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Ibn Rushd's Tripartite Framework of Discourse and the Architecture of Religious Truth

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophical contributions of Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198 CE), focusing on how his tripartite theory of discourse: *demonstrative*, *dialectical*, and *rhetorical*, functions as an architecture for securing assent to religious truth across different classes of believers. These three modes of argument reconcile philosophical reason with Qur'anic revelation, without reducing either to the other. Drawing on Ibn Rushd's major works, particularly *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, *Kashf 'an Manāhij al-Adilla*, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*, and his Commentaries on Aristotle, alongside contemporary scholarship, this study argues that Ibn Rushd's tripartite theory of discourse is not merely a taxonomy of communication styles but a structured epistemology, each mode of discourse i.e. *rhetorical*, *dialectical*, and *demonstrative* corresponds to a distinct cognitive capacity among believers, and yield legitimate, though unequally certain, assent to the same underlying truth. Rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative discourse yield practical assent, provisional belief, and certain knowledge respectively; yet all three, on Ibn Rushd's account, deliver genuine access to truth rather than three competing truths. What distinguishes them is not what is known but how securely, and on what grounds, it is held. Ibn Rushd further argues that philosophy and religion cannot genuinely contradict each other, because both are paths to truth, and truth cannot contradict itself.

Keywords: Ibn Rushd, Averroes, discourse, hermeneutics, Tripartite Framework, the Architecture of Religious truth.

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Introduction

The intellectual legacy of Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd, known in the Latin West as Averroes, occupies a singular position in the history of world philosophy. Born in Córdoba in 1126 CE and dying in Marrakesh in 1198 CE, Ibn Rushd produced a body of work that shaped the trajectory of both Islamic and European philosophical traditions for centuries. His systematic commentaries on Aristotle's works earned him the title "*The Commentator*" among medieval European scholars, and his influence on thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, Siger of Brabant, and Dante Alighieri is well documented (Leaman, 1988; Davidson, 1992). Yet the depth and originality of his philosophical vision, particularly his theory of language, his defense of demonstrative reasoning, and his hermeneutical approach to scripture has not always received the attention it deserves.

This paper is, thus, organized around a single focused research question: how does Ibn Rushd's tripartite theory of discourse — *demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetorical* — function as an architecture for producing legitimate assent to religious truth among different classes of believers, and what does this architecture reveal about the relationship between philosophical reason and Qur'anic revelation in classical Islamic thought? Rather than treating the three discourse types as a simple taxonomy of communication styles, this paper argues that they constitute a structured epistemology of persuasion: each mode of argument corresponds to a distinct cognitive capacity, and each is capable of yielding genuine, though unequally certain, assent to one and the same truth. On this reading, philosophy and religion do not compete for the same audience or contradict one another; they address different audiences through appropriately calibrated roads to the same destination.

This question is not merely historical. It speaks to enduring problems about the nature of persuasion, the limits of language, the interpretation of sacred texts, and the relationship between reason and faith. Problems that remain as urgent in the twenty-first century as they were in the twelfth, wherever plural audiences must be led toward shared conclusions by different argumentative means. By reconstructing Ibn Rushd's tripartite with precision and situating it within its historical context, this manuscript aims to demonstrate that Ibn Rushd is not merely a figure of historical interest but a philosopher whose account of assent illuminates how reasoned agreement is possible across audiences of unequal philosophical praxis.

Ibn Rushd's intellectual formation took place within the vibrant but turbulent cultural world of Almohad Al-Andalus. He was born into a family of distinguished jurists, his grandfather and father both served as chief judges (*qāḍī*) of Córdoba and received a comprehensive education in Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy (Urvoy, 1991). His encounter with philosophy was

decisively shaped by the Almohad caliph Abu Ya‘qub Yusuf, who reportedly commissioned Ibn Rushd to produce accessible commentaries on Aristotle after lamenting the obscurity of existing Arabic translations (Arnaldez, 2000). This commission defined Ibn Rushd's intellectual project. Over several decades, he produced three levels of commentary on virtually the entire Aristotelian corpus (short epitomes) or *jawāmi‘*, middle commentaries (*talkhīṣāt*), and long commentaries (*tafāsīr*), a monumental achievement representing the most systematic engagement with Aristotle in the medieval world (Taylor, 2005). But Ibn Rushd was not merely a commentator. He was a philosopher in his own right, and his original works – particularly *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, *Kaṣf ‘an Manāhiḡ al-Adilla*, and *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* – reveal a thinker of remarkable depth, originality, and courage. The intellectual context of Ibn Rushd's work is defined by three major tensions:

1. The tension between Aristotelian philosophy and Islamic theology, building since the translation movement of the eighth and ninth centuries.
2. The tension between the rationalist tradition of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā and the theological reaction of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*.
3. The tension between the demands of philosophical inquiry and the social and political constraints of a religious community governed by Islamic law.

Ibn Rushd's philosophical project is, in large part, a sustained attempt to navigate and resolve these tensions, not by choosing one side over the other, but by developing a framework sophisticated enough to accommodate both.

The Tripartite Theory of Discourse and its Philosophical Foundations

Ibn Rushd's philosophical project lies a deceptively simple classification: all argumentation, he holds, resolves into three fundamental discourse or mode: the rhetorical (*Al-Khaṭābī*), the dialectical (*Al-Jadali*), the demonstrative (*Al-Burhānī*). These are inherited from Aristotle's logical and rhetorical works, particularly the *Posterior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and the *Rhetoric*. Ibn Rushd transforms it from a taxonomy of argumentative technique into something far more consequential: a theory of human beings, differently constituted in their cognitive capacities, arrive at assent (*taṣḍīq*) to religious truth (Adamson, 2023; Black, 1990).

Table 1. Fundamental modes of discourse

Mode of Discourse	Arabic term	Method	Epistemic Goal
<i>Rhetorical</i>	<i>Al-Khaṭābī</i>	Persuasion, imagery, emotional appeal	Practical assent
<i>Dialectical</i>	<i>Al-Jadali</i>	Probable premises, contestive argumentation	Provisional belief
<i>Demonstrative</i>	<i>Al-Burhānī</i>	Necessary premises, logical proof	Certain knowledge

The rhetorical

Rhetorical discourse proceeds by persuasion rather than proof. It marshals imagery, analogy, example, and emotional resonance to secure the listener's acceptance without requiring (or presupposing), the capacity to evaluate a formal syllogism. For Ibn Rushd, this is not a defective mode of speech but the appropriate one for the overwhelming majority of humankind, and he treats it as the proper instrument for addressing the general public on any matter whatever (Butterworth, 1977; Aouad, 2002). Crucially, the assent it produces is real assent: the ordinary believer who accepts the resurrection through the Qur'an's vivid depictions genuinely believes, and genuinely holds a true belief. What that believer lacks are not truth but the demonstrative grounding of it.

The dialectical

Dialectic occupies the intermediate position. It reasons from premises that are widely accepted or probable (*mashhūrāt*) rather than from premises that are necessarily true, and it characteristically operates through contest between opposed positions. Ibn Rushd assigns this mode primarily to the *mutakallimūn* (theologians in Islam who practice *kalam*), and their attitude toward it is notoriously ambivalent (Adamson, 2023). He frequently deploys "dialectical" as a term of reproach, since dialectical premises may be false (selected for their renown rather than their truth), where demonstrative premises are true of necessity (Butterworth, 1977). Yet dialectic is not thereby dismissed. Adamson (2023) argues that Ibn Rushd assigns it a genuinely positive ground-clearing function preparatory to demonstration, and that the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* is itself a consciously dialectical performance rather than a demonstrative one. The tension here is real and unresolved in the corpus; Ibn Rushd goes considerably further, describing dialectic as a necessary component of metaphysics itself, in apparent departure from the class hierarchy of the Decisive Treatise (Halper, 2015).

The demonstrative

Demonstration alone yields certain knowledge (*yaqīn*). Proceeding from necessary and true premises through valid syllogistic form, it produces conclusions that cannot be otherwise. This is philosophy's proper instrument, and its audience is unavoidably narrow: only those trained in the logical arts can follow a demonstration, let alone construct one. Ibn Rushd's ranking of the logical arts places demonstration at the apex, with dialectic, sophistic, rhetoric, and poetics descending beneath it (Butterworth, 1977; Fakhry, 2004). His insistence on this hierarchy is what grounds his claim that scriptural interpretation (*ta'wīl*) is not merely permitted but

obligatory for the demonstrative class, and equally, that it must be withheld from those incapables of it (Hourani, 1961; Wohlman, 2010).

Ibn Rushd's concept of demonstrative reasoning (*burhān*) is drawn from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, which he regarded as the foundational text of epistemology. He argues that genuine knowledge requires not merely true belief but understanding of causes – knowledge not merely that something is the case, but why it must be the case (Davidson, 1992). A demonstration, in Ibn Rushd's technical sense, is a syllogism in which:

1. The premises are necessarily true and causally explanatory
2. The premises are better known than the conclusion
3. The conclusion follows necessarily from the premises
4. The conclusion yields knowledge of the cause, not merely the fact

Ibn Rushd's most philosophically significant application of demonstrative reasoning is his defense of natural causation against al-Ghazālī's occasionalism. Al-Ghazālī had argued that God is the direct and immediate cause of every natural event, and that what we call natural causation is merely the customary accompaniment of divine action, not genuine causal necessity (Marmura, 1997). Ibn Rushd's response in *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* is epistemologically fundamental:

If fire does not necessarily burn, then no universal, necessary premise about fire can be formed. If no universal, necessary premises can be formed, then no demonstrations can be constructed. If no demonstrations can be constructed, then there is no scientific knowledge only habit, custom, and probable opinion. (Van Den Bergh, 1954)

This argument reveals the deep connection between Ibn Rushd's epistemology and his philosophy of nature. Demonstrative reasoning presupposes the reality of natural necessity. Without stable, universal causal structures in the world, the entire edifice of Aristotelian science collapses.

Furthermore, Ibn Rushd's account of demonstrative reasoning is connected to his controversial theory of the intellect. Following Aristotle's *De Anima*, he distinguishes between the material intellect, the active intellect, and the acquired intellect. His most controversial claim is that the material intellect is universal – a single intellect shared by all human beings (Davidson, 1992). The active intellect is the principle that makes demonstrative knowledge possible (the source of the intelligible forms that constitute the content of scientific knowledge). Demonstrative reasoning, on this account, is not merely a logical technique; it is a metaphysical achievement, the actualization of human intellectual potential through contact with a universal principle of intelligibility (Black, 1990).

Ibn Rushd's framework offers a distinctive contribution: his insistence that demonstrative reasoning is not only compatible with but required by Islamic religious commitment provides a basis for positive engagement with modern science that does not require abandoning religious faith (Leaman, 2002).

The three discourse-types correspond to three classes of humanity, distinguished by their native cognitive capacities, and this correspondence determines who may legitimately interpret scripture and by what means (Sidiropoulou, 2015). Ibn Rushd treats the resulting arrangement as providential rather than defective: because God has provided three distinct roads, all three classes possess genuine access to the truths necessary for salvation, even though the roads differ radically in their epistemic yield (Adamson, 2023). Dialectic and rhetoric alike are modes of opinion — and opinion unlike certitude — is defeasible, since it remains possible that matters stand otherwise than one believes. This is the sense in which the tripartite theory constitutes an architecture rather than a list. It is a structure in which unequal epistemic goods are distributed across unequal capacities without any class being left outside the truth altogether. And it is precisely the coherence of this arrangement that critics have questioned. Sidiropoulou (2015) presses the sharpest version of the objection: if the three classes assent to propositions whose meaning differs with the form of life in which those propositions are used, it becomes difficult to say that they assent to the same truth at all, which in turn undermines readings of Ibn Rushd as a proto-Enlightenment social model.

Ibn Rushd's theory of discourse carries significant contribution. In *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, he argues that philosophers have an obligation of discretion, demonstrative conclusions must not be shared with those who lack the intellectual formation to receive them properly. This is not intellectual elitism; it is a theory of pedagogical and social responsibility grounded in a philosophy of language (Griffel, 2009). The danger of mismatched discourse is not merely epistemic but social. When theologians publicize their dialectical disputes among the general public, they introduce doubt and confusion without providing the tools to resolve them. The social fabric of a religious community depends on the appropriate calibration of discourse to audience (a principle) that Ibn Rushd regards as both philosophically grounded and religiously mandated (Leaman, 1988).

One of Ibn Rushd's most consequential applications of this tripartite framework is his hermeneutical theory of the Qur'an. In *Faṣl al-Maqāl*, he argues that the Qur'an simultaneously addresses multiple audiences at multiple epistemic levels. The same verse may function rhetorically for the general believer, dialectically for the theologian, and demonstratively for the philosopher. Not because the text is ambiguous, but because it is designed by divine wisdom to speak to the full range of human cognitive capacities (Hourani, 1976). This means that apparent contradictions between Qur'anic statements and philosophical conclusions are not genuine

contradictions but misreading. Hence, applying the interpretive tools proper to one level of discourse to a text operating at a different level results in an inappropriate and potentially misleading interpretation. For example, when the Qur'an describes God as having a face, hands, or a throne, it is not making a literal metaphysical claim about the divine. Rather, its rhetorical imagery appropriate to an audience that cannot access abstract philosophical discourse about divine transcendence (Campanini, 2007). When a philosophical demonstration yields a conclusion that appears to contradict a literal reading of a Qur'anic verse, the verse must be interpreted figuratively, in accordance with the rules of Arabic language and the principles of demonstrative reasoning. This is a principled hermeneutical method, not arbitrary reinterpretation (Campanini, 2007).

Ibn Rushd's argument that apparent contradictions between scripture and philosophy are always hermeneutical problems rather than genuine metaphysical contradictions provides a framework for engaging with modern science without either abandoning religious commitment or retreating into anti-scientific obscurantism. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Fazlur Rahman, and Mohammed Arkoun have all drawn on the Averroist tradition in developing their approaches to Islamic texts in the modern world (Nasr, 1996; Rahman, 1982).

Ibn Rushd, further, argues that the opposition between philosophy and religion is itself a misunderstanding, a failure to recognize that both are, properly understood, paths to the same truth. The question of the relationship between scientific rationality and religious discourse is one of the defining intellectual challenges of the contemporary world. In the Western context, this debate has been shaped by significant figures such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Alvin Plantinga, and John Polkinghorne (Barbour, 1997). In the Islamic context, it has been shaped by the encounter between modern Western science and traditional Islamic epistemology (Nasr, 1996).

The scholarly consensus today is that Ibn Rushd held a more nuanced position: philosophy and religion cannot genuinely contradict each other, because both are paths to truth, and truth cannot contradict itself. When apparent contradictions arise, they result from misreading the level of discourse (Leaman, 1988; Arnaldez, 2000). This position represents a third way between crude rationalism and crude fideism, insisting that both philosophy and religion, properly understood and properly practiced, are legitimate and complementary paths to truth. In *Faṣl al-Maqāl* and *Kaṣṣf 'an Manāḥij al-Adilla*, Ibn Rushd argues that the public dissemination of theological disputes is socially harmful. It introduces doubt and confusion into communities whose religious life depends on the stability of shared beliefs, without providing the intellectual tools necessary to resolve the doubts that have been raised (Campanini, 2007). This concern resonates powerfully with contemporary debates about expertise, public communication, and epistemic responsibility.

Ibn Rushd's argument that occasionalism destroys the foundations of natural science remains as powerful today as it was in the twelfth century. If natural causation is merely apparent, then the universal, necessary premises required for scientific demonstrations cannot be formed, and the entire project of natural science is undermined. This argument does not settle the metaphysical question of whether God is the ultimate cause of natural events; it argues only that, at the level of natural explanation, causal necessity must be real (Griffel, 2009).

Conclusion

Ibn Rushd's tripartite theory of discourse is best understood not as a taxonomy of argumentative styles but as an architecture of assent (a structured account of how a single truth becomes accessible to audiences of radically unequal cognitive capacity). Rhetorical, dialectical, and demonstrative discourse yield practical assent, provisional belief, and certain knowledge respectively; yet all three, on Ibn Rushd's account, deliver genuine access to truth rather than three competing truths. What distinguishes them is not what is known but how securely, and on what grounds, it is held. This architecture carries consequences well beyond logic. It grounds hermeneutics in which apparent conflicts between revelation and demonstration are diagnosed as category errors, the misapplication of interpretive tools proper to one discursive level to a text operating at another. It grounds an ethics of intellectual communication, in which the philosopher's discretion is a form of social responsibility rather than elitism. And it grounds a defense of natural necessity without which, Ibn Rushd insists, demonstrative science itself becomes impossible. The framework is not without nuisance; whether three classes speaking three styles can meaningfully assent to the same proposition remains contested. But the underlying conviction, that truth does not contradict truth, but it retains its philosophical force.

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