Transcript of *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Podcast 1

Contents: Peter Adamson (LMU Munich) interviewing Jari Kaukua (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) on Jari's article, "Avicenna's Outsourced Rationalism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 58.2 (April 2020): 215-40. The article won the JHP's Prize for the best article published in the pages of the JHP in 2020. The interview was recorded in November, 2021.

Transcribed by Calum Jopling, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Alberta

DR. PETER ADAMSON: I'm Peter Adamson. I'm a professor of Philosophy at the LMU in Munich and I'm here to have a chat with the author of an article that appeared in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* called "Avicenna's Outsourced Rationalism." The author is Jari Kaukua. Hi Jari.

DR. JARI KAUKUA: Hi Peter.

P.A: Do you want to tell us where you are and what your job is?

J.K: I'm at the University of Jyväskylä, which is in central Finland. I'm working as a professor of philosophy here teaching philosophy in general but doing research mostly on medieval Islamic philosophy.

P.A: I would have said that myself but I didn't trust myself to say 'Jyväskylä' correctly, but I just learned how to say it from you, so that's good. We are not here to talk about Finland though. We're here to talk about central Asia, and in particular a philosopher who lived in central Asia – namely, Ibn Sīnā – who is often called in English after his latinized name 'Avicenna.' I guess I'll let you choose whether we should call him Ibn Sīnā or Avicenna. Should we call him Avicenna since that's what you call him in the article?

J.K: Let's go with that. I'm used to it.

P.A: Okay, but folks his real name is Ibn Sīnā. Beyond his name, do you want to tell us a little bit about who he was, just for listeners who may not be familiar with the work of this vastly important figure?

J.K: We're dealing with a Persian Muslim philosopher from the turn of the first millennium CE. He died in 1037. He steps into the scene when the translations of the Greek philosophical texts into Arabic were more or less done. When he comes to the scene there is already a fairly lively tradition of discussion both among those who endorse the Greek philosophical tradition – the newly translated texts – but also between those philosophers and Muslim theologians who were dealing with some of the same questions. So, in a way he comes to a stage that's already set, but he makes a profound and wide-ranging contribution on almost all areas of philosophy, I would say. He's very influential in both Islamic and Christian intellectual culture subsequently,

and I think you would agree if I say that he's one of the absolutely prodigious stars of medieval philosophy, regardless of cultural context or language, and one of the absolutely central thinkers.

P.A: I would certainly agree with that. I always say that he's the most important medieval philosopher because the other candidates for that title get so many of their ideas from him or are responding to him. He plays the role in medieval philosophy that Aristotle does in ancient philosophy, or Kant does in German modern philosophy.

J.K: Indeed, yeah.

P.A: Your title is "Avicenna's Outsourced Rationalism," and I thought that – being philosophers – we should probably be good about defining our terms at the outset. Maybe you could say something about rationalism, especially because I think that's a word that people might have different associations with. You are contrasting that to empiricism, so if you have in your head the empiricist versus rationalist debates of early modern philosophy, that's relevant, right? But maybe you can just say what you take empiricism and rationalism to consist in for the purposes of this conversation?

J.K: In the most general sense I'll begin with empiricism because I think that's perhaps slightly easier. In a very general sense of the term, I suppose empiricism just means an epistemological stance that holds that all of our knowledge and all of our concepts are derived from sense perception. But then I think in this article a more relevant definition of empiricism is a slightly stronger one which holds that all our knowledge and all our concepts are derived from simple sense percepts: things like the sensation of the color red or the color blue; things like the sensation of a sound of a certain pitch, a certain smell, something like that. Any more complex concepts that we have are somehow constructed from these simple percepts by our mind. Obviously, this entails the possibility that things go wrong in the construction, or that what is the result of that constructing process by the mind is not an accurate representation of whatever is out there in reality. This kind of empiricism – empiricism in this stronger sense – entails at least a moderate or methodological skepticism about whether our concepts actually correspond to anything in the world. So, that would be empiricism as it is dealt with in this paper. Rationalism, then, is perhaps slightly trickier, but I suppose we could define it as saying that at least some of our concepts are known in a way, or at least some of our knowledge is such that it cannot be reduced to sense-perception. This could be for a number of reasons. Perhaps some of our concepts are innate to the mind: we are born with them and then either they are actualized when we perceive something or perhaps we can even know them without any perception. That's one version. Another would be that some of our knowledge is such that we just intuit, or somehow directly get, the concepts from the world without sense perception acting as a mediator, or at least without this intuited content being in any way reducible to perceptible content. That would be another version of rationalism. Usually, I think it's fair to say that rationalism, or a rationalist, would be more optimistic about the capacity of our mind to grasp realty as it is. So, this sort of veil of the senses, or the veil of sense perception is not there,

at least for some of our concepts or some of our knowledge. For that reason, a rationalist would perhaps be more optimistic, epistemologically speaking.

P.A: It sounds like on your view, or at least on the way you're using the word, rationalism really just comes down to being the denial of empiricism. Empiricism is the view that all concepts and knowledge come ultimately – if not directly – from sense perception. Rationalism would be the view that that's not true. And then you specify which kind of rationalist you are by specifying what the other source would be, whether it's innate ideas or God beaming knowledge into your mind, or whatever it may be. Is that right?

J.K: I think that's a fair assessment.

P.A: Your work here on Avicenna is a response to, and was perhaps prompted by, an earlier piece written by Dimitri Gutas, which is an article in which Gutas – who is a very well-known and important scholar of Avicenna's thought – argues that Avicenna was an empiricist. He draws a direct comparison between Avicenna's epistemology and that of John Locke – the famous early modern English empiricist. So, maybe it's obvious from the title that you don't think that Avicenna is an empiricist. But maybe you could first of all say what the grounds would be for ascribing some version of empiricism to Avicenna – the reasons why Gutas would have thought it made sense to describe his epistemology as empiricist.

J.K: I think in a modest sense Avicenna is an empiricist. He clearly denies that there are innate ideas in the mind. He does have a notion that is frequently translated as 'intuition' in English. But I think he means something quite different with that from what a rationalist concept of intuition would mean. In that sense, since he denies the usual rationalist methods for gaining this direct knowledge about the world, it might perhaps make sense to say that he's an empiricist. He would certainly be an empiricist in much the same sense as someone like Aristotle is an empiricist: ultimately, we need to perceive the world in order to get started with the acquisition of our knowledge, and all of our sciences ultimately are based on sense percepts in that sense. Where I firmly disagree with Gutas is that this kind of empiricism is far removed from Lockean empiricism. I think Locke's brand of empiricism, and I think much of early modern empiricism, is a much stronger thesis. As I say in the article, it moves down to at least three views that are fundamentally something with which I think neither Aristotle nor Avicenna would agree even if they are empiricist in this looser sense. First of all, Locke is motivated by the challenge of radical skepticism – or global skepticism – which I think is not there for Aristotle, at least not prominently. Perhaps surprisingly, it's not there for Avicenna either. I don't think he takes that challenge seriously anywhere in his works. So, that's one thing. The other thing is that I think it's important to realize that for Locke, epistemology is first philosophy, as opposed to Aristotle and Avicenna, who both would be willing to say they are building their system on metaphysics. Logic obviously plays an important role, but logic in their sense as the instrument of philosophy is not quite what Locke means by epistemology. For Locke, epistemology as first philosophy is precisely this attempt to explain the generation of our concepts from these simple perceptual ideas that we have. I think that's quite different from

logic in the Aristotelian or Avicennian sense – logic as an instrument of thought. Finally, the third feature of Lockean empiricism which I think is completely lacking – okay, 'completely,' that's perhaps saying a bit too much but they're certainly not prominent in Avicenna – is epistemological resignation, or epistemological modest skepticism that Locke ends up with. That's an essential part of Lockean empiricism, and something that's simply not there for Avicenna. Locke would be quite close to something that is called, in contemporary theory of science, fallibilism: the idea that even our best theories are true only until proven otherwise and we can never know for certain whether they are the true models or the true representations of reality. I think Lockean empiricism entails this, but Avicenna is quite far removed from that. So, on these grounds I would say that instead of a Lockean empiricist, Avicenna is really a rationalist of a certain sort. And I then try to substantiate that view in the article.

P.A: Before I ask you about how you argue for that, let me just touch on one kind of knowledge that I think might raise questions, which is first principles. I just want to see if we can get clear on this. If we have a first principle – like 'the whole is greater than the part,' or a famous one is that, for Avicenna, 'existence is divided into the contingent and the necessary' – it might seem kind of strange – given that he's always invoking these kind of first principles or first intelligibles that don't have any further basis – to suppose that those are gleaned from sensation. I take it that you're agreeing with Gutas that – and you actually quote a passage which suggests this – Avicenna thinks that we get first principles and first intelligibles along with sensation. So, obviously, something like 'giraffes have long necks' or 'apples are red' is something that you could get from sensation, but he would even think that something like 'the whole is greater than the part' or 'existence is either necessary or contingent,' that that's something you would only be able to know once you've enjoyed sense experience. Is that right?

J.K: Yeah, I think so. But then, that's a difficult question. I think your pointing at a genuine problem in Avicenna's theory. It almost seems as if some of these first intelligibles, or first principles, are such that as soon as we perceive something, anything really, we get those concepts – maybe not the principle that 'the whole is greater than the part' or something like that, but at least concepts like existence, or one, or some of the most fundamental concepts that we have. It seems as if those are triggered by any kind of perception that we have, not as something that we can articulate – those are such concepts that we may never be able to fully articulate – but some kind of understanding of being will be there as soon as there is conscious experience. Now, if that is the case, I suppose that could also be used as an argument against Avicenna being an empiricist in any sort of robust sense of the word because it comes very close to the kind of rationalist intuition which allows you to get these ultimately rather complex things simply by having a perception of anything. I wanted to give the benefit of the doubt to Gutas in that regard and try to unearth texts which would suggest that Avicenna thinks that even these concepts, even these first intelligibles, are derived from sense perception in a meaningful way.

P.A: Let's now turn to your argument for what you call his 'outsourced rationalism'. This is going to involve the famous principle that he calls the active intellect. Maybe I can just quickly sketch the idea there and then you can build on that. So, Avicenna has this theory – which might sound a little bit strange to some of our listeners but actually fits very well into the tradition of Aristotelian and Platonic cosmology – according to which a chain of intellects is descending from god, emanated from him. These intellects are somehow connected with the celestial spheres. The lowest of these intellects is the active intellect, which gives forms to things in the earthly realm. For example, when some matter is prepared to be some giraffe baby, the form of a giraffe is given to the matter by the active intellect. The active intellect is also supposed to have some kind of role in human knowledge. As you say in the article, it's one of the most controversial things in Avicenna scholarship – exactly what the active intellect is doing in our acquisition of knowledge. Now, whatever it's doing, if it has some kind of causal role in giving us knowledge, we might immediately think, 'well then obviously Avicenna is not an empiricist because we're getting knowledge zapped into our minds by the active intellect, so why is this even a conversation?' I think what's interesting about your take is that you want to give the active intellect a substantive role in knowledge formation without denying that there's some sense in which Avicenna is an empiricist – as you've already said. And this is where we get to what you call his outsourced rationalism. With that as background, can you now explain what the active intellect does on your reading and how it therefore makes sense to talk about Avicenna as a rationalist and an empiricist?

J.K: I think I'll start with a slightly different idea, another idea central to Avicenna's theory of knowledge, or theory of perception. He thinks that the way in which we know – the way in which we derive concepts of complex things, or concepts of things like substances, like your giraffe or a horse or a human being – is by abstracting these essences, or these essence concepts, from our sense perception or whatever is transmitted to us by sense-perception. This process of abstraction presupposes something that undermines the idea that Avicenna is a robust empiricist in any meaningful sense because it requires him to assume that sense-perception actually carries a lot more information than the just the simple percepts – things like the perception of the color red, or the perception of the sound of a certain pitch. There has to be something in sense-perception that you can abstract from it, and the abstraction takes place by way of our stripping off accidental features of things like giraffes – the particular length of its neck or the particular color of its skin and things like that: things that belong to particular giraffes instead of the essence of giraffe-hood. We strip off those features and then ultimately what we're left with is the essence of giraffe, or giraffe-hood as such. That's then the concept of giraffe and it's also the intelligible giraffe, or giraffe-hood. Now, in order for that to be possible, sense-perception must contain this sort of core giraffe-hood in itself. It must be there along with the perceptible features. I think that's an idea that someone like Locke would never have accepted. His point with having epistemology as a first principle was precisely the opposite: to explain how we get from the simple percepts to an essence-concept like the concept of giraffe. Whereas in Avicenna, it's sort of the other way around: how do we get rid of

the simple percepts? And then we simply find the substance concept as something that was already there in our sense perception. So, that's one thing. Another thing – and here we get to the active intellect part – another thing is that, in addition to the active intellect's controversial role in the production of our knowledge, it's also responsible for impressing these essences in matter in the first place. It's responsible for there being particular giraffes when their material circumstances are right. If we continue this line of thought we realize that actually the intelligibility of giraffe-hood that is then transmitted to us through sense-perception is actually due to the fact that it has an intellectual origin. It was an intelligible to begin with. When giraffe-hood was there, or is there in the active intellect, it's intelligible to begin with. Then it becomes something concrete, but it retains its intelligibility which then is re-actualized in our mind when we abstract that concept. And that's why I call Avicenna's rationalism outsourced. It's clear that these ideas are not innate to our mind, but they are, they serve the function of innate ideas in a sort of circumspect way. Ultimately their origin is a mind or an intellect that is superior to ours, but as an intellect it's the same: a similar kind of thing or a similar kind of being.

P.A: Listeners might have been puzzled because we said at the beginning that rationalism is just the denial of empiricism. How could it possibly make sense to say that someone is in some sense both an empiricist and a rationalist? If I understand you correctly the answer is something like this: that although Avicenna would agree with empiricists that you couldn't get any knowledge without sense-perception, some of the knowledge that you get through sense-perception is something that is only knowledge because it started in a mind and was then funneled through sense experience into your mind. That's why you're able to get at something like the essence of giraffe even though you could never possibly cobble together the essence of giraffe out of seeing things like seeing colors and shapes, or smelling the way giraffes smell. In fact, as you said, Avicenna is inclined to think that those things get in the way of understanding the essence of giraffe, far from being put together to constitute the essence of giraffe.

J.K: But they do not get on the way in any sort of fatal sense of the word. I don't want to claim that it's necessarily a straightforward matter to get to the essence of giraffe-hood, but it's in principle possible for us. It's in principle possible because giraffe-hood in-itself, even in concrete giraffes, is intelligible. There is no principled veil of the senses. We can get rid of the accidental features of particular giraffes.

P.A: The accidental sensible features are a package which delivers the essence to you, but then you need to unwrap the package and get rid of the packaging and what you're left with inside in the essence.

J.K: That's a beautiful comparison.

P.A: Before we stop, I wanted to ask you one other thing which you don't discuss in the article, or don't discuss very much. We've discussed this on other occasions so I know you have a lot to say about it. In fact, you wrote a whole book about self-awareness in Avicenna and later

thinkers. This is a famous passage about self-awareness. What I have in mind here is of course the flying man argument. Do you want to have a go explaining the flying man thought experiments? And then I'll say why I think it might be relevant.

J.K: The flying man is basically a thought experiment that asks us to imagine ourselves in a situation where we are floating in mid-air, the temperature of which is precisely the same as our body, and none of the members of our body are touching each other. Basically, we are having no tactile perceptions. Ours ears, eyes, nose, taste, are also blocked out, so we're not having any perceptions whatsoever. We're supposed to imagine ourselves to be created in this state; we have no prior personal history. This, in Avicenna's cognitive psychology, means that we cannot imagine anything because all imagination is done by means of material that you have first perceived. If you have not perceived anything, you cannot imagine anything. By the same token, we can't remember anything because there is nothing to remember. Avicenna asks, 'will you be ware of anything in such a situation?' The answer is that you will be there. You will be aware of yourself even if there is no object for you to be aware of. He uses this as a piece of evidence – perhaps not as a decisive proof, but at least as a piece of evidence – towards psychological substance dualism. So, the self, or the soul, is independent of the body.

P.A: The reason I think this is relevant to the conversation we've just had is obvious, but I'll spell it out. If we think that Avicenna is an empiricist in this limited sense that you couldn't have any knowledge or concepts at all without engaging in sense-perception, then why isn't the flying man a counter-example to that? It seems that the person in the flying man thought experiment situation at least knows that they exist. There's something that they know, and once they know that they exist they could presumably also do things like get the primary intelligible that existence is divided into contingent and necessary – this would be a nice example of a primary intelligible that's not only derivable from sense-experience because the whole point of the flying man thought experiment is that we have someone who has no sense-experience and has never had any sense-experience. I always thought this was kind of strange about Gutas' article, that he takes someone who's maybe got the most famous thought experiment in the history of philosophy about someone in a sensory deprivation situation knowing something, and then he says 'yeah, this person is an empiricist.' Maybe you could say that's an exception to what is otherwise a thoroughgoing empiricism, but I take it that you don't think it's an exception. So, how do you get around that?

J.K: I think here, it might be helpful to get back to Locke, who recognizes two sources of primitive ideas. He speaks of sense-perception on the one hand but then he speaks of reflections. In addition to sense-percepts, in the sense of perceptions of objects distinct from ourselves, we also have perceptions of our own states. And some of these perceptions are also primitive in the sense of something on which we build or on which our mind builds in forming concepts. Avicenna, if we look at some of his logical works when he discusses the possible kinds of premises that we can have, when he discusses what he calls *maḥsūsāt*, which is sensible premises or perceptual premises in a broad sense of the word, he interestingly includes two

kinds of premise there. One of these are sensual premises or perceptible premises roughly in the sense that we've been talking about: perceptions of things other than us. The other class, interestingly, is perceptions of ourselves, of our own states: we might be angry, sad, or happy; or then we might feel pain; or indeed I think he also mentions the fact that we are aware of ourselves. Now, it's obvious that those are not perceptions in the technical sense of the word. Although, interestingly, he uses the same term, he includes them under *maḥsūsāt* but they're not sense-perception in the sense in which he speaks of the five senses and then of the internal senses. If we bear that in mind, then we could say that even the flying-man could be fitted here. It's not strictly speaking a sense-perception, but it is a perception, or we could think of it as an empirical source of information. It's a source of a very different kind from these other sources. It's always there, we cannot fail to have it as long as we're there, we're aware of ourselves. Still, it's something that we gain by means of experience. You're right that it also seems to give rise immediately to these first intelligibles. If I know that I exist, then I must know what existence is in some sense of the word. The distinction between essence and existence also seems to be there, and perhaps unity, things like unity: I'm aware of myself as some one thing and things of that sort.

P.A: So, basically the upshot of this is that he would still be an empiricist but his empiricism would include experiences that aren't strictly sensory experiences; they could be things like perception of one's own reality

J.K: Yes.

P.A: I think we've covered that pretty well. I would encourage people to go check out the article and also check out Jari's book on self-awareness in Islamic philosophy, which is really interesting and goes beyond Avicenna in addition to discussing Avicenna quite a lot. For now, I guess we'll stop there and thanks so much for coming on this series Jari.

J.K: Thank you Peter, thanks a lot, this was a great deal of fun.

P.A: Yep, for me too, thanks.