They are illustrated by numerous references to well-known tragedies and epic poems, as well as to several that are no longer extant. Thanks to Umberto Eco, most of us now have dramatic insight into how Aristotle’s reflections on comedy may have been recorded in a second part of the treatise that is no longer extant . . .

Given the emphasis placed on the syllogism at the end of the first part of Aristotle’s logical teaching, the Posterior Analytics, and the fact that syllogistic reasoning dominates dialectical procedure, it is reasonable to examine the other logical arts from this perspective. This is precisely the course pursued by the medieval Arab philosophers, especially Alfarabi, in their attempts to make sense of these writings . . . Aristotle, as well as his medieval Arab
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commentators, saw how impossible it was to speak of syllogistic reasoning in a fully technical sense when discussing rhetorical and poetical speech. But the commentators preserved that line of analysis in order to indicate what political advisors, judicial advocates, eulogizers, and poets generally seek to do in public discourse, just as they drew frequently upon the Quran as the most beautiful – and most well-known – instance of Arabic speech in order to find parallels for observations they sought to make about figures of speech. [This] is a rhetorical ploy . . . 27

The many unsatisfactory elements of this interpretation of the Poetics and its reception include the following. First, the interpretation adopts a complex but unargued stance. It begins by simply assuming without qualification that Aristotle’s Medieval Arab commentators found it ‘impossible to speak of syllogistic reasoning [in poetry] in a fully technical sense’. Then, from this alleged difficulty, it infers conclusions about the status accorded to poetry, and goes on to diagnose that philosophers ascribed this status to poetry as a ‘rhetorical ploy’. Second, the interpretation maintains that in considering poetry the Arabic Aristotelians aimed for ‘deeper reflections on the relationship between speech and politics’, an end they achieved by considering the role of poetry in ‘public discourse’. Despite its not-quite-rational nature, it seems, poetry could determine the social order; and, having given up on its rational character, the interpretation maintains, the commentators sought to limn the social effects of poetry. Third, the interpretation emphasises the role of speech without acknowledging the philosophers’ concern with logic and deliberation. There are many other points to be made about Butterworth’s interpretation, but these three elements already call for elaboration.

To begin with the logical validity of poetic meanings: For his Arabic commentators, Aristotle proceeded as follows. In the Organon he first argues in the Categories for the fundamental nature of categorical concepts, such as substance, quality, etc., which we must use to think about objects and events. Next, in De Interpretatione, among other things, he considers the nature of statements, the conventional nature of language, and its distinction and relation to logic and metaphysics in an account of meaning. And in the Prior Analytics and Posterior Analytics he develops his conception of ‘right thinking’ by setting out the inferential rules we may use. To think correctly and rationally, to act coherently, an agent may reason informally or may reason formally in musing about the nature of happiness, say, by setting out the premises, steps, and conclusion of a deduction. In both cases, Aristotle maintains, if we think coherently we must use the syllogism. In Prior Analytics he defines the syllogism (deduction) as instances of thinking where ‘certain things having been supposed, something different from the things supposed results of necessity because these things are so’.

The fundamental status of this mode of deduction, which characterises reasonable thought, makes it crucial also to poetry and its validity as ‘right thinking’. 28 So far as they are reasonable, the different modes of thought –
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dialectical, rhetorical, and poetic – are logical in that they, like demonstration, rely on the syllogism. Accordingly, for Arabic Aristotelians such as Avicenna, the difference between these modes of thought consists in the nature of their premises, not in whether or not they rely on the syllogism. The difficulty in talking of the syllogism in relation to poetry, a difficulty Avicenna seeks to overcome, lies in showing that poetic premises have the kind of consistency, etc. that allows them to be premises in a meaningful deduction. In other words, to suppose that poetry is rational, meaningful, capable of being understood, appreciated, coherent, etc., the commentators want to show that poetic premises are such that they can have a syllogistic form.

Butterworth’s misguided interpretation was that ‘Aristotle saw, as did his medieval Arab commentators, how impossible it was to speak of syllogistic reasoning in a fully technical sense when discussing rhetorical and poetical speech. But the commentators preserved that line of analysis in order to indicate what … poets generally seek to do in public discourse. … [This] is a rhetorical ploy’. This claim does not give serious weight to the particular arguments at work in the texts and, as a result, almost exactly reverses the commentators’ aims and the role they gave to the syllogism in their philosophical poetics. Presumably what people say in argument depends on what argument they want to make. Since the commentators accepted the syllogistic form as the paradigm of validity, they sought to justify the validity of poetry by showing how it possessed the consistency and rule-governedness that made it capable of providing premises suitable to the syllogistic form. They did not persevere in taking poetry seriously despite its logical weakness, as Butterworth suggests, but rather took it seriously because they could see how its validity might be justified logically. Had they been unable to take it seriously, given the dearth of commentaries on Aristotle’s Poetics in the tradition, they might simply have excluded consideration of its logical and social possibilities.

Leaving aside the importance that, as we shall see, the Arab Aristotelians ascribed to poetry because of its validity, there are other issues to develop here. If poetic validity could not clearly be justified logically, it might have made sense to explain its effectiveness in public discourse by looking to other sources of its power. This might be a ‘rhetorical ploy’ in the double sense of, first, treating poetry as a public discourse that has validity despite lacking the ‘pure’ logical validity of demonstrative syllogisms, and, second, relying on rhetoric to provide poetry with its organising principles and ability to generate conviction. But this proposal is triply weak: First it is possible to argue for the logical validity of poetry, as the Arabic Aristotelians did, and this validity can be the basis of the importance we ascribe to poetry. Second, rhetorical ploys themselves stand in need of a philosophical analysis to explain their use by clarifying their nature, validity, and potential. We do not escape the task of working out the logic of statements simply by substituting a rhetorical use or ploy for the validity of poetic meaning in public discourse. The task of philosophy, to seek out validity by showing the logic at work in specific uses, extends to justifying poetic language
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and rhetoric. Butterworth simply assumes the validity of rhetoric, but the construction of syllogisms that the philosophers propose raises questions about whether rhetoric, which at most carries conviction for the audience of its immediate utterance, can possess the validity that would make it syllogistic. Unless he can provide an account of their validity, Butterworth's 'rhetorical ploys' at best label a set of practices we happen to have. We can describe these practices in detail in their particular use in a given context, but in the absence of some philosophical defence of this rhetorical practice such descriptions will be uninteresting, because we could not generalise from the description of a particular context to any other context, and unenlightening, because they fail to grasp the concern for reason and reflection that drive the philosophers' analyses. And, as we shall see in the case of Averroës, the Aristotelians acknowledged the contribution poetic and metaphorical language can make to rhetorical deliberation while also finding it necessary to distinguish that from its role in poetics.

Third, even a rhetorical use of poetry in public discourse has to be sure of the logical validity of poetry as poetry. One expectation we have of poetic language is that it generates emotions yet is valid, that it has to do with pleasure and wonder, which are subjective feelings, yet claims that others can and should feel the same pleasure and thereby appreciate the poem. Any philosophical account of the validity of poetic language, of the expectation that poetry is not just symptomatic of one individual's varied emotional reactions to some particular, but is aesthetically good or bad, has to explain how the poem can claim this status despite being entirely subjective (in that it generates feelings and emotions, that it is not an objective statement, yet in some features acts like it is). This status, this philosophical claim for validity, underlies and must be presupposed in any rhetorical ploys which poetry might serve. Butterworth seems to ignore the validity that poetic meanings must have even in the 'larger' story people might want to tell about the role of the rhetorical syllogism.

This discussion already indicates some of the problems with the second element we set out above – Butterworth's supposition that the Arab Aristotelians sought 'deeper reflections on the relationship between speech and politics'. Among other limitations, this supposition fails to do justice to the many other concerns informing the study of these texts. Clearly, a concern with politics is far from antithetical to Aristotle's thought; but for him a mediation with politics is not simple, first, since politics includes, among other things, examinations of the good life, the power of ethical argumentation, and obligation. Second, the nature of speech is complicated by numerous issues of logic, meaning, convention, intelligibility, and so on. In this context, a reference to politics is merely crude if, for example, it construes 'speech' to include poetry but cannot allow for the distinctiveness of poetic validity and its characteristic construction of social order. Yet the conception of figurative language proposed in Butterworth's interpretation seems guilty of just that crudity. It seems to think of poetry merely as formulating speech in 'such a manner that it produces
IMITATIONS OF THINGS WE SEE AROUND US – ACTIONS AS WELL AS ARTIFACTS – AND PRESENTS THEM IN A MANNER THAT MOVES US TO DESIRE AND RUSH TOWARDS THEM OR TO FLEE AND AVOID THEM.34 BUT THE LATTER CLAIM IS A REDUCTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHILOSOPHERS’ EXPLANATION OF THE WORKINGS OF POETIC LANGUAGE. MOST IMPORTANTLY, AGAIN, BUTTERWORTH’S INTERPRETATION LEAVES OUT OF CONSIDERATION THE CENTRAL PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION OF THE LOGICAL VALIDITY OF POETIC MEANING: HOW POETRY IS CAPABLE OF PROVIDING A MATERIAL THAT CAN BE BROUGHT TO SYLLOGISTIC FORMS. FOR POETIC REPRESENTATIONS TO LEAD US TO ACT, THEY WOULD STILL HAVE TO BE FOUND MEANINGFUL AS POETIC REPRESENTATIONS – OR ELSE THEIR POETIC CHARACTER WOULD BE MERELY ACCIDENTAL TO THE ALLEGED POWER OF REPRESENTATIONS TO MOTIVATE US – AND THAT REQUIRES US TO EXPLAIN HOW POETIC ‘REPRESENTATIONS’ CAN HAVE THESE VALID MEANINGS. BUTTERWORTH’S REDUCTION PREVENTS US FROM SHOWING HOW THE RATIOCINATIVE ELEMENT OF POETRY OPERATES OR THE CENTRAL ROLE THE PHILOSOPHERS GIVE TO PLEASURE AND WONDER IN CONSTITUTING VALID POETIC RESPONSE.

The interpretation of poetry in terms of its power to move us may coincide in a few respects with some features of Alfarabi’s analysis of poetry and meaning, as we shall see, but even the latter is much more sophisticated than this description suggests, and in Butterworth’s interpretation poetry does not even approach the scope that Avicenna and Averroës give to poetic value and meaning, and hence to its mediation with politics. For them, poetry constituted a distinctive aspect of social being and, if poetic thought and language informed social interaction, they did so in a way that cannot obviously be subsumed within the rhetorical use of language in public discourse. Pointing to its part in a rhetorical ploy may explain why we create poetry; a psychological explanation of the workings of poetic language may even orient a study of the rhetorical uses we might make of imaginative products, and thereby contribute to a taxonomy of rhetorical devices used in political and public discourse. But, again, describing the rhetorical use of poetry says nothing about what makes the product of imagination meaningful and valid as poetry in the first place. Where issues of community and the relation between agents in society became salient, the philosophers did not seek to reduce poetical value to its political or moral role. For them, before we understand the political associations given to poetry, we must understand the action that results from the meaning affirmed in a poetic syllogism. We must have a philosophically defensible account of what makes for a successful poetic syllogism before we can associate its syllogism with action or, next, action with a particular political value which, itself, stands in need of a defence of its validity.35

Moreover, talk of the relation of speech to politics seems to be a reductive variation on the Classical relation between truth and goodness. While Aristotle makes clear the political role of ethics,36 that relation does not appear in Butterworth’s account. Consequently, his proposal is reductive because, by contrast with his assumptions, goodness is more than politics alone, and truth much more than speech alone. We may understand goodness as ‘justice’, a central ethical and social concept in Islam, and think of the search for truth as occurring in public discourse in a just polity. By contrast, Butterworth’s proposed
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relation of politics to speech compounds the initial reduction of goodness and justice to politics alone by dissolving the search for truth in public discourse into issues of speech. Talk of mere ‘speech’ introduces issues of the linguistic and grammatical rules of language without bringing in questions of the logical and philosophical validity of thought. At best it relies upon an unargued assumption about the priority of rhetoric, so far as this governs speech, within the scheme of a goodness and justice now reduced to politics.

Third, then, Butterworth misconstrues the philosophers’ concern for philosophy and logic when he emphasises speech. The claim that De Interpretatione ‘is viewed as showing how nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech are to be combined into propositions having different significations’, does not adequately grasp that most of what Aristotle says there does not depend on the special theory about words, thoughts, and things that is also suggested in the text. And emphasising speech and its parts fails to indicate the philosophical nature of the text and its issues. Among the latter, arguments for the conventional nature of language and speech were of considerable interest to Arabic commentators, but their interest in language did not allow a concern for speech to displace philosophy. The philosophers distinguished logic, as ‘the art’ of ‘right thinking’, from grammar, as the art of correct expression in speech in particular languages; and they associated intelligible meanings with logic. Part of their intention was to use Aristotle’s formalised logic to examine issues arising in their own lives. Speech was obviously important to this context, but the Arab Aristotelians maintained that a study of speech and language was the concern of grammarians. This needs further explanation.

A description of the Arab Aristotelian’s work that fails to observe the important distinction between grammar and logic will not adequately grasp what they sought to do. For example, in his essay ‘Concerning the Difference between Philosophical Logic and Arabic Grammar’, Ibn al Adi explains that grammar deals with speech and spoken statements while logic concerns intelligible meaning. Both logic and grammar are kinds of art, which we define by reference to their subject matter and goals. The subject matter of the art of Arabic grammar is sounds, regardless of whether these carry meanings, and its goal is the arrangement of these sounds and inflections according to conventions of Arabic speech. Intelligible meanings lie outside the scope of this art of grammar. We may construct grammatically correct sentences, but this does not by itself generate meanings, for a grammatically correct sentence can be ambiguous or meaningless. Meanings are the domain of logic. Even if grammarians have arrogated to themselves the task of legislating over meanings, and though we may provide historical explanations of their attempts to do so, the move is not justified by the validity or scope of grammar. For this art does not include meanings among its materials or its goal. Only by misunderstanding the nature of art generally, by confusing the distinction between the subject matter and goals that constitute arts generally, can grammarians lay claim to dealing with meanings.
In a parallel argument in the ‘Introductory Risalah on Logic’, Alfārabi defines logic as ‘the art which includes the things which lead the rational faculty towards right thinking, whenever there is the possibility of error, and which indicates all the safeguards against error, wherever a conclusion is to be known by the intellect’. And he differentiates grammar from logic as follows: the status of logic ‘in relation to the intellect is the status of the art of grammar in relation to language, and just as the science of grammar rectifies the language among people for whose language the grammar has been made, so the science of logic rectifies the intellect, so that it intellects only what is right where there is a possibility of error. Thus, the relation of the science of grammar to the language and the expressions is as the relation of the science of logic to the intellect and the intelligibles, and just as grammar is the touchstone of language where there is the possibility of error of language in regard to the method of expression, so the science of logic is the touchstone of the intellect where there is the possibility of an error in regard to the intelligibles’. Logic deals with the propositional content of utterances and the relations we assert between objects and events.

In other texts Alfārabi confirms that grammar is the principal object of a science of language that governs the uses of expressions – speech and writing – in a linguistic community, and is a matter of historical and social principles. Grammar governs linguistic rules, setting out how we must use the language in which we express ourselves and the order and relation between words. But grammar does not legislate over meanings – over the intelligible content conveyed by utterances in any language: perfectly grammatical sentences may be unintelligible. Only logic grasps meanings, and Alfārabi holds that the logic of intelligible meanings is basic to thought and reason, and, therefore, common to all human beings. And he argues further that as meanings are determined by logic, grammar and language must always find their final arbiter in logic so far as meaningful communication between human beings is concerned. Hence, for Alfārabi, there may be a parallel, but there are also important distinctions between grammar and logic.

Parallel arguments can be found in the work of Avicenna and Averroës. The importance of the distinction between ‘expression’ and ‘logic’ suggests that Butterworth’s account is weakened by its emphasis on speech over logic and deliberation. And given these weaknesses, his interpretation is inadequate to the philosophical concerns of the Poetics as a part of the Oeconom. Indeed, recent work on Aristotle’s Poetics shows the numerous philosophical issues raised by the text and how far it is successful. By comparison with these recent works, the description of the Poetics as made up of ‘Aristotle’s reflections on the poetry known to him’ seems grossly inadequate. The description may result from a long-standing tendency to treat the works of Arabic Aristotelians as part of an history of ideas rather than as texts whose arguments may be successful or unsuccessful and from whose formulations of issues we may still learn. That tendency seems to assume that the history of this philosophy has reached its end, that it is an obsolete machine, now only of antiquarian interest. Such an approach usually
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This page places scholarship, in the sense of translation and editing, at the centre of gravity because it lacks interest in philosophical argumentation for itself. As such it must be inadequate to the philosophers and their work.

In any case, the discussion in this section shows that its philosophical context is an important factor determining the reception of the *Poetics* by Arabic Aristotelians. The distinction between logic and grammar, where the latter governs speech and expression in particular languages but does not establish the validity of meanings, is crucial to this explanation of issues drawn from the *Poetics*. We will examine that distinction further in the next section, in part to clarify the nature of logical validity.

*Alfarabi, logic, language*

If the philosophers are right, grammar fails to justify meanings. Logic and grammar are the only modes of justification usually proposed. Therefore, arguably, if we cannot justify poetic meanings logically, then poetry is a merely subjective and arbitrary exercise which fails to provide valid meanings. A response to a poem will become similar to liking or disliking the taste of apples: it has no validity and is not open to argument. As a result, the entire process of appreciating poems, or sharing them with a community of listeners and writers, will become vacuous. But if we accept the philosophers’ claim, and reject the grammatical validity of poetry, then we must discover a logical justification for poetry and its meanings. Thereby we can show that poetry has validity – that the process of writing and communicating poetry is rule-governed, meaningful, and not arbitrary.

Grammar and linguistic structure allegedly provided the standard for deciding whether a poem had a valid meaning and was a poem at all, and we need to examine whether it can play that role. Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes hold that logic deals with intelligible meanings, and is basic to thought and reason. They also contend that adequate analysis of any occasion where grammar seems to validate meaning will show that ultimately only logic justifies valid meanings.

This distinction between logic and grammar rests on a deeper conflict over conceptions of method and explanation. The grammarian and linguistic analysis of meanings emerged from the study of the Quran and its language. It sought to justify the validity of grammatical and linguistic structures by explaining that the rules of these structures are ‘drawn from four sources – imitation, tradition, limited lists, and free analogy’. Some practitioners sought to justify uses of language and meaning by identifying some uses of language as exemplary models and then showing the analogies between a particular use and the exemplary model, or tracing elements of contemporary usage back to those original models, or showing a consensus among contemporary users of the language about the correctness of a particular use, or relying on all of these procedures. Grammarians propose that we misunderstand such analysis of language if we think of it only as a listing of linguistic devices and themes, for this method *exhibits*
the validity of linguistic usage, and is an exercise in philosophical argument as much as it is an analysis of particular meanings.\textsuperscript{51}

Grammarians claim to clarify the validity and sense of meanings by tracing meanings back to their origins, showing how they are analogous to exemplary usages, and the consensus found in our response to them. In other words, the analysis does more than merely work out a set of linguistic rules for understanding meaning; rather, it constitutes meaning by exhibiting the nature of discourse deployed in particular instances. It examines successful utterances and expressions to see what in their grammatical and linguistic structure makes them valuable. The grammarians and linguists display the nature of language and its meanings generally through the study of how particular uses are meaningful.\textsuperscript{55}

At first the logicist and grammarians construals of thought and intelligibles do not seem entirely opposed to each other.\textsuperscript{56} Both think intelligibles are the warrant of meanings. But it soon becomes clear that they differ in access to intelligibles that each allows to language. We may set out this conflict by examining Alfarabi's discussion, for he rejects the grammarians' claim, maintaining not only that the intelligible meanings are not conventional and that they follow the rules of logic, but also that where language deals with intelligible meanings, there it follows the rules of grammar and logic.\textsuperscript{57} He argues that 'the meanings of expressions are joined in the soul in the same way that expressions are joined in language; the union of their meanings in the soul resembles the union of expressions in a language'.\textsuperscript{56} The suggestion is that if our ordinary speech and writing are meaningful, then conventional language, governed by grammatical rules, must correspond with the meanings composed in the soul, that are common to all rational beings and governed by logic. Thus, to convey meanings, conventional linguistic expressions and their structure must grasp and replicate the logical structure of intelligible meanings. However, given that he thinks conventional languages differ in their structure while logic does not, Alfarabi must explain how language gains access to intelligible meanings or, in other terms, how grammar relates to logic such that the basis of meaning lies in logic not in expressions.\textsuperscript{59}

To begin with, Alfarabi writes that 'its name [logic] is derived from reason, articulate speech'.\textsuperscript{60} This art 'gives rules to the rational faculty for the interior speech which is the intelligibles, and rules shared in common by all languages for the exterior speech which is the expression, and directs the rational faculty in both matters at once towards what is right and protects it from error in both of them together. ... Grammar shares with it to some extent and differs from it also, because grammar gives rules only for the expressions which are peculiar to a [particular] nation and to the people who use the language, whereas logic gives rules for the expressions which are common to all languages'.\textsuperscript{61} The distinction between grammar and logic has a deeper source: 'Had man been given his expressions by nature they would all be the same for all communities, just as the thoughts [the intelligibles] expressed by different languages are the same with all communities, and just as the same objects which these thoughts are thoughts of
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are also common to all communities'. But, as it happens, expressions are conventional, not a part of natural philosophy, and their grammatical correctness need not result in meaningful communication.

Second, speech and writing relate to logic not just as exterior to interior but also as expression and meaning. Alfarabi alludes to the relation between logic and grammar by once again presenting this relation between language and meanings. For example, 'combination [of intelligibles] in the soul parallels affirmation in speech; separation in the soul parallels negation in speech'. Again the suggestion is that since language is conventional and contingent, it communicates meanings by using the linguistic tools appropriate to its linguistic community. It corresponds to meanings, its sentences replicate logical and meaningful relations as these exist in the soul, and the laws governing its sentence structures parallel the laws of logic as these govern intelligible meanings.

By this account, the laws of logic govern all intelligible meanings, while grammar governs the expressions of any single language being used to convey those meanings within a linguistic community. However, since language attempts to parallel and convey intelligible meanings, which logic governs, we may expect that logic will also govern language so far as the latter is intelligible. If logic governs meanings, which are common to all rational human beings, it must also govern the expressions of particular languages, and their grammatical rules, because it governs the intelligible meanings expressed grammatically. Grammar cannot tell us anything of the relation between intelligibles. We correct errors in expression by examining how their use has changed rather than by comparing them with the relation between intelligibles. But their sense depends on their ability to convey meanings, and the latter depends on logic. If the grammar of a language does not satisfy the requirements of logic, the language will be meaningless even if its sentences are grammatically correct. But this raises the issue of just how logic governs language and its expressions. In other words, the relation of grammar to logic may now be construed in terms of the latter, which Alfarabi addresses in his Commentary on Aristotle's De Interpretatione (and in other texts).

Third, for Alfarabi language is merely a vehicle for conveying meanings. Consequently, 'communication is essentially a logical activity, not a linguistic one ... [Thus] as long as [language] is capable of performing this function [of being the vehicle for communicating intelligibles] it is kept in use. When it fails, the necessary adjustments must be made. The need for adjustment and the kind of adjustment to be affected are to be determined by logic'. It seems that logic governs language and its structure in particular ways. 'The only thing that expressions of all languages have in common is that they are various expressions that are capable of conveying the same meanings'.

Logic determines linguistic expressions in two ways. In the first we examine the circumstances which must be satisfied for them to signify intelligibles. For example, expressions may signify misleadingly because the argument forms are wrongly taken as demonstrative when they are rhetorical, sophistical, or poetic.
In the second way of studying logic, as we saw, we suppose that expressions 'imitat[e] thoughts ... Complex expressions here take the place of complex thoughts, since similar expressions attach to them ... Principally, the purpose is to explain the composition of thoughts. But since thoughts are difficult to grasp, Aristotle substitutes for them expressions which signify them and studies their composition instead ... [and discusses] as much of the similarity between them as is necessary'.

Together, these two modes suggest that logic not only examines the structure of propositions but also ensures that their arguments have a real basis. Since logic examines the correctness of expressions when they denote and articulate intelligible meanings, it guards against error in grasping the truth. It provides the laws necessary for 'straightening' the mind, because by forming propositions it identifies the starting point for any inquiry, examines its basis and methods, and clarifies the conditions for securing conviction. To establish whether expressions are representations of real objects, we rely on perception. In combination with the rules and order of logic, our expression of intelligibles provides an account of the epistemological status of our experiences. Grammar is contingent, so far as diverse languages and usages in linguistic communities are means for conveying meaning. Logic provides the rules for assessing a language and its community because, if language communicates meaningfully, it must satisfy the logical order and relations relevant to intelligibles. Moreover, logic alone provides certain knowledge. All this allows it to assess what makes the theoretical and practical arts valid and also warrants the conclusions of inquiry.

Finally, Alfarabi shows that the linguist's method depends on logic. The linguists sought to trace meanings back to their origins in the linguistic tradition to discover analogies with accepted usage, or to show there was an existing consensus about meaningful uses of language. We identify putative linguistic rules and analyse their significant similarities to given and original principles of grammar. We discover these given principles by examining the range of language use to abstract its determining rules. Further, these rules, being conventions, work so far as they are accepted, so far as they participate in a consensus involving the language community. Alfarabi analyses these criteria of the grammatical method to show that they are successful only in ways defined and justified by logic.

Alfarabi first explains that inductive arguments are or have the force of syllogisms. A property ascribed to objects of any one kind must be present in all or most objects of that kind, and we rely on investigation of objects to discover the presence or absence of this property generally. Further, we can validate an inductive generalisation only if we can fit our observations and conclusions into a syllogistic form. These factors together are necessary to the grammarian's analysis. To explain: grammarians propose that we investigate language and abstract grammatical rules from ordinary usage by means of 'observation, scrutiny, reflection, and industry'. We use observation, reflection, and scrutiny to trace contemporary usage back to an origin in or analogy with the pattern of Classical usage and thereby justify its present use. However, this shows that the
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inductive argument form is basic to the search for original models and, consequently, foundational for the grammarian justification of language use. This is because all scrutiny, observation, and reflection that trace any usages back to their origins rely on inductive procedures. For example, to trace back a particular usage we must sift through examples of speech and usage to discover (to 'abstract') the rules that structure language; only then can we follow a rule back to its origin in some preferred model. But such abstraction depends on inductively generalizing over a number of cases to identify that structural feature of language. In other words, the grammarian method of tracing the original itself stands in need of induction to justify the process of abstraction that, based on observation, scrutiny and reflection, produces the rules we trace to their origin. Induction, with its basis in the syllogistic form, is fundamental to the grammarian's method of justifying any usage by tracing it to its original in a preferred and accepted model.

Similarly, logic is fundamental to other aspects of the grammarian method. In some cases, these aspects include the use of analogy and consensus. Analogy could require the grammarian to discern and follow similarities. If a new use resembles or is analogous to an accepted use, then it is permissible for the reasons that justify the accepted usage. Unfortunately, analogy is undisciplined and does not serve an argument by itself: any number of similarities may exist between things, not all of which may be relevant to justifying a permissible use. To justify the significant analogy we need criteria that show which analogies are relevant, which can be ignored, and in what respect analogies permit ascribing to one object characteristics which belong to another. Here, again, Alfarabi maintains that logic shows us how to explain which analogies are relevant. 76

Take the case of two objects, X and Y, which have a common feature A. Suppose also that X has a property S. From these two claims we might be tempted to argue by analogy or transference that since X and Y are similar in possessing A, and as S is present in X, therefore S is present in Y. However, clearly the argument by transference or analogy cannot succeed in this form. Common possession of one characteristic A does not warrant the claim that both X and Y must also possess another similarity S unless we can set out why A and S are related so that possession of A will imply possession of S. In Alfarabi's words, 'If we are determined to have the "transfer" be correct, then it is necessary that the "matter" which is similar to the two [compared] objects be investigated'. But, he goes on to explain, it turns out that when we justify a transfer we first investigate objects and discover the relation between two objects and their properties that, second, allows us to say that the rules applying to the one must also apply to the other because of their analogy. Here the argument by analogy is a syllogism with a universal premise, whereby 'the force of this [inference] becomes [the same as] the force of the arrangement of the syllogism in the first figure'. Wherever an argument by analogy is valid, there the inference is a syllogistic one; and conversely where we cannot construct a syllogism, there the argument by analogy 'is an invalid inference'. 77 In other words, we can make inferences based
on relevant similarities just where the inference in fact has a syllogistic form: so a successful argument by analogy is a disguised syllogism. Where the purported inference fails to be or cannot be expressed as a syllogism, there the analogy is wild and no criteria of relevance seem to operate: consequently, the transfer or analogy is invalid.

Alfarabi sets out his case as follows. Argument by analogy or ‘transference’ occurs for example when one knows by sensation that some corporeal substance, like the animals and similar things, are created, and consequently the intellect transfers the createdness from the animals or plants, and thus judges about the sky and the stars that they are [also] created. But it is only possible that one can ‘transfer’ [createdness] from the animals to the sky, and thus to impute to it [viz. the sky] the createdness which was found by sensation in the animals if the animals and the sky exhibit a similarity; and not just any agreeing similarity at all, but a similarity in some matter that is relevant to the characterisation of the animals as created. That is, there must be a similarity between the animals and the sky in a matter which lends truth to the judgment that createdness pertains to this entire matter, such as ‘being contingent’, for example. For if it is known by sensation that animals are created and that they are similar to the sky in respect of being ‘contingent’, and [if] the judgment regarding createdness is true about everything that is ‘contingent’, then the ‘transfer’ of createdness from the animals to the sky will be a true one. But if the judgment that it is created is not [assumed as] true of everything ‘contingent’, and the sky is ‘contingent’, then it is not possible [to make] the ‘transference’ [of createdness] from the animals to the sky, before [it has been shown that] it is possible that createdness actually exists in everything ‘contingent’. [The ‘transfer’] is bound to the condition which draws [the conclusion about] the sky from the similarity with the animals in a matter relating to the createdness of the animals; because createdness is only found as something actually present in animals due to a connection with ‘being contingent’, through some special form of connection. This form of connection is not to be found in [the case of] the sky. Therefore, when the situation is of this kind, there it is not possible at all for the ‘transfer’ to be maintained. . . . If we are determined to have the ‘transfer’ be correct, then it is necessary that the matter which is similar in the two [compared] objects be investigated. The judgment regarding the createdness of the totality is correct when everything ‘contingent’ is created. [For then] if the sky is similar to the animals in being ‘contingent’, then it necessarily follows that the sky is created. The force of the [inference] becomes [the same as] the force of the arrangement of the syllogism in the first figure, namely: “The sky is ‘contingent’, and everything ‘contingent’ is created, therefore it follows that the sky is created”. Once again it appears that we must assess a feature of the grammarian’s method by reference to logic in order to guarantee its success.

A parallel case can be made for requiring consensus to have a syllogistic form. Syllogisms are ‘employed either in discoursing with another or in a man’s bringing about something in his own mind’. Employing a syllogism brings
about a state of mind of conviction as a result of ordering and thinking through propositions. Given that ‘a syllogism is a body of discourse made up of premises so constituted that if conjoined there follows from them, essentially and not by accident, some other different thing as the outcome’, where the outcome is a consequence or conclusion, we may expect that the state of mind which results from discoursing about or thinking through a syllogism is identical with the conclusion of a syllogism. In other words, the state of mind of conviction is a result of arriving at a conclusion of a syllogism in discourse or thought.

Further, the five syllogistic arts of philosophy, dialectic, sophistry, rhetoric, and poetry use logic, ‘which give[s] in each one of the syllogistic arts the special rules by which each one of them is constituted’, ensuring that any resulting state of mind is common to all subjects who engage in the activity of rational discourse. Consequently, in these arts logic ensures that consensus or agreement to warranted conclusions arises from right thinking in syllogisms. And we could argue here that the grammarians’ sense of consensus consists of agreement for right reasons among subjects in a community. Or, perhaps more accurately, consensus could depend on right reason when it follows from examining analogies and tracing origins. And, if so, since both the latter depend on logic, consensus too must ultimately be justified by logic.

However, grammarians could see consensus as a procedure for validating claims about meanings and reasoning independently of origins and analogies with accepted usages. Then consensus would not depend on right reasons so much as on right persons, and on agreement between them in the community of believers. We turn to the community when the procedure of tracing origins and analogies fails to provide sufficiently strong evidence for any particular conclusion. But even here the consensus does not clearly escape logic. We may expect that this kind of consensus is open to change, depending on the membership of the community or the issues it faces, so that consensus is not proposed as a basis for some ultimate truth. Further, where the community proposes to accept certain principles of action and belief on the basis of consensus, presumably the choice of its members is not simply arbitrary but is based on reasons – in which case again logic will be central. Conversely, if the choice is not based on reason, its validity is questionable. In all these cases, reason as logic seems to provide the standard by which to assess consensus.

Nor is it clear that a non-rational consensus can be successful. A community of believers may have a non-rational basis, because belief does not possess cognitive certainty, yet its basis in the community members’ commitment to their beliefs may warrant its validity. Unfortunately, this claim does not work as it stands. It assumes that commitment to a set of beliefs will guarantee the kind of unity necessary for consensus. But the kinds of commitment members have can vary, and will determine whether and what kind of relation obtains between subjects. Indeed, perhaps the best way to provide a sustainable consensus, we may argue, is by seeking a rational coherence between the beliefs which members adhere to, and the actions they consequently perform.
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In any case, in its actual use, it seems, although 'the legal theory of the ancient schools of law was dominated by the idea of consensus', consensus followed from the pursuit of original accepted usages and their analogies. As final arbitrator consensus consisted of agreeing or disagreeing with evidence discovered through the best, most complete tracing of accepted usages and the most competent elaboration of analogies. Since the latter depends on logic, consensus also depends on logic.

By this account, then, the grammarian's reliance on tradition, analogy, and consensus is grounded in and justified by logic. All those procedures in which the grammarian's method is successful are also successful in logic, whereas where claims are logically invalid, there the grammarian's method for attaining intelligible meanings and truths also fails. Logic shows why the grammarian's conclusions about meaning are justified. Analogies, origins in accepted usages, and consensus work to provide valid conclusions, and where these conclusions are valid, logic proves their soundness.

This examination of grammar and logic has implications also for some recent work on poetics, which we shall explain in the next section.

Logic and literary criticism

The grammarian's analysis of language applies also to poetry and prose. It explains the success of poetry by reference to linguistic devices rather than simply in terms of feelings, non-linguistic imagery, or psychological mechanisms. Issues raised by the grammatical or linguistic conception of poetics – the validity of poetic utterances, the nature of satisfactory explanations, the role of the subject, the power of poetry, and its construction of a community – were central to the work of Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës. And although the Arab Aristotle handled these issues in a distinctive way, the stage was set for them by the literary critics' method of grammatical and linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, despite their debt to the literary critics, an understanding of the work of the Arab Aristotelians must avoid confusing logic with grammar.

This caveat has not always been observed by recent literary critics, who have been misled into ascribing grammar (in a particular understanding) a power it cannot claim. A grammarian or linguistic account of the validity of literary works faces a number of difficulties of its own, in addition to the ones that became apparent in the comparison with logic. These difficulties include, first, that it fails to explain how critics determine the value of the exemplary models in the first instance. Second, it does not recognise that the three criteria of identifying analogies with exemplary models, tracing contemporary usages back to their origins, and relying on a consensus, may conflict with each other. Third, it fails to take its practitioners beyond mere linguistic validity, restricted to particular languages, on to logic: only logic can justify the validity of meanings in poetic language. While not all these criticisms will show conclusively that literary poetics is impossible, they are difficulties that make alternative accounts more attractive, especially the alternatives suggested in the third criticism.
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To expand on the first criticism: Critics need some explanation of what makes a work exemplary, what allows us to see it as embodying all the fine qualities which mark it out as a model for others to follow. If there are any rules at work here, if we expect that there is a consistency in our response to these works, then we may expect to set out what this consistency consists in, where the occurrence of certain features in the object or of particular reactions in the subject's link with the object, lead to an appreciation of the work. This is what a linguistic account of poetry and its meanings was supposed to provide, from which others might draw out analogies, trace origins, and establish consensus. But the latter procedures do not justify the initial appraisal of the aesthetic object, for they only go to justify a claim that another object shares significant features with the exemplary instance. For example, whereas the Quran could claim a divine authority for itself, which gave a particular credence to its exemplary models, examples of good poetry lack such awesome backing, and have to find some other basis for the exemplarity they claim. If the appreciation of poetry is not to rely on divine backing nor to degenerate into a merely irrational set of preferences, then any critic who proposes to privilege some poems as exemplary models would have to explain the criteria that supported this valuation. But then, those criteria would be independent of the exemplary models, in that they would be general rules that could be applied elsewhere, and the critic would have to be able to accept that any object that satisfied the given criteria must be aesthetically valuable just because it satisfied those criteria. Yet this possibility does not sit well with the intuition that motivated the critic to rely on the exemplary model in the first place, which maintained that aesthetic value resides in the given and accepted models. The use of models was necessary because this embodiment of value was the only means of gaining access to poetic value. Any abstraction from or description of poetic value could fail to grasp the value embodied in an exemplary work, and therefore would be less reliable than an experience and appreciation of the example itself. But the consequence of this immediacy of appreciation is that we do not have clear criteria for judging the validity of a work.

There is in any case a difficulty with relying on given models, which may be exemplary for a number of different and perhaps incompatible reasons. Any rules derived from them will be commensurately incongruent with each other, and will not clearly yield serviceable rules for distinguishing valuable examples. Similarly, the three criteria for validity are not always compatible. For example, as we pointed out, the models may be exemplary for diverse and incongruent reasons. But in addition to the conflict there may be between the criteria constituting the exemplary models, there are also uncertainties about the use of consensus and analogy. An example of poetry may enjoy a consensus about its value; the criteria of analogy then allows validity to other similar examples; but the notion of analogy is wild and can cover any similarity, thereby easily making consensus impossible because the analogies are increasingly remote or attenuated. Now, the possibility of this conflict between analogy and consensus
calls for some criteria by which to distinguish relevant similarities from etiolated connections; but any criteria that succeed in establishing the distinction will also determine when a consensus is permissible or justified. Consequently, consensus cannot be the basis for poetic value and meaning but must depend on some other more fundamental features. Moreover, consensus itself can be arbitrary; and it may change: people can disagree about an example that was previously thought exemplary. On the other hand, if the consensus is not arbitrary, it must have some criteria, which again raises the issues set out above, about the priority of criteria over particular examples.

There is also a deeper question attaching to the original claim to validity: its justification fails if it is grounded only in language rather than in logic. Because it borrowed from the practices of Hellenic philosophy, these poetic theories gained considerable authority. Even the study of philology in that context has only recently emerged from the dominance of grammatical analysis and the criticisms that thinkers such as Avicenna or Ibn Tammieyya were taken to level against philological analysis. In particular, the study of poetic value has been the almost exclusive provenance of linguistic analysis. Yet, since the Arab Hellenic philosophers argued that linguistic analysis itself depended on logic as the basis of reasoning, they maintained that any full understanding of the power of poetic and figurative language needs to supplement the usual literary analysis of particular works by a philosophical study of the nature of poetic and figurative language, value, and its implications.

The two kinds of analysis, linguistic and philosophical, need not contradict each other. But the attempt to substitute grammatical or linguistic for logical analysis leads to an inadequate grasp of the issues that motivated the Arab Aristotelian philosophers. Indeed, a failure to understand the distinction between these poetic theories and the philosophical poetics that the Hellenic Arabic philosophers developed in their studies of Aristotle’s Poetics can lead to highly questionable claims about poetic value.

In order to develop this distinction between the needs of logic and language, we may pursue the claims one literary critic has made about the nature of poetic language. Instead of examining the arguments philosophers used to justify the logical validity of poetic language, the literary theorist contends, first, that the philosophers’ distinction between logic and language is an ‘extreme’ position. The object of analysis of both literary theorists and philosophers ‘was the poetic statement . . . , that is language, as is seen in the attention given by Alfarabi and [Avicenna] to the correct use of language, even though their chief concern was to demonstrate the status of poetry as a logical art’. Both ‘philosophers and linguists [emphasised] language, which in order to be effective in conveying meanings, must be correctly employed, whether in a grammatical or a logical sense’. Second, rather than accept that the Aristotelians sought a logical justification of the universality claimed for poetic language, the theorist says ‘I would argue instead that the ... Aristotelians assumed poetry’s logical status, and set out to demonstrate how it operated’. Third, Avicenna’s theory ‘is entirely in
keeping with the affectivist poetics of Arabic, which is not based on representation but on conventions which encode a "reality" that is itself a construct of language, and in which the focus is on the speaker, whose correct and eloquent expression moves the audience to assent. The latter point goes with the claims that the commentators 'lyricized the Poetics in accordance with their own tradition' and that the philosophers' 'primary focus was on the expressive and affective potential of the statement'.

Even the few quotations we cited at the beginning of this chapter show that this literary critic's hypotheses are incongruent with what the Arab commentators say of the role of logic, of themselves, and of their understanding of Aristotle. The suggestion that the philosophers were not interested in arriving at general conclusions about poetic meaning because they were concerned with particular languages and how these 'encoded a "reality"' contradicts the clear insistence by Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës on a distinction between the general principles of rational thought, including poetic meaning, on the one hand, and the specifics of a particular language, on the other. The philosophers examine the logical rules that are 'common to all or most people', not just particular to some one language. Similarly, another claim by the critic, that the commentators 'lyricised' the Poetics, seems at best to miss the point that the commentators clearly espoused a distinction between the logical status of poetic language, whose nature they address in their commentaries, and other features of poetry such as lyric and melody which, as we saw above, they leave out of consideration in their analyses.

For the critic to reject the emphasis on logic by saying that 'most poetic systems ... are founded on lyric, and are affective-expressive rather than mimetic' is, first, highly questionable so far as it ignores, among other things, the role given to poetry in generating conviction about certain truths. Second, it does not work as a criticism of the Arab Aristotelians because for them poetry, whether affective-emotive or mimetic, must depend on logic for its meaning and power. The affective power of poetry depends on its meanings, on the associations between terms; and since the philosophers maintained that such meaning had a logical validity, their position implies that any affective-emotive or mimetic power of poetic and figurative language depended on the (logical) validity of its meanings. At the same time, the philosophers recognise the role of language and such features as lyric and melody; nevertheless their principal concern is with logic rather than language because they see its logical status as the key to understanding the operation and power of poetic language.

In this context, talk of 'encoding' reality is useless unless it allows for meaningful poetic language. The structuralist and semiotic approach, to which this vocabulary of 'encoding' is usual, faces a number of problems. Among other things, talk of 'encoding "reality"' faces a considerable difficulty in explaining how any encoding in language bears reference to reality at all.

Nor do the critic's other objections fare much better. As we have already suggested, and as the following chapters will consider in some detail, in calling for a distinctive account of justification and validity the philosophers
distinguished the needs of logic from those of linguistic and grammatical analysis. It is a misnomer to say, as the critic does, that only an ‘extreme’ viewpoint seeks to make this distinction. Describing ‘Adl’s position, and by inference that of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës, as ‘extreme’ suggests that it falls at one end along some scale where, according to some more moderate view, there is no need to distinguish logic from grammar. By that understanding, ‘the object of both [grammarians and philosophers], in their discussions of poetry, was the poetic statement (not “the poem”), that is, language, . . .’ and this somehow is supposed to make the distinction between logic and grammar otiose. But this conflation of the two projects on the ground that they have the same object merely fails even to acknowledge that the participants in the two projects disagreed sharply over what justifies the meaningfulness of any use of language.

The same conflation is at work in saying that ‘philosophers and linguists emphasised that language must be correctly employed, whether in a grammatical or a logical sense’. This is true to the extent that meaning and correct grammar are both necessary to expression and utterance in any particular language; but correctness in the two cases depends on very distinctive considerations: philosophers denied that the linguists’ analyses were satisfactory explanations of meaning. Indeed, the distinction of logic from grammar is so fundamental to the Aristotelians that it seems perverse to maintain that any of them identified the logical status of poetic statements with the grammatical analysis of poetic expressions in a particular language. The philosophers maintained that poetry was meaningful in a way parallel to cognitive utterances and must similarly depend on logic. Any formal or informal reasoning, to be meaningful and coherent, must use logic; and logic addresses a different set of considerations from those that engage grammar. The distinction between them is a qualitative one, in this consideration, and not one that is ‘extreme’ by comparison with some unexplained ‘moderate’ position in which the two are continuous. To say that the distinction between language and logic ‘is an extreme one’ simply fails to understand the distinctive validity Aristotelians claimed for each. The critic then merely compounds this error by proposing without qualification that the object of analysis of both literary theorists and philosophers ‘was the poetic statement, . . . that is language’.95

Another issue raised by the critic is as follows. We saw that linguistic analysis sought to show that the form and order of particular works, the tropes used, their development in words, etc., instantiated the mechanism used in aesthetically valuable exemplary works. Leaving aside the difficulties inherent in such validation, it appeared that the task of critics was to show how particular works were valuable because they used and developed the proven linguistic forms. By contrast, because they were influenced by Aristotle, the philosophers Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës sought a logical universality for poetry that they thought literary poetics lacked because it depended on grammar. In opposition the last, the literary critic sets out her position by saying that ‘I would argue instead that the Arab Aristotelians simply assumed poetry’s logical status, and set out to demonstrate
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how it operated'. This contention is sophistry masquerading as tough contention. Difficulties with it begin as soon as we try to understand what it means. The contention may describe a procedure: the philosophers first hypothesised (assumed) that people were right to find poetic language valid and then sought to justify (demonstrate) that assumption by analysing and arguing for the logical status of poetic language. In other words, they first identified the conclusion they wanted to reach and then considered arguments to justify the claim. If this is the case, then the proposed contrast between seeking to demonstrate or prove and assuming the logical status of poetry is mere sophistry. It says that as a first step in a usual procedure of proving validity the philosophers hypothesised that poetry was logically valid and then sought to prove that validity. But since this description of their procedure acknowledges the need to justify the logical status of poetic meaning on the basis of which people found it valid (in the sense that they supposed that all other subjects could understand and appreciate works), the description is uncontentious, and does not warrant the critic’s dissenting tone of voice.

Perhaps, then, we need to look for another explanation of the criticism. It may be that the critic intends ‘demonstration’ in two different senses: that is, she may be drawing a contrast between, on the one hand, demonstrating the sense of arguing for a conclusion from some more basic premise and, on the other hand, demonstrating in the sense of proving the validity of a poetic language and then displaying (or demonstrating) its similarity to exemplary cases. For the critic, then, arguing for the validity of poetic language generally contrasts with exhibiting the validity of particular poems. But this interpretation of the criticism does not make it much more illuminating. If proposed as a contrast between the Arab Aristotelian philosophers and the grammarians, it is useless since both thought that poetic and figurative language had validity and both sought to justify it. If either thought validity were impossible, they would not have sought to justify it. Second, if ‘demonstration’ means ‘exhibition’ or ‘to display’, then the critic’s contention would have to be that, where the ‘chief concern [of Alfarabi and Avicenna] was to demonstrate the status of poetry as a logical art’, there they intended that this demonstration be a matter of exhibiting analogies with or origins in an exemplary model. But this does not understand ‘demonstrate’ as the philosophers did, to mean prove or justify – in this case to justify the logical validity claimed for poetic statements. The only sense of demonstration that was acceptable to the philosophers also led them to argue that poetic statements have a syllogistic validity. They did not identify it as their task to demonstrate, in the sense of ‘validate by exhibiting analogies and origins’ – which is the sense of demonstration usual to the grammarians.

By this understanding, the critic not only fails to see what is at issue in justification and how the philosophers argued for it, but also seems to imply the following. The context of the quotation, together with the only sense of demonstration (as validating meanings by exhibiting analogies and origins) that allows its critical tone to be coherent, asks us to believe that while these Arabic Aristotelian philosophers emphasised the need to prove or demonstrate logical
validity, and accepted the need for justification and logic in considering the statements of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, science, religion, or rhetoric, they nonetheless, when it came to figurative and poetic meanings, merely assumed the logical status of poetic statements. Although they sought justifications of the logical scope of other kinds of statements, because they took that proof of validity to be the justifiable ground for the meaningfulness of such statements, they nevertheless, in the case of poetic statements, simply rescinded the need for logical justification and, in order to show how poetic statements worked, accepted an alien sense of demonstration as 'validation by exhibiting analogies and origins'. It is difficult to make this claim coherent with the philosophers' repeated insistence on the need for logical validity to establish meanings.

The brief comparison of philosophical and literary concerns that we have provided in the discussion of the last few sections should become clearer as the following chapters of this book fill out the philosophical concerns. But it may be as well to add the following here. A justification of poetic validity may seem to reflect a very narrow compass since a focus on poetry seems to leave out large parts of the artistic tradition in other kinds of literature, ornamentation, and visual art. Stylized non-representational geometrical designs and calligraphic arts typically come to mind when people think of Islamic art, for example. And although Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroës sometimes discuss visual arts, usually all those other art forms seem to be outside the domain of poetic validity and its concern with the use of figurative language. Moreover, in the context of the commentators it was usual to characterise civilisations 'according to their achievements. For these writers, excellence in poetry was their distinguishing achievement'. Here, questions of poetic validity have a larger focus than poetry alone: they also encompass the aesthetic value of literature because poetry was a central element of the literary arts. In other words, the centrality of poetry makes the focus on poetic validity significant to any understanding of the values characterising the culture of the commentators. And this study of the philosophical poetics of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës will leave aside for the present how far the conception of aesthetic value at issue can also extend over other, non-literary genres. Consequently, it would be pointless to criticise the book for only considering the philosophical implications for poetry rather than providing a survey of theories of the arts. Poetry is central; at best such a criticism would have to rely on unstated and unargued assumptions about its relation to the other arts, and may simply evince the critic's unfamiliarity with the language and its poetry. A familiarity with the visual arts alone, perhaps because of the lack of access to the language, easily leads critics to undervalue the real role of poetry in culture.

Commentary, Philosophy, and Argument

The present book focuses on aesthetic value as instantiated in poetic validity. The arguments at issue have to be reconstructed from their contexts and parts. Such reconstruction is necessary with all the philosophers, even if it is especially
important in the case of Avicenna.102 Alfarabi, for example, puts forward his conception of poetics both in a commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics,103 and in the ‘Canons of Poetry’.104 In addition he explains part of his theory of the nature of poetic language and meaning in the ‘Catalogue of the Sciences’ and in The Book of Letters; and in his commentaries on the Prior Analytics he sets out important details which are crucial to the idea of the (poetic) syllogism. Some other vital parts of his theory also appear in other works such as the ‘Philosophy of Aristotle and Plato’, where he explains among other things the nature of narrative, the fit between objects and mind, and the moral and communal aspects of poetic meaning. To see the philosophical argument he is making, we have to reconstruct it from its various appearances. Similarly, since Avicenna intentionally uses an ‘indicative method’ in which he expects the reader to construct an argument out of the elements he describes, his method invites the reader to think the argument through for its present use, in the reader’s circumstances, rather than consider it only as fully formed in the context of its utterance.

Avicenna’s conception of the poetic syllogism develops Aristotelian ideas beyond their original scope by introducing elements from his own understanding of poetics or from Alfarabi’s Canons of Poetry. Since the latter lacks a clearly recognizable Aristotelian source, while the former has features which are distinctive to Avicenna, the reader can only understand the Commentary by carefully disentangling its heterogeneous elements. Moreover, Avicenna presents parts of his theory in different texts.105 As a result, the reader must be sensitive to nuances and ready to recognise how diverse concepts from different texts determine issues from their particular text. And, as they must defend claims made for their texts by assessing and clarifying the part played by these concepts in Avicenna’s theory, readers are forced to engage with the text by both exegesis and argument with it.

Another important feature of Avicenna’s commentary is that he uses concepts of ‘imagination’, ‘wonder’, ‘imitation’, etc., which borrow meanings from his own culture as well as from Aristotelian psychology. That is, although philosophers such as Alfarabi and Avicenna introduced a number of Greek terms into their usage, nevertheless a number of other terms already had a history in their own culture; and to grasp Avicenna’s usage, the reader must attend to all these senses. In addition, in relation to this Commentary, Avicenna explains the logical and ratiocinative force of the poetic syllogism not in this work on poetics but in his texts on logic. Therefore, to understand the logical validity of poetry we must relate texts which he does not explicitly relate. Here we can neither introduce premises alien to Avicenna nor contradict his explicit claims, but we must explain how his ideas work to make his theory whole.

We can clarify these claims by considering an example. Avicenna claims that poetry is imaginative and figurative, where figurative speech involves a meaningful composition of images. This composition will be merely subjective unless it is governed by rules. Avicenna proposes that we see whether the imagination is successfully following rules in composing images by seeing whether its use in a
poem evokes a feeling of pleasure. Yet pleasure seems entirely subjective, and therefore ill suited as a standard for assessing the rules of imagination. In other words, pleasure varies from subject to subject, and some use of imagination may generate pleasure in one person, perhaps because of associations she has with whatever is imagined, while another person may feel no such pleasure. Conversely, different images may be evoked in diverse subjects by the same poem, and so cause pleasure in each case, yet without any guarantee that the same rules of imagination are present or being observed. Where such arbitrariness obtains, each ‘successful’ use of imagination is only coincidentally related to pleasure, and the occurrence of pleasure fails to provide a ground for saying that the imagination is rule-governed. Thus, the occurrence of pleasure seems an unsatisfactory criterion by which to judge the operation of imagination in poetry.

At this point we might expect Avicenna to defend his claim by showing how pleasure and imagination are rule governed, but he does not do so. Now, once we see pleasure as part of the formal character of the poetic syllogistic, Avicenna’s justification for his claims becomes clearer; yet we have to make this insight explicit by comparing different texts and extrapolating issues. Taking premises implicit in Avicenna’s Commentary on De Anima and in the logical works, which are also advanced in his Remarks and Admonitions: Logic, we have to produce arguments to secure the conclusions which Avicenna espouses, seemingly without defence, in the Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle. It requires us to explain how the account of poetic syllogisms that Avicenna suggests in the writings on logic supports his contention in the Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle that ‘Poetry is imaginative speech’. It is not obvious that the former must explain the latter, but we shall see that as Avicenna sets out his conception of imaginative speech, their relation becomes more plausible.

Later Averroës, like Alfarabi, considers a number of related concepts in diverse texts, leaving the reader to be alert to connections. His commentary on the Poetics appears in Short and Middle versions, and part of the discussion of truth in relation to poetic validity draws on discussions of metaphor and their relation to truth that appear in other works. Moreover, in part Averroës is reacting to Ghazali who, for all his reputed refutation of philosophy, still admits a strong commitment to logic and has his own contribution to make to explanations of metaphor that, in turn, he presents in different texts. In any of these cases the reader has to construct arguments in order to follow what the philosophers intended. A merely scholarly survey, however useful as a report on the types and purposes of arguments, their context and reception, while it presents their conclusions about experience and its objects, does not necessarily do justice to their concerns. We need to know more than that this philosopher was a neo-Platonist or that the other one subscribed to a particular version of Sufism and why it might have seemed a plausible route at some time. We also need to know how far that procedure is effective now in resolving problems we have at present in part because those original arguments are seminal to and therefore inform our present concerns. The growth of neo-Aristotelian strains in
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contemporary social and political philosophy and in some parts of aesthetics suggests that Hellenic Arabic philosophers can engage in the continuing debates. The conception of community and justice that they developed, for example, sits well with some issues that have emerged in philosophy recently. To ignore, fail to acknowledge, or suppress this possible contribution to the debate, especially while promoting some other version of community, all because we ignore what the philosophical arguments are doing, is surely unwelcome.

An alternative, of course, is to show that poetic meanings are rational because they satisfy the requirements of completeness and consistency that are crucial to rational thought. And, again, it is worth stressing that this philosophical task has not received much attention in the literature on poetics and criticism. Especially in a context where too many studies of Islamic philosophy have consisted of reports on the conclusions proposed by particular people, chosen from the perspective of particular ideological, educational, and religious standpoints, a pursuit of the philosophers’ arguments may seem as ‘rich and strange’ as the Pythagorean soul in the afterlife. But unless we consider these issues and arguments for themselves, in the same way as we engage with our contemporaries, we shall lose sight of the richness of this tradition and the deep and serious effort it made, of the philosophical devices and mechanisms it generated to pursue the continuing task of understanding our place in existence and in relation to each other.

In the next section we shall set out how this book will examine the nature and role of poetic validity in the writings of three Arab Aristotelians.

Poetics and Philosophy

As we saw, while literary critics used the exegetical account of satisfactory explanation to defend poetic validity, philosophers provided a different defence. The latter look to logic for a justification of the validity provided through exhibition. As we shall see, Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës examine the role of poets in society, the validity of their utterances, their access to truths, and so on, but provide logic-oriented accounts of what is important to agreement in the community on some rational basis. And if the Arabic philosophers’ explanation of those concepts is distinctive, the reasons for this are many. Inadequacies in the available translation of the Poetics, difficulties in transmission, the particular character of Arabic poetics and its methodology; the desire to justify its conclusions while disagreeing with its method; identifying the Poetics as a part of the logical works of the Organon; the desire to be philosophers in the Aristotelian mould: all these factors go to explain the Arabic reception of the Poetics, and their role makes it important to construct a context from which we can better understand Arabic poetics and aesthetics. For if we see differences between Arabic philosophers’ and Aristotle’s works only as simply deviations from some central authority, then we misunderstand the former. Instead, by following the work of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës on poetics, we can see how they expounded
Aristotle’s work to explain the nature of poetic validity, its ability to obtain truth, its basis in a subjective community of feeling, its relation to politics and morality, and issues of interpretation and understanding in a consensual community.

Among the crucial differences between Greek and Arabic conceptions which we must note here is that because they were influenced by Aristotle, Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës sought a logical universality for poetry that they thought Arabic poetics lacked because it depended on grammar. On these grounds they even thought that some parts of Aristotle’s work were unknowable. When Avicenna examines the *Poetics*, he first puts forward his own theory, which is based on Aristotle’s logical texts, and allows that his concern is with general principles, and reminds the reader that many of Aristotle’s examples and descriptions are part of an incomprehensible and different tradition. However, his claims, like those of Alfarabi and Averroës, involve a deeper theory about understanding and interpretation by which, because they accepted the validity of Aristotle’s logic, they also accepted the general principles underlying Aristotle’s work since it depends on logic. And to understand this Arabic Aristotelian tradition, we begin with Alfarabi’s effort to find a logical basis for the validity of poetic meanings. He presents his arguments in a number of texts, which we examine in Chapter Two. The issues here, first, turn on a conception of imagination which Alfarabi derives from Aristotle. As this also influenced Avicenna and Averroës, this chapter considers the three accounts of imagination together. The discussion shows that Avicenna in fact develops Aristotle’s theory some way beyond its original expression. Second we explain why Alfarabi conceives of poetic discourse as ‘imaginative’. Now, the latter seems to introduce an element of subjectivity and a commensurate arbitrariness into poetic discourse, which raises questions about how logic could provide it with any kind of validity. But Alfarabi argues that in spite of being imaginative, poetic discourse has a logical validity because it has a syllogistic form. By definition a syllogism involves that if we accept a proposition then we must accede to what ever follows logically from that proposition. And Alfarabi maintains that the logical form of poetic discourse is similar to the syllogism and has validity because it demands a similar acceptance. This construal of poetic validity in terms of poetic syllogisms is a distinctive feature of the work of Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroës. Construing poetic discourse as imaginative also brings into focus the subject whose imagination is such an important element of the nature and validity of poetic discourse and syllogisms. This leads us to attend to the role of subjects and the power poetry has to generate responses in them. In turn that points, first, to the social and practical effects of poetry and, second, to the motivational structure of the poetic syllogism.

Regardless of the success with which he writes on Aristotle, philosophy, and logic while developing his concerns with central philosophical issues, Alfarabi’s explanations of poetic validity seem to remain wanting: he can neither give a satisfactory account of the poetic syllogism nor successfully argue for the relation he wants to maintain between subjects and to moral life. But this is only ‘formally’ a failure in the sense that the weakness of his theory is outweighed by
its many virtues. His is the first mature word about poetics and a *logical* poetic validity. He develops the Aristotelian account beyond its original, setting the direction for attempts by later Arabic and European thinkers to provide an *episteme* for poetry. And his concern with the logical and practical aspects of poetic validity evince a recognition of how poetics, poetry, knowledge and practice are intertwined. He sees that poetry and the imagination are not simply peripheral to the ‘main’ business of life but are among the modes of reasoning. His justifications embroil poetic validity within the full scope of the power of reasoning, linking it with every important part of theory and practice.

Moreover, Avicenna’s philosophical poetics depends on the path first opened by Alfarabi’s work. We consider that work in the next two chapters. In Chapter Three we look at Avicenna’s account of imagination in some more detail. Because he distinguishes between the imagination as the ability to evoke absent particulars and the imagination as the faculty for estimating or a disposition to approach or flee from the object imagined, he avoids a difficulty that faced Alfarabi. The latter, following the Alexanderine interpretation of Aristotle, maintained that imagination was a faculty that both evoked images and generated a disposition to be attracted or repulsed. Indeed, he used the fact that imagination contained both these abilities to explain the power and validity of poetry, suggesting that subjects acceded to poetry, giving its imaginative images an inter-subjective validity because, when faced with certain images, every subject was disposed to respond to it in similar ways. The poetic image claimed validity, then, because we could expect all subjects to accept, in their disposition and behaviour, the same reactions. However, as Avicenna distinguishes the two functions of imagination, he cannot expect that evoking images will result in provoking similar responses. Consequently, he has to find some other defence of the validity of poetry and does not fall victim to the problems that beset Alfarabi’s psychologicist account. In Chapter Three we clarify the explanation Avicenna provides by setting out his understanding of imagination and its relation to pleasure and wonder in poetry. This makes it possible to show that pleasure is a part of the formal or necessary part of the poetic syllogism. Because of that formal role, the subjective nature of pleasure does not introduce any arbitrariness into poetic syllogisms – poetic syllogisms are coherent and complete despite the role of imagination, pleasure and wonder in them.

To make full sense of these issues requires an excursus to show that the poetic syllogistic form rightly claims completeness and coherence. The argument of Chapter Three sets out the completeness and coherence of poetic syllogisms principally by contrasting them with demonstrative syllogisms. This procedure may seem to be mistaken. In the *Qiyas* Avicenna accepts that the form of the syllogism is best exhibited in demonstration, but he is clear also that the poetic syllogism too conforms to the same definition of syllogisms. As both demonstrative and poetic syllogisms have the same form, a contrast between them seems less than illuminating. However, Avicenna also recognizes a difference between the two syllogisms. The evoking of images in poetic
syllogisms is similar to the conviction generated by demonstration. The former, imaginative representation, occurs in poetic syllogisms as assent occurs in demonstrative syllogisms. Both are supposed to work in the same way: by Aristotle's definition of syllogism, once we accept a proposition, then of necessity we must accept whatever follows from that proposition. Assent is a matter of necessarily accepting the proposition that follows from the initial premises of the syllogism, and it appears best in demonstrative syllogisms. But of imaginative representation we can question whether it is syllogistic in form at all. Whatever legitimates demonstrative conviction, what we need to ask of imaginative representation is whether it can claim any necessity or conviction at all.

On the face of it imagination seems to lack the necessity that demonstrative syllogisms claim. This is because imagination seems too subjective: its products are too closely tied to causing feelings of wonder and pleasure, which are completely subjective because they vary from individual to individual, to ever warrant any claim to validity or to justify the assertion that every other subject must accede to an imaginative representation and find some pleasure in it because some particular subject does so. To show that we can have this expectation of imaginative discourse — that we can have poetic syllogisms — we proceed by first clarifying the distinction between poetic and demonstrative syllogisms to show what problem the former faces. The contrast here fits nicely with the translation we will rely on, which identifies 'conviction' or 'demonstration' and distinguishes it from 'imaginative representation'. This emphasises the very issue that is our concern. Second, we can take the opposite tack, clarifying how poetic and demonstrative syllogisms are similar and showing that imaginative representations can sustain a syllogistic despite their distinctive subjective 'content'. In effect we shall argue that whereas we might have denied that poetic discourse is valid by arguing that its content makes it arbitrary, we see that the content of poetry, its imaginative representations and their evocation of pleasure, is subjective yet capable of generating conviction. That is, imaginative representation is the poetic counterpart of conviction.

Chapter Four argues further for the completeness of the poetic syllogism, showing how the themes involved in poetry provide completeness. We present Avicenna's conception of the role of the subject and the manner in which poetry sustains a community of subjects, where poetic validity depends on individual participation. That is, the completeness of the poetic syllogism requires us to consider the kind of community and moral validity sustained by poetic validity. Here we argue that critics wrongly purport that Arabic poetics, especially in Avicenna's version, fails to resolve a tension between a view of poetry as having an end in wonder and pleasure and a conception that recognises the moral aspects of poetry. Avicenna's work yields an argument for the relation between poetry and morality that defends the classical claim for the relation between beauty and goodness.

Indeed, that relation between goodness and beauty forms part of the depth structure to this book and its arguments. Just as the exegetical method of explanation sought to justify the Islamic conception of a poetry related to truth
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and to gaining resonance and value in a community of believers, so too Avicenna shows that poetry is part of logic's concern with truth and also, by its aesthetic value, promotes a community of equal participating subjects. The defence he provides of the relation between beauty, goodness, and community is one from which we still have a lot to learn.

Chapters Five and Six consider the relation to truth, the third member of the triad of beauty, goodness and truth. After Avicenna, Averroës is the next important Aristotelian to comment on the Poetics. But between them there stands the towering presence of Ghazali, whose most important contribution has usually seemed to be a rejection of classical philosophy on its own grounds. Averroës' reappropriation of the Classical tradition cannot ignore the presence of this figure, whose concerns inform the theses and arguments he proposes. In considerations of the nature of metaphorical and figurative language, Ghazali argues for a relation to truth that Averroës was able to accept on his own grounds. Both of them put forward explanations of the validity of allegories that have implications for the more general relation between poetic validity and truth.

In order to clarify his concern for truth, in Chapter Five we shall first quickly summarise Avicenna's conception of allegory and its use. Next, we shall examine Ghazali's conception of figurative language and its relation to matters of truth and religion. People who are interested in logic and the validity of poetic language do not usually look to Ghazali for insights, and those who are interested in Ghazali's work do not usually examine his reflections on these themes. The limited space of this chapter does not provide an opportunity for the lengthy study that his account of logic may deserve, and we shall examine only those aspects that help to reconstruct a conception of the logic of figurative language.

This conception is worth pursuing for itself and because it seems to have determined the work of those who came after him. When Averroës reappropriates the tradition of Aristotelian thought generally, his work is informed by the need to overcome Ghazali's critical analysis of philosophy. The Incoherence of Incoherence, Averroës' response to Ghazali's The Incoherence of the Philosophers, plays a central role in this re-appropriation, but other less direct rebuttals also occur in Averroës' philosophical-legal defence of the status of philosophy and his related studies of the status of figurative language in allegory and poetry. This interaction between the two philosophers brings Ghazali's understanding of imaginative and figurative language within the context of the development of Aristotelian thought from Avicenna to Averroës, placing it also within the ambit of this book's concern with the Classical and Islamic triad of beauty, goodness, and truth. For Ghazali proposes a need for figurative language, and a place for its rational validity, that links it with truth. And although his principal concern is with a religious text, he contributes also to our understanding of figurative and poetic language generally rather than explaining revelation alone. His reflections on these issues have not usually been studied – perhaps because they do not form a commentary on the Poetics, but are scattered in diverse texts, and because their success is questionable – but they still fit within the narrative of the present study.
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This ‘rational’ perspective on Ghazali may seem counter to his later mysticism, from where Aristotelian metaphysics constitutes a barren wasteland, full of confused ideas, inadequately formulated arguments, and misconstrued premises, all based on a misunderstanding of the power of logic. Famously, Ghazali wrote the Incoherence of the Philosophers, the Aims of Philosophy, and The Standard of Knowledge during 1091–1095, when he moved to Baghdad and entered a period of scepticism about the sciences that eventually led to a spiritual crisis and recovery. During that sceptical period he re-examined the sciences he had studied, concluded that they were unreliable, and turned instead to religious belief, especially of a Sufi variety, which he hoped would provide an understanding of our place in the world and guidelines for action within it. Despite his ultimate commitment to mysticism, however, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, the Standard of Knowledge, and the Revival of Religious Knowledge all show that he does not reject Aristotelian thinking altogether, for he accepts the need for reason and for its principal tool, logic. He is critical of a great deal: he maintains that Alfarabi and Avicenna pursue an unreliable metaphysics derived from the works of Plato and Aristotle in translations that, he suggests, are themselves of questionable provenance; he critically questions Avicenna’s psychology; he finds that some of the Aristotelians’ philosophical theories are irreligious, that others are mistaken, and that yet others are heretical; and he condemns their understanding of divinity and its power; nonetheless, he also makes clear at the very outset of The Incoherence of the Philosophers, in its appendix, and in other works such as The Correct Balance that he has no quarrel with the use of rational logical thought.113

This commitment to logical reasoning is present in his earlier, pre-sceptical works; and, since it continues in his later work, we may suppose it is an important feature of his thought.114 Arguably, reason also structures Ghazali’s conception of figurative language and its access to truth. And in order to explain that conception, its status, power, and place, this chapter will begin with a regression of sorts by briefly presenting Avicenna’s understanding of allegory. This links the present chapter to issues developed in the last two: Avicenna’s conception presages one form in which later writers understood the issue of truth in figurative language.115 Then the chapter will set out some aspects of Ghazali’s understanding of reason, before briefly exploring Ghazali’s discussion of logical forms in part to explain its incomplete nature. His account of logic may not be our best entry into his contribution to explaining the relation of poetic language to truth. For that more interesting contribution we may look to his conception of ‘existence’, clarifying the place he finds for figurative language and thereby making it possible to explain the relation of figurative language to truth.116 As we shall see, aspects of this conception determine Averroës’ understanding of metaphors and other mechanisms by which we construct figurative language, both in poetry and elsewhere.

Ghazali favours the use of the logical tools of contradiction and coherence to explain important features of religious knowledge. We shall show that where Ghazali seems to question the power and reliability of reason, his arguments are
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either unsuccessful or less than disenchanted with reason because he continues to rely on criteria such as coherence and the avoidance of contradiction as tests of the viability of the system of knowledge he constructs. He also has a particular theory about where we must look for premises in our arguments; but this does not reject the use of logical and consistent thinking in religious and moral matters.

The possibility and exercise of interpretation depends on mechanisms for grasping truth that, in turn, need the formation of a consensus community. The following sections set out these relations, tracing Ghazali’s use of ‘existence’ to establish an hierarchy of access to truth in which imaginative and figurative language has a significant role. Explaining these connections turns out also to be a presentation of Ghazali’s theory of the construction of metaphors and their relation to truth. And this theory shows how, for his own reasons, Ghazali accepts and develops a relation that parallels the classical triad.

This theory forms the background against which Averroës composes his own recovery of the Aristotelian tradition. He argues against Ghazali explicitly, but also implicitly accepts his construction of the debate in important respects, taking for granted the need to argue about the issues that motivate Ghazali. Consequently, his own conception of the relation of metaphor to truth, and the connection of these with aesthetic value that he proposes later, while it follows the model of the classical triad also engages with the Islamic conception of this relation. Even though his concern with metaphorical language in each of the contexts we will consider is not directly related to the logical validity of poetic language, they all contribute to our understanding of this validity. In any case, Averroës’ conception of allegories and their use, together with his explanation of the guidance truth offers to metaphor, form the topics of the early part of the next chapter. For he explains that by understanding some statements as allegories that call for interpretation we can dissolve what appear to be contradictions between religiously sanctioned truths. In turn, he explains that allegories use metaphorical language, suggesting that the latter express irrefutable claims in syllogistically structured rhetorical uses of language. The chapter then explores the scope of the rhetorical use of metaphors to show that their relation to truth is external. In the final section the chapter examines how, in Averroës’ account, the syllogistic structure of metaphors relates poetic validity to truth.

Averroës wants his commentaries to be true to Aristotle’s work.117 Aristotle notes that ‘poetry is more philosophical and a more serious thing than history’ because it ‘tends to speak of universals, history of particulars’.118 A ‘universal’ is ‘the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity – that is what poetry aims at, although it assigns names [to the people]’.119 Averroës’ work suggests how we may develop issues from the Prior and Posterior Analytics to justify a ‘poetic syllogism’120 and thereby explain poetry’s power to provide philosophical or deep truths about ourselves.121

To explore these issues, we shall begin by examining Alfarabi’s account of the logical validity of poetic discourse.

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